

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 38 (2019)

**Artikel:** Literary genre and affective experience : intergenerational trauma in the neo-slave narrative of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*  
**Autor:** Jacobs, Courtney / Schleifer, Ronald  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869557>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 19.05.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Literary Genre and Affective Experience: Intergenerational Trauma in the Neo-Slave Narrative of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Courtney Jacobs and Ronald Schleifer

This essay examines narrative strategies of pain and suffering in two literary genres – the nineteenth-century slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative – that share as their focus the enduring trauma of American slavery across generations. Specifically, it compares how these genres shape and are shaped by the cultural politics of intergenerational emotional experience and, in the case of the contemporary neo-slave narrative, refigure personal emotions as “impersonal,” or culturally particular, affective experiences. This approach to affect as historical and contextual allows for an understanding of how genre functions to signify and establish what feels to be self-evident social meaning and to signify and establish social involvement. Taking as its focus Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, this essay analyzes how the novel and its genre communicate the illegible and unspeakable interiority of traumatic experience to confront the blank and bewildering force of the legacy of chattel slavery that continues to influence the experience of American culture in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, genre theory, slave narrative, neo-slave narrative, affect theory, trauma

## Preamble: Chattel Slavery

The chattel slavery practiced in the antebellum South can be distinguished from other forms of human slavery by the corpus of laws that

*The Genres of Genre: Form, Formats, and Cultural Formations*. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 38. Ed. Cécile Heim, Boris Vejdovsky and Benjamin Pickford. Tübingen: Narr, 2019. 145-66.

identified the enslaved not as legal persons but as “chattels personal,” or the explicit property of an owner or master. Under this legal designation, and unlike other forms of human bondage, slaves in antebellum America could be individually sold as merchandise. In addition, they were not granted civic rights or protections; they could not enter into contracts, own property, or, in most cases, marry or “constitute families” (Goodell 379). Many slave narratives make clear that the fears of being sold or separated from family were among the worst, if not *the* worst abominations of American slavery.

## Introduction

Traditional slave narratives of the American South were fueled, in part, by a desire to facilitate black participation in American democracy both prior to, and following, emancipation in the mid-nineteenth century. The genre depicts, in realistic detail, the extreme brutality of chattel slavery, and, for the first time in American history, the anguish of the suffering black body, which was rendered from the authorial perspective of previously enslaved persons. Nineteenth-century narrative portrayals of captives’ pain, emotional anguish, and violated bodies were rhetorically crafted to create the conditions for empathetic understanding in contemporary readers. Narrative empathy, as it was evoked in the slave narrative genre, was positioned ideally as a tool of political action: it functioned to marshal emotional experience with the end of promoting abolition and the subsequent enfranchisement of freed slaves. In significant part, this essay focuses on the degree to which readers are invited to participate in and emotionally respond to scenes of suffering in literary genres, like the slave narrative and its descendant the neo-slave narrative, that share as their focus the enduring trauma of American slavery across generations.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) pioneered the genre of neo-slave narrative. Unlike its literary predecessors, *Beloved* does not attempt to make the suffering black body entirely legible and therefore subject to processes of identification and empathetic understanding that gloss over differences and celebrate commonality. Rather, it recognizes that the portrayal of “legible” experience might only acknowledge pain and suffering to the degree that it can be imagined and understood outside the politics of the specific historical and cultural context of that pain and suffering. In depicting the “illegibility” of the suffering body or, more specifically, of the suffering family, Morrison’s novel, unlike the nine-

teenth-century autobiographical slave narrative, does not fetishize, but rather interrogates, the political potential of narrative empathy. We argue then that *Beloved* recasts what Raymond Williams calls the “structures of feeling” (132) associated with the traditional slave narrative in order to reorient the attention of its collective American readership to the cause and source of the wounds it so painstakingly describes: the national and cultural narratives of which the institution of chattel slavery was a constitutive part. Taking narrative depictions of pain and suffering in *Beloved* as its focus, this essay examines how literary genres mediate between aesthetic conceptions of emotional experience conceived of as private, and conceptions of experience regarded as impersonal, or culturally particular, principally in relation to the treatment of race and gender in American literature.<sup>1</sup>

The term *affect* has, since the 1990s, increasingly been deployed in the field of literary studies – as an alternative to, or supplement for, more traditional conceptualizations of *emotion*, *feeling*, or, in some cases, *experience* – in order to critique, or as Fredric Jameson posits “usefully unsettle” (36), sustained distinctions between the private and public (personal and impersonal) qualities of emotional experience. In his recent publication *The Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson describes *affect* as “global waves of generalized sensation” (28) and “singularities and intensities, existences rather than essences” (36) that are known exclusively to the body. Here, he gestures toward a common conceptualization of affect as the preconscious, somatic intensities that prime us to act in response to our environment without rational intention. This approach, however, suggests an explicit separation between mind and body that renders the experience of strong feeling unnarratable and unconnected to any social

---

<sup>1</sup> We do not bring up the issue here of “collective American readership” of Morrison’s neo-slave narrative to suggest that non-American readers are incapable of engaging and benefitting from her work (and from American studies more generally). Rather, we bring this up because chattel slavery was not simply an aberrational atrocity in the development of the American republic – such atrocities can be discerned in cultural histories throughout the world – but, as we note above, it is a *constitutive* part of the development of American society organized, from its beginnings, around entrepreneurial capitalism, which, as we noted in the Preamble, understood human enslavement as essentially that of “chattels personal” (Goodell 379). Thus, to be an American – even, in our cases where our ancestors immigrated to the US long after emancipation – is to be a special audience for the “illegibility” of chattel slavery we describe in late twentieth-century neo-slave narratives. That is, the intergenerational trauma of slavery we examine here is a constituent aspect of the American polity. Another special audience, as we suggest later, are African American writers who grapple, like Morrison, explicitly with the illegibility of such trauma.



or historical context.<sup>2</sup> Thus, insofar as this conception of affect might be associated with a working sense of how literary genre is characterized by an emotional force, it renders genre as a trans-historical manifestation of abstract form.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, however, we regard affect – even, automatic responses that seem to be what some call “preconscious” responses to the environment – as phenomena imbricated in a particular historical context. Moreover, by historicizing “preconscious” and “pre-discursive” affect – recurrent terms in affect theory – we are able to contrast such affective feeling with conscious cognitive understanding to the ends of emphasizing the power, or the force, rather than the knowledge of the literary genres that these ends inform.

Affect, for our purposes then, is relational, and our interpretation of the affective force of literary genre explores how the power of conspicuously impersonal affect in literature manifests itself in dynamic relation to specific material contexts. The notion of affect we are positing is influenced by Williams’s “structures of feeling.” In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams articulates this term in order to focus upon and analyze the phenomenon of *social* rather than *individual* experience – or really how the social inhabits seemingly individual or private experiences. He suggests that

an alternative definition [to “structures of feeling”] would be structures of *experience* [. . .] a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics. (132)

Approaching affect in this way allows us to explore how cognition, feeling, and a wider notion of impersonal experience help us to understand how the formal literary understanding of genre functions to signify and establish what feels to be self-evident social meaning and to signify and establish social involvement. Such an understanding of affect, we suggest, allows us to both focus and widen the power of genre in the study of literature.

It is the work – or at least a major aspect of the work – of literary genres (as opposed to everyday speech genres), this paper argues, to deploy such impersonal emotional experience and sensation to the ends of widening sensibility and increasing the horizon of experience itself. As noted above, we begin by determining how the transmission of the

---

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of emotions and the human subject, see Terada.

<sup>3</sup> For a gesture toward this notion of genre, see Schleifer, “Death.”

affective experience of pain in the traditional slave narrative is positioned ideally as a political tool deployed to promote action, which is the work of speech genres. Then, by tracing the literary lineage between this historical genre and its subsequent twentieth-century transformation, we investigate how Morrison's neo-slave narrative *Beloved* depicts a form of suffering, particularly the suffering associated with black motherhood, that is no longer celebrated or romanticized as a sign of individual agency, and is no longer deployed, as it once was, as a warrant to support rhetorical arguments for citizenship. Rather, neo-slave narratives such as *Beloved* aim at enlarging experience to encompass the illegible and unspeakable not in order to marshal and deploy cognitive understanding but, powerfully, to confront the blank and bewildering force of the legacy of chattel slavery that continues to shape the experience of American culture in the twenty-first century.

### The Affective Force of Traditional Slave Narratives

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations.

— Harriet A. Jacobs, Preface to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: : Written by Herself*

The emergence of the slave narrative genre marks a period in American history during which, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr., “the black slave first proclaimed himself a human being” (xii). The act of writing the slave narrative, says Gates, was simultaneously one of personal expression and social interpellation, an opportunity “for the slave to *write* himself into the human community through the action of first-person narration” (xiii). It was also through these stories that black slaves or their immediate offspring could be considered contributors to the national narrative of American identity; as the above epigraph from Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* shows, the genre did in fact reflect “an immense faith in the emancipatory promise” of storytelling (Dubey 187). In particular, the genre was marked by a rhetoric of political enfranchisement that significantly shaped the texts' affective engagement with the brutal realities of chattel slavery and their larger ac-

knowledge of the national affects defining race relations in the antebellum period.<sup>4</sup>

The rhetorical force of slave narratives hinges on the establishment of narrative empathy, what Rita Charon describes as the ability to listen deeply to “the plight of another person” and “be moved” by that plight (3, 11). In her study of empathy in literature, Suzanne Keen agrees that readers or listeners need not have identical experiences to empathize with stories they read, but she argues that empathy is characterized by a “spontaneous sharing of affect” that “can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state” (4). She clarifies her argument by distinguishing between prosocial or “other-directed” empathy, which leads to “empathetic concern,” and “over-aroused” empathetic responses, which result in self-oriented personal anxiety (4-5). The elusive quality of “being moved” described by Charon approximates Keen’s understanding of “empathetic concern,”<sup>5</sup> and this particular terminology provides a foundation for understanding how the affective valences of the slave narrative are “transfere[n]tial”: empathy provides a means of transferring affect from one situation to another and in doing so maintains the “legibility” of the emotion itself – rather than submerging readers in an emotional experience that is not quite their own to the point that they are driven to distress. By engaging this type of narrative empathy, the traditional slave narrative promote social solidarity and social action.<sup>6</sup>

Written in a distinct literary style “derived from the pulpit, the lectern, and the soapbox” (Bell 28), nineteenth-century slave narratives have historically featured a “strident moral voice” (Step 3) and an “emotional fervor” (Bell 28). The tonal “fervor” of the slave narrative – also compared by Bernard Bell to generic understandings of “romance” or “melodrama” (27) – resembles that of a religious sermon; this particular tone of narrative voice constitutes, in part, the genre’s affective force in that it guides the degree to which readers are able to feel empathetic concern for the suffering of characters. While sermons were often

---

<sup>4</sup> José Esteban Muñoz contends that “standard models of United States citizenship are based on a national affect” and defines this “official” national affect as a normalized “mode of being in the world primarily associated with white middle-class subjectivity” (“Feeling Brown” 69).

<sup>5</sup> Keen argues that “empathetic concern,” a term she borrows from the field of psychology, more closely resembles *sympathy* – “the more complex, differentiated feeling for another” (4).

<sup>6</sup> While we are not using this term in strict connection with Sigmund Freud’s central psychoanalytic concept of “transference” as such, it is interesting to note that Freud’s therapeutic project was precisely to make illegible affect legible.

characterized by an outpouring of devotion, the slave narrative's rhetorical style included the cultivation of emotional restraint – in particular, the denial of personal emotional engagement in favor of personal cognitive engagement – with the goal of achieving emancipation and, later, enfranchisement for larger communities of slaves and freemen in the Southern states. The inclusion of one or more prefaces or disclaimers is a common rhetorical strategy that serves this political purpose in the autobiographical slave narrative; these paratextual features act to establish authorial ethos by way of an appeal to a rational, as opposed to emotional or sentimental, logic of storytelling. Claims of stoicism, or the denial – or at least the dampening – of personal emotional engagement with one's tale allowed authors of slave narratives to accentuate a larger political project. Jacobs establishes an emotional register intended to inform her contemporary audience's experience of the text,<sup>7</sup> but such a register subordinates itself to its larger cognitive goals. Thus, Jacobs denies taking pleasure in narration – and alludes to, even as she dampens, feelings of suffering associated with recounting her tale – and suggests that she does not seek an empathetic response for her own personal experience, but rather asks readers to feel for “two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them worse” (1). Here, Jacobs's preface highlights an important distinction that emerges through the genre's treatment of the black body suffering pain – the distinction between the personal (and in this case authorial) and the impersonal or social experience of pain. Zoe Norridge calls such impersonal experience “social suffering”: the expression of suffering as a “manifestation of a social ill and a symptom of inequalities of power” (15). “Social suffering” can be characterized as legible rather than pre-consciously affective, insofar as it is based upon shared assumptions and understandings. The genre of the slave narrative documents an important movement toward recognizing, as Williams purports, the social qualities of emotional experience – and in particular the common experience of suffering – that might otherwise seem deeply private and personal.

---

<sup>7</sup> As such, authors of slave narratives were subject to editorial pressures, and requests were often made to remove material deemed “too disturbing for antebellum white readers” (Li 329). Moreover, authors were also obliged to include testimonials from white abolitionists or political leaders attesting to the moral character, intellectual capacity, and past accomplishments of the primary author. A white abolitionist and women's rights activist named Lydia Maria Child, for example, provided a preface to Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; similarly, William Lloyd Garrison offered a testimony to preface the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845).

Therefore, disclaimers like those that precede Jacobs's narrative set the parameters for the text's ability to inspire a type of empathetic concern that traffics in shared categories of feeling rather than pre-discursive affect. In addition, such invocations of shared categories of feeling respond to and counter widely held racist assumptions that captive people did not have the capacity to communicate through the written word (see Gates xi). Buried in this assumption is a fetishization of the physical black body in a state of perpetual contentment and as incapable of experiencing pain and expressing suffering. "Fetishization" – a religious term appropriated by Karl Marx for purposes of political analysis and by Freud for psychoanalysis – attempts to create a shared category for emotional response, a category which is, essentially, cognitive: it fully exists within a program of understanding rather than feeling. In her analysis of the affective forms of domination deployed during slavery in nineteenth-century America, Saidiya V. Hartman describes this type of "program of understanding" within the context of chattel slavery: "the fixation" on (or fetishization of) a slave's perceived enjoyment of their captivity "conceals the affiliations of white enjoyment and black subjection and the affective dimensions of mastery and servitude" (25). Hartman begins, here, to articulate the value of investigating "affect" as not only a record of emotional intensity but as a legalistic impulse within the slave narrative; it is part of the exigency surrounding the literary genre to counter – to argue against rather than to emotionally respond to – the social belief that the inability to experience and express pain, and perhaps emotion in general, warranted the legal subjugation of black slaves.

Foundational to the legal framework underlying chattel slavery is the conviction, according to Hartman, that the black slave "is both insensate and content [. . .] indifferent to pain and induced to work by threats of corporal punishment" (51). This type of "pathologizing of the black body," Hartman goes on, "then serves to justify acts of violence that exceed normative standards of the humanely tolerable, though within the limits of the socially tolerable as concerned the black slave" (51). Hartman's description of the incongruity at the center of what she calls the slave's "contented servitude" (52) highlights how the systematic torture of black slaves marshaled an analysis of affective social phenomenon within a framework of shared, in this case legal, understanding. The slave narrative takes to task this fetishization of the perceived pleasure, and the denial of the pain, of black slaves – what we might call a radical and egregious failure of empathetic concern for the human plight of chattel slaves – not by offering a nuanced psychological profile of enslaved persons, but rather by forwarding urgent abolitionist arguments



that utilize the conventions surrounding categories of understanding shared by nineteenth-century white readers (abolitionist or not). Thus, the characterization of black figures in traditional slave narratives often serves as a corrective to the legalistic argument that Hartman documents: namely, that the pathologizing of the black body as incapable of experiencing suffering justified the legal and social normalization of extreme violence against slaves in the antebellum South.

Such characterization, as we mentioned earlier, provides legible accounts of affect. Thus, characters in slave narratives are often uniformly heroic and skilled, and by possessing such traits, they represent a set of important shared categories of understanding, tropes, and archetypes that outweigh their cognitive function as “model persons.”<sup>8</sup> Figures like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Nat Turner, as well as Jacobs herself, each symbolized a litany of inspiring values – “an indomitable will to be free, unshakable faith in the justice of their cause, extraordinary genius, and irrepressible bravery” (Bell 29) – that contributed above all to the texts’ (and the genre’s) urgent political agenda. These characters served a complex metaleptic function:<sup>9</sup> as both author *and* literary persona, they reinforce the truth of their stories while also exemplifying traits that metonymically lend emotional force to a text’s abolitionist argument. That is, metaleptically, they bring together the archetypal authority of personal narrative (autobiography) and the authority of narrative functions (e.g., the archetypal characteristics of a literary hero) to enhance the legibility of their narratives. Such authority is powerful because it is based on shared horizons of cognitive understanding among readers, authors, and recognizable narrative forms; and this cognitive understanding is the basis of legibility rendered in literary narrative insofar as it is distinct from the embodied sensations and intensities of affect.

---

<sup>8</sup> In *Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind*, David Herman states that “characters in fictional as well as nonfictional narratives can be described as textually grounded models of individuals-in-a-world, or [what he terms] *model persons*” (193). Herman’s concept of model persons reflects his larger contention that storytelling practices, including characterization, are interlinked with recognizable intelligent, or cognitive, activity.

<sup>9</sup> Authorial metalepsis works to complicate or collapse narrative boundaries and shatter mimetic illusion in a text by explicitly representing an extradiegetic author figure within the diegetic story world.

## The Neo-Slave Narrative

We are considering the antebellum slave narrative, particularly its affective rhetoric, as an important literary precursor to the late twentieth-century genre of the neo-slave narrative, which Stephanie Li argues is “one of the most important African-American literary genres of the past 50 years” (326). By directly engaging with the rhetorical and narrative strategies of nineteenth-century autobiographical accounts of chattel slavery, authors like Gayle Jones, Octavia Butler, Colson Whitehead, and Toni Morrison explore the history of slavery in the United States while interrogating the relation between affect and dominant forms of national history-telling. By establishing varying degrees of distance from the official historical record, the genre works to interrogate the relationship between the history of slavery and the dynamics of contemporary racial identity in America. Such analysis sheds light on the possibilities and precariousness of narrative empathy as well as the distinction between the professed historicity of the slave narrative and what we might describe as the “literary historicity” of the neo-slave narrative.

What makes the neo-slave narrative so integral to the canon of contemporary American literature, according to Morrison, is how its novels account for the critical absence of the “interior lives” of enslaved men and women (“The Site of Memory” 110). In response to Morrison’s analysis, we suggest that the neo-slave narrative – through the deployment of a bewildering affective force – renders the interior emotional lives of enslaved people not as legible, but as a palpable phenomenon in order to instigate *disidentification* in readers. José Esteban Muñoz defines “disidentification” as a process that

scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.

(*Disidentifications* 31)

In the context of our essay, the “raw material” he describes is precisely illegible to the same degree that “preconscious” and “pre-discursive” affect is illegible. But in Morrison and others, that “raw material” is deployed to indicate, without specifying, the “interior lives” of slaves. Essentially, then, rather than making the affective force of such an account



legible by means of shared understandings of affective states for rhetorical purposes – as Jacobs purports to do in her preface – one goal of the neo-slave narrative, particularly in the example of Morrison’s *Beloved*, is to isolate and explore, in depth, the interiority of experience; in particular the experiences of pain and suffering, which *cannot* be grasped or comprehended by way of narrative empathy by all audiences. Such affective bewilderment, we argue, creates a sense of the power of “interiority” in narrative discourse that cannot be recuperated within traditional notions of feeling and emotion, but instead offers up an understanding – or, at least, a recognition – of affect as an impersonal force in social institutions.<sup>10</sup>

### Bewildered Affect in *Beloved*

But to the slave mother, New Year’s day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother’s instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother’s agonies. – Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
 A long way from home,  
 A long way from home. – Traditional Slave Spiritual

Like Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Morrison’s *Beloved* powerfully focuses upon the suffering of enslaved women: “those most marginalized in the historical record of antebellum slavery” (Li 327-28). While the novel delves into the emotional experiences of several generations of black women, all haunted to varying degrees by their family’s history of enslavement, Jean Wyatt highlights how *Beloved* engages predominantly with the emotional history of “slave mothering” (20), in particular the phenomenon of “overclose mother-love” (19). Such a love is shaped by the familial and reproductive dynamics dictated by the enterprise of chattel slavery, here described by Hortense Spillers: “under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not ‘belong’ to the Mother, nor is s/he ‘related’ to the ‘owner,’ though the latter ‘pos-

---

<sup>10</sup> For an account of the provocation of bewilderment in modernist literature – which could, in fact, include Morrison – see Schleifer, “Modernism.”

sess' it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, *and* as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony" (74). Spillers describes a system in which the cultural bonds of "kinship" lose meaning since they can be severed at any moment by intervening laws that defined black slaves, even children, as possessions subject to trade. For Jacobs's "slave mother" in the above epigraph, this "enforced state of breach" (Spillers 74) activates an instinct to suffer at the thought of the certain potential loss of her children. It is a certainty built into the fabric of life itself, a product of the social system that has "brutalized her from childhood" (Jacobs 16) to such a degree that she prefers death and infanticide over separation. Similarly, finding themselves related to neither their begetters nor their legal owners, enslaved children, as the Slave Spiritual above demonstrates, suffered a radical (i.e., a *certain*) sense of displacement that positioned them as both literal and symbolic orphans. The first epigraph to this section – whose purport is repeated throughout *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* – documents the exclusive affective experience of the enslaved mother and child and alludes to the same pathology that rendered the slave, according to Hartman, incapable of suffering yet subject to excessive acts of violent discipline.

"[O]verclose mother-love" is a specific case of the "universalizing and exclusionary machinations," which disidentification recognizes, and which, in that recognition, Muñoz notes, allow "a step further than [simply] cracking open the code of the majority" (*Disidentifications* 31). Such a "step" into an almost illegible "furthermore" is effected by the contradiction between the familial love of "overclose mother-love" and the always possible – the social *certain*ty of the possibility – of the destruction (or really the social nonexistence) of the slave "family" in the first place. Similar foundational contradictions can be seen and felt at the beginning and ending of *Beloved*, in its epigraph and in the final section of the novel itself. To begin, Morrison cites Romans 9:25:

I will call them my people;  
which were not my people;  
and her beloved,  
which was not beloved.

The epigraph encapsulates the bewildering emotional burden of loving what will certainly be lost. Such certainty beyond accident has no place in "the code of the majority" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 31) but rather stands in contest with it, as a "minoritarian" affect (Muñoz, "Feeling Brown" 70). *Beloved*, as an exemplar of the neo-slave narrative genre, utilizes anti-mimetic narrative strategies – in particular, the characteriza-

tion of the “unnatural” figure of Beloved and the inclusion of stream-of-consciousness narration. It does so in order to circumscribe this “minoritarian” affect beyond the simple de-legitimization of the code of the majority: the bewildering pain of the enslaved mother that resides at the nexus of (what we understand as) the personal and impersonal affective experience of a terrible certainty, with which it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify. This unreadable affect indicates, without cognitively understanding it, the “interior life” of chattel slavery, which is impersonal, bewildering “raw material” that “positions,” as Muñoz argues, the “unthinkable” (*Disidentifications* 31).

The last section of the novel similarly presents a discourse outside “the code of the majority” that cannot be recuperated into a universalizing empathy. Following Beloved’s disappearance, the novel’s discourse describes how her ghostly presence haunts familiar places: “Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there” (*Beloved* 275). In the coming and going of her narrative, Morrison attempts to capture the affect of the “interior life” of a subject whose “interiority” is so embedded in a historical moment (and as such is not purely “interior”) that “identification” is all but impossible. Just before this paragraph of ephemeral paces the novel states the following about Beloved’s family:

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative – looked at too long – shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do.

This is not a story to pass on. (275)

The “something more familiar” in this text about slavery is different from the “peculiar sorrows” of the slave mother that Jacobs almost immediately associates with “a mother’s instinct,” “a mother’s agonies,” feelings she considers essential and universal. What Morrison imagines seeing and feeling in a photograph of a friend “looked at too long” – “something more familiar than the dear face itself” – is the “raw” material reality of pain and suffering whose familiarity is impossible to identify with beyond a vague assertion of bewilderment. Is such familiar be-

wilderment a mark of despair? Is it simple confusion? Is it the ghostly presence of trauma that haunts beyond identification? Is it what James Phelan describes as a “stubborn” narrative strategy, what we might call a “hesitation” in the experience of narrative?

In his exploration of “stubborn” narrative strategies in *Beloved* – whose stubbornness, we are suggesting, provokes bewilderment – Phelan theorizes his own experience of reading the confounding character of *Beloved*. He admits that the novel, but most importantly its puzzling namesake, “eludes” him:

Like Stamp Paid on the threshold of 124, I cannot enter. Parts of Morrison’s world won’t let me in. Especially *Beloved* herself and the narrative’s last two pages. *Who, what is Beloved? Yes, Sethe’s murdered daughter. And – or? – a survivor of the Middle Passage.* Labels, not understanding [. . .] Another label for *Beloved* – from the litcrit drawer: oppositional character. Spiteful ghost, manipulating lover, selfish sister, all-consuming daughter. But also innocent – and representative – victim. Where is the integration – or the reason for no integration? (710)

Here, Phelan captures the bewilderment of reading a character who/that is *illegible*, or to employ his own terminology, who/that stubbornly resists the reader’s explanatory efforts (714). Like Sethe’s unruly and unpredictable house, “124,” the novel itself is unsettling because, as Andrew Hock Soon Ng also explains, “the reader no longer ‘feels at home’ in the text, for the anchoring normally established by clear characterization is lost” (233). To Morrison’s readers, as to Sethe and Denver, *Beloved* is at once familiar – Phelan deploys tools from his “litcrit drawer” to render a reading that documents *Beloved*’s historical significance as a product of the Middle Passage, for example – and disconcerting, and as such provokes the bewildering feeling of the uncanny. Essentially, Morrison attempts to capture the affects circulating through the interior life of a subject whose world does not recognize such interiority. *Beloved* is “nobody” (*Beloved* 275), yet her presence in the narrative is forceful.

#### “A Hot Thing” and the Aftereffects of Trauma

The uncanny familiarity that we, Phelan, and Ng describe is a bewilderingly unmoored experience, almost – or, in *Beloved*’s case, maybe precisely – an experience without a subject and thus “preconscious” and “pre-discursive,” but in its lack of subjectivity hardly felt to be somatic.

This subject-less affective experience closely approximates what many have described as the disorienting and uncanny effects of trauma. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as a “singular possession by the past” and what remains, in Caruth’s estimation, particularly compelling about this singular experience “is that its insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred” (151). What Caruth describes – the “force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (151) – generates a certain resistance to the work of integration of self, experience, and understanding that is accomplished via ordinary memory.<sup>11</sup> Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart argue that this type of traumatic memory is always dissociative, that it always resists conscious integration in “autobiographical memory” – the type of memory narrativized in traditional slave narratives and interrogated, we are suggesting here, in the genre of the neo-slave narrative.

In this analysis, the condition of trauma enacts the possession of the present by the past and the inability of the subject of experience to own that experience itself, even as this subject acts out or is drawn toward the past again and again. *Beloved* is fundamentally shaped by this concept of dissociative memory in that its narrative is always “circling, circling” (*Beloved* 162) around an unspeakable past event that gnaws at the text’s protagonist, Sethe, and her family. Some illegible, or unspeakable, memory lies at the center of Morrison’s novel; and in the sense that *Beloved*, and other neo-slave narratives, are also novels of their contemporary historical moment (i.e., the long turn of twenty-first-century America), they also document how America today has yet to come to terms with the legacy of chattel slavery and, as part of that legacy, the continued enactment of racial violence and disenfranchisement. These traumatic memories – both Sethe’s in *Beloved* and the national haunting of chattel slavery – persist as narrative “points” (*Beloved* 37) beyond which the novel will not initially venture. Sethe “could never close in, pin *it* down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn’t get it right off – she could never explain” (163; emphasis added). Though “it” remains a memory unmoored from Sethe’s larger life narrative, the novel is organized to avoid and circle around its illegibility, as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy notes, which generates a palpable “tension between needing to bury the

---

<sup>11</sup> Put another way, Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart note that “under [the] extreme conditions [of trauma], existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes memory of those experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary circumstances” (160). This gives rise to Pierre Janet’s foundational conceptualization of “traumatic memory.”



past as well as needing to revive it, between a necessary remembering and an equally necessary forgetting” (569).

*Beloved* finally flashes back to articulate the traumatic memory through the intimate third-person account of a mother faced with the certainty of losing her children. Following her escape from the Sweet Home plantation, Sethe is pursued by her previous owner:

she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings [. . .] And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (163)

Focalized through Sethe's perspective, the event takes on a poetic sensibility. Read within the cadence of this sensibility, it is the story of a mother's love compelling her, instinctively and urgently, to protect her children. It is the story of a family under threat “flying away” to freedom and safety that is comforting in its telling. Yet, when Sethe speaks of love and safety, the novel reminds us, “what she meant could cleave the bone” (164). What Morrison's novel circles around is not just the reality that Sethe resorts to infanticide – to “dragging” her children through the “veil” (163) – to ensure that they not return to bondage, but also that she rationalizes the act of murder as a performance of a mother's instinctual love: “it is my job to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (165). One can imagine that the whole of *Beloved*, then, is Sethe's “acting out” in response to this bewildering decision, or rather, is an attempt to somehow accommodate an illegible narrative void in her memory. And the affective force of the story originates in the futility of this narrative praxis, in its continued attempts to narrativize the pain and suffering associated with an illegible traumatic event. The actual historical and cultural reality of violence and disenfranchisement resides, almost illegibly, in the provocation – the generic deployment – of bewilderment and impersonality in *Beloved*; it resides in the very *force* of the novel and its genre, whose presence is felt, but whose meaning is never fully comprehensible.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's description of the “experience” of meaning – in a language very close to Morrison's description of a photograph “looked at too long” (275) – helps us to understand how this type of traumatic repetition or “acting out” might specifically manifest itself in narrative experience. “What would you be missing,” he asks, “If you did

not experience the meaning of a word?" (182). In expanding his own query, Wittgenstein gestures toward the felt experience of the illegible: "What would you be missing, for instance, if you did not understand the request to pronounce the word 'till' and to mean it as a verb, – or if you did not feel that a word lost its meaning and became a mere sound if it was repeated ten times over?" (200). As Morrison does in her epigraph and in her description of the illegible "it" that initially resists narration, Wittgenstein describes an experience that, in its nature, feels bewildering – the experience of losing meaning (and, in the case of the relative's photograph, losing family). The "living interior" of chattel slavery, the neo-slave narrative of *Beloved* suggests, is precisely this: the "extravagant irresolution" (Aubry 177) of the loss of meaning that is so overwhelming that it cannot be recuperated in the cognitive language of "agony" or "instinct" – the very same language Sethe deploys to explain her harrowing experience. Moreover, the extravagant irresolution of trauma haunts experience, so to speak, its force embodied by the familiarity of uncanny footprints and faces marked by an affective experience whose subject, like both Sethe and the mysterious Beloved, is not recognizable as a conduit of human experience.

Morrison's novel continues to convey this "experience of meaning" (and its loss) in a series of monologues delivered through the perspectives of the text's female protagonists. Each monologue coalesces around concerns of kinship and radical affection and, stylistically, each creates a "linguistic facsimile" (Wyatt 30) of the bewildering aftereffects of trauma, which are shared across individuals and generations. Here, through the deployment of anti-mimetic narrative strategies, the novel hypothesizes how the affective force of private trauma – the unspeakable "it" that haunts Sethe's narrative – circulates and persists among family members and even across generations. The women's narrative voices settle atop one another to create a palimpsestic portrait of communal trauma, a unique concept defined by Kai Erikson as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (184).

Each vignette begins with a declaration of kinship. "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine," begins Sethe (*Beloved* 200). "Beloved is my sister," daughter Denver begins, "I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (205). Together, mother and daughter weave a tale of the "overclose mother-love" – the affection that Sethe terms "tough" and "too thick" (200, 203) – that is grounded in suffering, the same force that drove Sethe, we understand, to infanticide. In a stream of consciousness, Sethe explains, "My plan was to take us all to the other



side where my own ma'am is. They stopped me from getting us there, but they didn't stop you from getting here. Ha Ha. You came right on back like a good girl . . ." (203). Addressing Beloved herself, Sethe gestures toward a suffering love that is so forceful it penetrates and permeates generations. Denver witnesses the force of this possessive affection and recognizes the violence of Sethe's loving "too much": "Maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children" (206). This "thing" Denver describes – akin to Sethe's "it" – is the loss of meaning that accompanies the bewildering affective force of suffering beyond comprehension and identification.

Yet, Beloved's vignette, a famously difficult passage for readers, strictly draws the events of the near and distant past into the "present." The first section of Beloved's monologue presents a familiar declaration of identity and affinity that seems to place it in tandem with Sethe's and Denver's accounts: "I am Beloved and she is mine [. . .] All of it is now. it is always now" (210). Still, the following lines reveal that the figure readers know as Beloved is channeling, across time and space, the voice of a child on a slave ship:

there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others  
who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is  
dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are  
locked some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without  
skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none [. . .] if we  
had more to drink we could make tears (210)

This account of the Middle Passage, written entirely in the present tense and with a disorienting, fragmented syntax and typographical spacings, exemplifies what Wittgenstein describes as a loss of meaning and what we are describing as a hesitation in narrative; it imitates the loss of temporal order, a loss brought about by traumatic experience, while also detailing grotesque and inhuman horrors. There is no clear progression through time, only the repetition of violence and neglect that goes beyond simply cracking the code of the majority; without any sense of beginning or end this vignette suggests a vision of the past dislocated in the present.

Although Beloved's monologue conforms to the monologues of Denver and Sethe in its opening – "I am Beloved and she is mine" (210) – there is little evidence that this testimony of the Middle Passage journey drives, along with Sethe's and Denver's accounts, the plot of *Beloved* forward. Yet, the relentless – and stubbornly non-narrative – present of Beloved's monologue affords readers an affective confrontation with

the elusive, threatening “thing” that Denver mentions earlier, here described as the “hot thing,” that compels her mother to kill herself and her family. Still, among the abrupt sentences describing a litany of abominations – starvation, extreme thirst, rape, and a pileup of bodies – there remains a hint of “familiar” narrative forms. While the chaos of the writing allows a plethora of interpretations, the vignette suggests that the child witnesses her mother leaping overboard and drowning. The “hot thing,” a phrase repeated throughout the monologue, signals a fierce affective response to the loss of a mother where, traumatically, feeling is displaced to object (the “thing” of “hot thing”). This is precisely the social “process” of experience Williams describes as “taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and isolating” (132).

In this monologue *Beloved* describes what it feels like to see her mother gasping for air in the waves, to desire to join her:

I see her face which is mine    it is the face that was going to smile at me in  
the place where we crouched    now she is going to    her face comes  
through the water    a hot thing    her face is mine    she is not smiling  
she is chewing and swallowing [. . .]    she knows I want to join    she  
chews and swallows me    I am gone    now I am her face    my own face  
has left me    I see me swim away    a hot thing (212-13)

This series of statements describes the “feeling” of intergenerational trauma. As her mother dies, the child wishes to “join,” to be with her mother in death, and this burning feeling, this “hot thing,” is the same fervor that Denver recognizes (again, without comprehending it) in Sethe. The child, however, does not die and instead takes her mother’s “face,” suggesting that this suffering and the intense love that accompanies it is a not-quite-comprehensible aftereffect across generations. Contemporary readers are invited to recognize the relentless present of this bewildering affective experience and to see that the “thing” that drove Sethe’s infanticide is tethered to a historical lineage of suffering.

### Literary Genre and Affect

*Beloved* – and the genre of neo-slave narratives more generally – strive to provoke feelings of unmoored, preconscious, and pre-discursive affect that are nevertheless grounded in the trafficking of human beings as chattel property. Such trafficking offers itself as incomprehensible insofar as it presents, as *Beloved* does, an uncanny sense of the familiarity of the strange: commerce is essentially a social act, but the commerce of

*persons* in chattel slavery cracks open any sense of sociality by destroying the basis of human sociality altogether, namely the personhood of persons. This is unspeakable and illegible: it is a scandal to any sense of social value and morality and yet it has remained relentlessly and palimpsestically “present” in the American social order. That is, Morrison’s neo-slave narrative can help us engage with the affective forms we call literary genres, in which feelings are provoked to marshal social solidarity and enlarge horizons of experience. But to “experience” trauma – and particularly the overwhelming trauma of chattel slavery – which, in its nature, cannot be experienced as such simply because trauma dislocates the subject of experience altogether, is to encounter the illegible, the unspeakable “hot thing” of trauma.

Still, the neo-slave narrative of *Beloved* deploys the illegible in order to “crack open the code of the majority” and “to use this code as raw material” for circumscribing, as Muñoz argues, “a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (*Disidentifications* 31). What is “unthinkable” is the destruction of human life embodied in the “overclose mother-love” of the slave Mother, who understands

that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. (*Beloved* 151)

In this way the absolute destruction of human life is embodied in the “unthinkable” and unspeakable, namely, the erasure of human subjectivity and the erasure of qualities of “personhood.” In “positioning” this erasure, the genre of the neo-slave narrative allows infanticide to come to seem “thinkable” after all, or at least to indicate a felt aftereffect – a not-quite-comprehensible after-*affect* – of the national trauma of chattel slavery.

## References

- Aubry, Timothy. *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018.
- Bell, Bernard B. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.
- Caruth, Cathy. "Recapturing the Past." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995. 151-58.
- Charon, Rita. *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Dubey, Madhu. "The Politics of Genre in 'Beloved.'" *NOVEL: A Forum in Fiction* 32.2 (spring 1999): 187-206.
- Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 183-200.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Introduction: The Language of Slavery." *The Slave's Narrative*. Ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. xi-xxxiv.
- Goodell, William. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A History of the Great Struggle in Both Hemispheres; With a View of the Slavery Question in the United States*. New York: William Harned Publishers, 1852.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Herman, David. *Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013.
- Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Antinomies of Realism*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Janet, Pierre. *L'évolution de la mémoire et la notion du temps*. Paris: Cahine, 1928.
- Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Li, Stephanie. "12 Years a Slave as a Neo-Slave Narrative." *American Literary History* 26.2 (2014): 326-31.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1987.
- . "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 101-24.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

- . "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's 'The Sweetest Hangover (And Other STDs).'" *Theatre Journal* 52.1 (March 2000): 67-79.
- Ng, Andrew Hock Soon. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Space, Architecture, Trauma." *symploke* 19 (2011): 231-45.
- Norridge, Zoe. *Perceiving Pain in African American Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Phelan, James. "Toward a Rhetorical Reader-Response Criticism: The Difficult, the Stubborn, and the Ending of *Beloved*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 39 (fall/winter 1993): 709-28.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *American Literature* 64.3 (September 1992): 567-97.
- Schleifer, Ronald. "Death, Literary Form, and Affective Comprehension: Primary Emotions and the Neurological Basis of Genre." *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature*. Ed. Daniel Jernigan, Neil Murphy and W. Michelle Wang. New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2020.
- . "Modernism and Gesture: The Experience of Music, Samuel Beckett, and Performed Bewilderment." *Criticism* 61 (2019): 73-96.
- Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (summer 1987): 64-81.
- Stepto, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979.
- Terada, Rei. "Introduction: Emotion After the 'Death of the Subject.'" *Feeling in Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. 1-15.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel and Onno van der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995. 158-82.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- Wyatt, Jean. *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2017.