THE GOTHIC AS A SUBVERSIVE NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVERY FICTION

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Introduction

African Americans carry the weight of a terrifying past; their history is loaded with some of the worst atrocities that humanity is capable of inflicting on itself. African-American history begins with the transatlantic slave trade, commonly known as the Middle Passage, which was part of the triangular trade route between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The Middle Passage was for the Africans, as Stephanie Smallwood points out, a "transformative journey from 'African captives' through 'Atlantic commodities' to 'American slaves'" (qtd. in Chassot 91). Each one of these stages of transformation meant suffering and loss; not only were Africans taken away from their homeland for good, but, worst of all, they were denied their own identity and deprived of their culture. As Africans became a commodity, they lost their individuality and they were objectified; "the slave 'ceased to belong in his [*sic*] own right to any legitimate social order'; existing only through and for his master" (Patterson, qtd. in Chassot 92). Many Africans perished during the voyage, but for those who survived the prospect was not any more encouraging: a lifetime of slavery and forced labor was awaiting them in the new world. Many generations had to pass until the system of slavery was finally abolished. However, the struggle of African Americans did not end there; the Reconstruction Era after the American Civil War was only the beginning of the road to their recognition as American citizens with full rights.

Slavery is a shameful chapter of American history which until recently was largely omitted from public memory, or inaccurately portrayed. Slavery is a cultural trauma which needs to be properly integrated into public memory. This cultural trauma is like a traumatic memory which, though existing in the mind, resists integration and cannot become narrative (Bal

viii). A subject who has gone through a traumatic experience usually presents one or more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); these are varied, but often include “memory problems, emotional numbing and difficulty maintaining close relationships” (Kurtz 424). According to Jeffrey Alexander, when these symptoms affect an entire community they constitute a cultural trauma (1), which happens when “members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 1). One way of integrating the traumatizing events of the past according to Mieke Bal is through art: “Art ... can mediate between the parties of the traumatizing scene and between these and the reader or viewer. The recipients of the account perform an act of memory that is potentially healing, as it calls for political and cultural solidarity in recognizing the traumatized party's predicament” (x). Therefore, literature (like any other artistic expression) has the capacity of giving a voice to those who were victims of a traumatic experience such as slavery, and through this artistic expression evoke the readers’ empathy.

The gothic genre has proven to be a productive medium to express the unspeakable events of slavery. Because the perversions of the slavery system defy logic and reasoning, the terrifying facts of slavery are particularly effectively portrayed in a genre in which the supernatural and the horrific are not only possible, but expected elements. According to Fred Botting, the gothic is defined by “negative aesthetics;” this means that the gothic does not deal with values or morals−or does not aim at being an example of these−but rather with the obscure and ambiguous. He argues that,

> If knowledge is associated with rational procedures of enquiry and understanding based on natural, empirical reality, then gothic styles disturb the borders of knowing and conjure up obscure otherworldly phenomena of the "dark arts," alchemical, arcane and occult forms normally characterized as delusion, apparition deception. Not tied to a natural order of things as defined by realism, gothic flights of imagination suggest supernatural possibility, mystery magic, wonder and monstrosity. (2)

Because the gothic genre with its fantastic elements, such as ghosts, conjure, and magic, escapes logic, it is adequate to portray the horrors of the system. The gothic has the capacity to explore phenomena which, at first sight, would seem to exist only in horror stories, including the terrible lives that slaves were forced to endure. Moreover, the gothic's effects on its readers can make them aware of the terrible consequences of such an unjust system as slavery was: "In writing slavery as a Gothic script, the antislavery movement used the Gothic not only to demonize slavery as a wicked system, but also to arouse the appropriate response of disgust and horror in the reader" (Goddu, "To Thrill" 75). In accordance with its negative aesthetics, the gothic also seeks to evoke negative responses from its readers, such as rejection, fear and anger: "Their effects, aesthetically and socially, are also replete with a range of negative features: not beautiful, they display no harmony or proportion. Ill formed, obscure, ugly, gloomy and utterly antipathetic to effects of love, admiration or gentle delight, gothic texts register revulsion, abhorrence, fear, disgust and terror" (Botting 2). These characteristics make the gothic an adequate genre to give expression to repressed and unspeakable experiences.

Teresa Goddu examines different strategies by which the gothic is used to give voice to the horror of slavery. Firstly, she argues that "by signifying the event of slavery through

narrative effects, the gothic both registers actual events and turns them into fiction" ("Haunting Back" 132). This means that the horrific scenes of slavery can be compared to gothic tropes; in fact, on many occasions these events seem more to belong within the frame of a gothic tale than in the everyday world: vile masters whipping their slaves, mothers separated from their children, continual physical abuse, men treated worse than animals, and so on. All these instances of abuse and exploitation which were so widespread under the slavery system seem to belong to a place beyond the real world. Because they escape logic, they need to be fictionalized in order to be mentally processed by those who have not been direct witnesses of these events. Goddu also "explores the extent to which the gothic is able to rematerialize the ghosts of America's racial history and enable African-American writers to haunt back" ("Haunting Back" 132). With this idea she refers to the way in which those unspeakable events find a place in narrative, and can begin to be incorporated and recognized in public memory, allowing descendants of those who were traumatized by slavery to start on the path towards healing.

Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), and Tony Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) are three works written by African-American writers who use of the gothic and the supernatural to portray the horrors of slavery. These works share the characteristic of being narrated by black characters who, despite being already free, are still haunted by the atrocities of the slave system. *The Conjure Woman* is a collection of tales told by Uncle Julius, a former slave who despite being free still lives on the plantation to which he used to belong in his slave days. Julius uses the supernatural to narrate episodes from the times of slavery to John, a white man who is interested in buying the land where Julius lives and who serves as the skeptical frame narrator for Julius's stories. By using the gothic and the supernatural, Julius places the injustices of the slave system in the realm of fiction, but at the

same time he cunningly reveals the horrendous reality of the lives of the enslaved. In *Middle Passage,* Rutherford Calhoun, a young black man, was granted his freedom by his master at the time of the latter's death. To escape the bonds of marriage, Calhoun embarks on the *Republic*, a slave ship which is on its way to Africa in search of African captives whose destiny will be enslavement in America. Even though the general tone of the novel is humorous, the gothic finds its way in through the terrifying descriptions of how the captives are treated on board and the terrible way in which their identity is erased while they become mere commodities. Finally, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe, a woman free from the burden of slavery, but captive of the memories of the slave system, especially of the consequences that slavery had for her husband and children. *Beloved* presents many characteristics of gothic fiction, of which the haunting of Sethe and her house by the ghost of her dead baby girl is the most terrifying. By deploying elements of the gothic in their works, these authors demonstrate how the ghost of slavery still haunts those who were victims of that perverse system and allow them to give a narrative form to those events which seemed unspeakable at first.

In my thesis I will argue that by appropriating and subverting genres such as the plantation romance and a slave ship's log and introducing gothic conventions, Chesnutt and Johnson do not only call on their readers' imagination, but also call attention to the injustices of the slave system. Morrison's subversive strategy is carried out by the resurrection of the ghost of slavery, demonstrating thus that the past cannot be buried and forgotten. The past must be confronted and integrated into public memory. The gothic foregrounds the horrors of slavery, and these are meant to evoke a sense of moral indignation and rejection in the audience. The atrocities committed during slavery are mitigated by being represented as fiction; however, presenting the horrors of slavery in the realm of fiction allows African-American writers to reach

a wider public and raise awareness of the importance of the incorporation of this shameful chapter of American history into mainstream national narratives. By representing the horrors of the slave system, the gothic is a narrative strategy that potentially contributes to the healing of the cultural trauma that slavery has left on the African-American community.

Chapter 1: Charles Chesnutt and the Subversion of the Plantation Myth in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*

Charles Chesnutt was a well-educated man whose main ambition was to become a great novelist. As he wrote in his journal, "It is the dream of my life − to be an author" (154). For Chesnutt a successful literary career meant not only fame, but also a path through which a man without a fortune, as he was, could rise in social status: "I want fame; I want money; I want to raise my children in a different rank of life from that I sprang from" (Chesnutt 154). The young Chesnutt was confident that his talent would be enough to grant him the success that he aspired to obtain from his writing, and that no racial issues would interfere. As he writes in his journal:

> I believe that the American people will recognize worth [,] ability or talent, wherever it shows itself, and that as the colored people, as a class, show themselves worthy of respect and recognition, the old prejudice will vanish, or wear away, and the Colored Man in America will be considered, not as a separate race … but as a friend and brother. (108; double underscore in original)

However, the American literary market of the end of the nineteenth century was not as simple as Chesnutt thought, especially for an African-American writer who was writing "without literary models and a literary tradition" (Fienberg 163). Chesnutt soon realized that he would have to comply with the demands of his editors if he wished to see his works published. This is why his first encounter with success was through the publication of a series of plantation romances, first published in literary journals like *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Overland Monthly* and *Two Tales*, and a few years later collected as a short story sequence titled *The Conjure Woman* (1899). The

plantation romance was a very popular genre at that time, but it was not Chesnutt's creation. As Richard Brodhead points out, "[i]t represents a convention already massively conventional when he adopted it, a formula fully established in the literary system of his time" (3). These romances looked nostalgically and in an idealized way to the antebellum rural south, attributing values such as chivalry, courage, integrity, honorable conduct and loyalty to white southerners. These features contrasted sharply with the reality of big industrial cities in the north where most readers lived. Representative writers of this genre were white southerners like Thomas Dixon, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page; their tales generally depict stereotypical characters, like the kind and paternal plantation owner and the faithful black servant, who lived in complete harmony in a perfectly organized society in which everyone knew and respected his role; as Gretchen Martin points out, "the southern plantation novel emerged, idealizing the plantation lifestyle by creating romantic character portraits that grew to become cultural ideals" (65). These "cultural ideals" had been disrupted by the Civil War; and, as Lucinda MacKethan notes, "nostalgia is most appealing to a society encountering tumultuous change … . [N]ostalgia for the Old South fed anxiety about the present and future by proclaiming that things were better in a lost past, and, at the same time, assuaged those fears by giving assurance that the past can be relieved through memory" (qtd. in M. Martin 2).

However, while the plantation romances written by white southern authors tend to downgrade blacks, Chesnutt's stories give them a voice through which they can reveal a more realistic picture of the Old South, even when he does this in a very subtle manner, so as not to antagonize his readers. Matthew Martin describes the differences between Chesnutt and Page's tales in the following terms: "Page and Chesnutt stand opposite each other as southern plantation writers: Page the grand perpetuator of the plantation myth, Chesnutt its subverter; Page the white

supremacist, Chesnutt the crusader for racial justice" (2). Although Chesnutt appropriates this genre, using for his plantation stories the same romantic characters, structure and format as Page, he keeps his own agenda in mind and introduces elements which help him to convey his message. For instance, Chesnutt includes John's wife, a female character whose sensitivity allows her to comprehend clearly the purpose behind Julius's stories. Moreover, Julius stories are "conjure" tales, in which magic spells play an important role since they constitute the means of escaping and alleviating the oppressive system of slavery.

Chesnutt criticizes the slavery system and the condition of the emancipated black people during the post- Reconstruction era, but he does so behind the veil of a well-known white format. He introduces the supernatural and elements which belong to the gothic genre to articulate the terrible cruelties of slavery which were impossible to depict in plain language. As Hyejin Kim points out, "Gothic strategies allow writers of the repressed class, race, or gender to transgress the main discourse. The gothic opens a space not only to articulate the broken voice of suffering and pain, but also to produce a counter-hegemonic discourse" (414). Chesnutt, I will argue, uses the plantation romance to reach a white audience, but he deviates from the conventions of the genre by using elements of the gothic to make his readers aware of the perversion of the slave system and the necessity of working towards the full integration of former slaves into post-Reconstruction American society.

The opening paragraphs of the first tale of the collection, "The Goophered Grapevine," describe a gothic setting in which decay and solitude, together with the abandonment of the house and other buildings on the former plantation, are the main characteristics. According to Fred Botting, gothic settings are "located in isolated spots, areas beyond reason, law and civilized authority;" moreover, "these sites are often tempered with decay: deserted, haunted and

in ruins, like the feudal institutions they incarnate" (Botting 4). This story, like the rest of stories in the collection, is narrated by John, a white educated northern carpetbagger who has come to the south due to his wife's poor health, but also with the intention of starting his business there, since "labor was cheap, and land could be bought for a mere song" (31). When John and his wife Annie visit the McAdoo estate, a former plantation, they cannot help but notice the decay of the once splendid facilities and the general state of abandonment that these currently present:

> We drove between a pair of decayed gateposts −the gate itself had long disappeared− and up a straight sandy line, between two lines of rotting rail fence, partly concealed by jimsom weeds and briers, to the open space where a dwelling house had once stood, evidently a spacious mansion, if we might judge from the ruined chimneys that were still standing, and the brick pillars on which the sills rested. The house itself, we had been informed, had fallen victim to the fortunes of war. (33-34)

The decaying state of the once formidable plantation buildings mirrors the condition of former slaves after the abolition of the institution of slavery, which had been the dominant economic model in the Southern states before the war. The abolition of slavery meant a profound change in the lives of both former slaves and slave owners. The years following the war witnessed a period of social and economic reorganization which caused anxiety and uncertainty in the lives of those who had spent all their lives under the old order. Like many other Northerners, John moves to the South in search of business opportunities; he is interested in grape-culture, but he observes that, like many other Southern economic activities, it has "fallen in desuetude" (32). At the same time, the estate he intends to purchase has been involved in a long litigation "during which periods of shiftless cultivation had well-nigh exhausted the soil;" the vineyard "has lapsed into utter neglect" and the trellises which supported the vines are "decayed and broken down" (33).

This deterioration of resources due to neglect and abandonment symbolizes the way in which former slaves had also been overused, exhausted, and subsequently left to their own luck.

Uncle Julius, a former slave of the McAdoo plantation, is trying to find his place in this context of historical change. As a middle-aged man who has spent all his life at the service of his master, it is not easy for him to adapt himself to the new conditions. As Jeannette White points out, "[c]aptives still, the former slaves emerge as the lost souls, physically free, emotionally lost, economically deprived, socially outcast, and spiritually isolated from their former captors" (86). Julius, like most other former slaves, has no formal education and owns no land; these facts put him in a disadvantageous position from which there is not an easy way out. John, as a character representing white northerners who came south after the war (commonly called "carpetbaggers") intends to take advantage of his situation, since he knows that freedmen are "cheap labor" that he can employ for his business. About Julius John observes the following:

> He had been accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another. When this relation was no longer possible, owing to the war, and to his master's death and the dispersion of the family, he had been unable to break off entirely the mental habits of a lifetime, but had attached himself to the old plantation, of which he seemed to consider himself an appurtenance. (55)

Even when Julius is not a slave anymore, he is still attached to the land he has worked all his life, given that he still makes use of the resources that the land provides for his subsistence. However, his status in society has changed: "[n]o longer an economic object, he must become an economic subject, participating in the market place with whatever goods he can turn to profit" (Fienberg 169). In order to maintain his means of life, which consists of small-scale exploitation of the

land where he lives, Julius resorts to his ingenuity to manipulate John and Annie's minds through clever stories, which help him to obtain some economic profit, though he “never steps outside his servile role” (White 89). Moreover, given his profound knowledge of the land, John finds him “useful in many ways” (55); therefore John allows Julius to stay on the estate. In this way, Julius finds a means of living by offering the expertise that John needs in the form of tales and advice. As Richard Brodhead remarks, “[t]he economy associated with Julius (not a cash economy) is based on bargaining, striking deals in which one gives up something the other wants in order to get something the other has” (11). This primitive form of economy allows Julius to stay on the land where he was born and which is part of his identity, and provide him with the income he needs for survival.

While Julius obtains what he needs through telling his tales, Chesnutt, as author, also intends to achieve his own goals through them: setting free the oppressed voices of slaves, and showing the harsh reality of the institution of slavery. Chesnutt copies Page’s use of the frame narrative to structure his tales. Julius’s stories are framed by John, an educated white man, and his interpretations and comments tame the voice of the black narrator of the embedded stories, and give the tales more credibility. However, by including the voice of Annie, John’s wife, Chesnutt also adds a second interpretation of Julius’s tales. Since Annie is more sensitive, her interpretation is much closer to the message that Julius is intending to transmit; that is how terrible life was for blacks under the slave system. Julius’s stories are set during slavery, which places them in an apparently distant and long gone past; however, many of stories also reflect the situation of former slaves at the moment of Julius’s narration, that is, after their emancipation. As Botting argues in relation to the gothic, “[h]istorical settings allow a movement from and back to a rational present: more than a flight of nostalgic retrospection or an escape from the dullness of

a present without chivalry, magic or adventure, the movement does not long for terrifying and arbitrary aristocratic power, religious superstition or supernatural events but juxtaposes terrors of the negative with an order authorized by reason and morality" (3). Like the gothic tales to which Botting refers, Julius's stories are situated in a supposedly irrational past which is contrasted with a "rational" present. Even when these irrational elements, such as magic, conjure, and transformations are symbols for the slaves' oppressive lives, John is constantly downgrading Julius's stories and considers them pure fantasy, since he reads them from a rational perspective. "The devices and techniques employed [in gothic tales] heighten ambivalence and ambiguity, suggesting opposed ways of understanding events as supernatural occurrences or venally materialistic plots, imagined or actual" (Botting 5). Chesnutt's introduction of gothic elements in Julius's stories gives a voice to the oppressed slaves, but at the same time sharply contrasts with John's rational point of view; Chesnutt's aim is to enable his audience to see beyond John's rigid position.

One of the most evident gothic elements in Julius's stories is the use of conjure and magic spells. Referred to as "goopher." The spell "imbues life into slaves, enables them to pursue freedom, and helps them survive though the traumas of slavery. It raises the socially dead slaves back to the center of attention, the center of stories" (Kim 423). In Julius's tales the most important conjure woman is Aunt Peggy, a black woman who has bought her freedom before the war and makes her living by casting spells and conjures; Julius describes her in the following terms: "[s]he could wuk de mos' powerfulles' kin' er goopher,−could make people have fits, er rheumatiz, er make 'em dwinel away en die; en dey say she went out ridin' de niggers at night, fer she wuz a witch 'sides bein' a cunjuh 'oman" (36). The conjurer represents a figure of authority within the black community, since she is able to solve all kinds of trouble, for instance

reuniting a small child with its mother in “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny,” correcting the cruel manners of a harsh master in “Mars Jeem’s Nightmare,” bringing lovers together in “Hot-Foot Hannibal,” and helping a slave obtain his freedom in “Tobe’s Tribulations.” Aunt Peggy represents the only source of justice that slaves can resort to, since they were deprived of any rights; in Brodhead’s words, she represents “a form of power available to the powerless in mortally intolerable situations” (9). In exchange for her conjuring, slaves pay Peggy with whatever they have at hand, evidencing a parallel economic system where money is not the currency. This is clearly illustrated in the following interchange in “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny”: “’Dat is a monst’us small mess er peas you is fotch' me', sez Aun’ Peggy. ... ‘You’ll hafter fetch me sump’n mo’, sez Aun’ Peggy, ‘fer you can’t ‘spec’ me ter was’e my time diggin’ roots en wukkin’ cunj’ation fer nuffin’” (87). Peggy is willing to help slaves and does so effectively, but she is also aware that her work is valuable, and she expects to be paid in accordance with her efforts. Aunt Peggy is respected by slaves and feared by whites, who, even when asserting that believing in conjure is foolish, prefer not to bother Peggy: “w’iles Mars Dugal say he didn’ b’liebe in cunj’in en sich, he ‘peared ter ‘low it wuz bes’ ter be on de safe side, and let Aun’ Peggy alone” (116). In fact, there are occasions on which even plantation owners seek her services; for example in “The Goophered Grapevine,” Mars Dugal wants his slaves to stop eating the grapes of his vines so he can make a bigger profit from his vineyard. For this reason he visits Aunt Peggy and asks her to “goopher” his grapevines. Aunt Peggy’s goopher works to perfection, preventing laborers from eating the grapes. However, Mars Dugal’s ambition is so great that it crosses the boundaries of human respect for the other; for instance, when he realizes that, due to the goopher’s side-effects, the health of one of his slaves named Henry, flourishes and declines according to the seasons, he decides to sell Henry for a high price every spring

when he feels strong and vital, and buy him back in winter when Henry feels weak and old to obtain a bigger profit from him. This cruel act portrays Mars Dugal as what Botting calls a gothic "monster," who trespasses the limits of human decency. In Botting's terms, "[t]ransgressors move beyond norms and regulations, thereby challenging their value, authority and permanence. Monsters combine negative features that oppose (and define) norms, conventions and values; they suggest an excess or absence beyond those structures and bear the weight of projections and emotions (revulsion, horror, disgust) that result" (10). But Mars Dugal's greed does not end with the exploitation of his slaves; he blindly follows the advice of a Yankee, which leads to the ruin of his vineyard. This proves that Aunt Peggy's conjuring is highly powerful, but also fallible; therefore, people's right judgment must be part of the equation.

As another prominent gothic resource, Chesnutt includes many instances of transformations in his tales to recreate slaves' attempt to evade their terrible fate; "[Chesnutt's] tales are filled with suffering slaves and introduce their magical transformations as a tool of physical and psychological escape from a horrific reality of slavery" (Kim 418). One of these horrific realities was the objectifying of slaves. The reduction of slaves to mere commodities was inherent in the slave system and it was legitimized by the ideology of white supremacy, the belief that the "white race" was superior, and could, therefore, dominate other races. This commodification of slaves is clearly portrayed in "Po Sandy." Sandy is a "monst'us good nigger" (46); he can do to perfection all kinds of tasks on the plantation, and for this reason all of Mars Marrabo's children want him as a wedding present. Because Mars Marrabo wants to be just (to his family at least), he decides that Sandy will live for a month with each of his children. However, Mars Marrabo's sense of justice does not take Sandy into consideration; Sandy will no longer have a fixed home, since he will have to live rotating among different locations as if he

were a simple piece of machinery. This miserable way of life soon starts to take its toll on Sandy; as he confesses to Tenie, his new wife, he is "gittin' monst'us tie'ed er dish yer gwine roun' so much. ... I wish I wuz a tree, er a stump, er a rock, er sump'n w'at could stay on the plantation fer a wi'le" (47). Sandy is so tired of his nomadic life that he feels that even a rock or a tree have a better life that he. Like Aunt Peggy, his wife Tenie is a "cunjuh 'oman" (47) and she has the power to transform Sandy into anything he wants. They decide that the best option is to turn Sandy into a tree. This transformation means that Sandy will lose his mouth and ears, but he is willing to pay that price for his freedom; that is, Sandy is prepared to give up part of his humanity for a more stable life. However, poor Sandy's problems do not end with his metamorphosis. Even though he has finally obtained his freedom, his bliss is not complete: he can only spend time with his wife clandestinely, and, as a tree, he is subject to the actions of birds and woodcutters, which harm him badly. The worst part comes when he is chopped down and turned into lumber for building a new kitchen; this terrible act turns Sandy again into a product at somebody else's service. The goopher was not powerful enough to save Sandy's life from the objectification of the slavery system. As a result, his soul continues to haunt the kitchen that was built out of his wood, just as the memories of slavery haunt those like Uncle Julius, even when they are already free from the system. In this tale Chesnutt portrays, through the voice of Julius, the terrible injustices that slaves endured and the great difficulties they had to go through to improve their living conditions.

The commodification of slaves was possible since they were not considered fully human. As Julius's tales reveal, the dehumanization of slaves meant a denial of their feelings or intelligence and allowed their masters to treat them as if they were animals. Transformations within Julius's stories also stand for repressed feelings and desires; what slaves could not do in

their human form was sometimes possible after changing form. In this way, "[t]he conjure becomes a redeeming strategy that provides power for the powerless; it offers an alternative way of reasoning and survival for blacks. … It enables slaves to redeem their freedom and humanity" (Kim 427). In "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," a loving mother is separated from her child just to be traded for a race horse. Her owner considers his slaves mere property and is willing to exchange them anytime at his convenience, regardless of the slaves' personal circumstances. When in need of money to buy a new horse, Becky's owner, "Kunnel Pen'leton," says to Mars Dugal, the horse's owner: "You come out ter my plantation ter-morrer en look ober my niggers, en pick out de one you wants" (85). Mars Dugal chooses Becky but he refuses to accept her child with her, since he only cares about his business and an infant is not a good worker; as he puts it, "I doan raise niggers; I raises hosses, en I doan wanter be both'rin' wid no nigger babies. Nemmine de baby. I'll keep dat 'oman so busy she'll fergit de baby; fer niggers is made ter wuk, en dey ain' got no time for no sich foolis'ness ez babies" (86). According to Mars Dugal, slaves, just like any other farm animal, are made only to work and not to waste time bonding with others. It is only through a magic spell that transforms Becky's baby into a bird, that the child is able to meet its mother again, a possibility which was denied to it in its human form. It is also Aunt Peggy who conjures the two masters into believing that they have made a bad deal; as a result, Becky is finally returned to her old master and is able to live with her baby again.

In "The Conjurer's Revenge" dehumanization is treated from a different perspective; Primus, a black slave, is turned into a mule by a conjure man in revenge for stealing his "shote" after a night of dancing and drinking; if Primus had known that the pig was the property of a conjure man, he would never have stolen it, but since he was drunk, he was unable to control himself. In his new mule shape, Primus is sold to his old master and put to work on the

plantation, but even when to everybody's eyes Primus is an animal, he repeatedly shows human behaviour. Soon the other slaves start to notice something strange about the new mule; first Primus eats a whole patch of tobacco even when they think that "[t]erbacker is lack religion, de good Lawd made it for people, en dey ain' no yuther creetur w'at kin preciate it" (74); after that, Primus is taken to a vineyard where he finds the opportunity to drink a full barrel of wine; and finally, Primus starts provoking the man who has seduced his wife. In Hyejin Kim words, "[t]he mule-man Primus's 'weird' behavior enacts a refusal to be treated as a mule and a determination to retain his humanity … . Primus's narrative also accuses the institution of slavery of forcing transformation of slaves into cattle" (426). In this way, Chesnutt reverses the dehumanization exerted by one class over the other by attributing human characteristics to a mule and proving that humanity cannot be simply erased from people.

Although the use of magic and transformations abound in Julius's tales, as the African-American writer Richard Wright has famously written, the supernatural is not always a requirement for a tale to fit into the Gothic genre: "African-American history is not only material for the gothic writer, but is also itself coded in gothic terms" (qtd. in Goddu 131). Sometimes reality is so terrible that its mere depiction recreates a horror story. For example in "Dave's Neckliss," in this tale the transformation that the slave Dave undergoes is psychological rather than supernatural. Dave is an exceptional individual, interested in learning to read and write, and most of all in preaching the Lord's word. Dave exerts such a positive influence over his fellow slaves that his master does not punish him from learning to read (which was illegal for slaves at that time), and decides to give Dave the status of plantation preacher. Everything seems to be going well for Dave; he preaches and is respected by the other slaves, and he has found a good woman to marry. However, soon his life takes an unexpected and undeserved turn: Dave is

unjustly blamed for stealing a piece of ham from the smoke house, and severely punished for this. Mars Walker, the overseer of the plantation, is an ignorant white man who feels threatened by Dave's intellectual superiority and takes this chance to humiliate him. Not only is Dave physically punished with the usual forty whiplashes, but he is also forced to wear a chained ham around his neck day and night. In this way, Dave and the other slaves are constantly reminded of his crime. As Julius relates:

> "[W]'eneber he went ter wuk, dat ham would be in his way; he had ter do his task, howsomedever, de same ez ef he didn' hab de ham. W'eneber he went ter lay down, dat ham would be in de way. ... It wuz de las' thing he seed at night, en de fus' thing he seed in de mawnin'. W'eneber he met a stranger, de ham would be de fus thing de stranger would see." (130)

This punishment, which clearly exceeds the crime which Dave has been – unjustly − charged with, destroys Dave's self-esteem: Dave goes from being an example of good behaviour to being an example of shame and crime. He carries the piece of ham around his neck as a stigma of a crime he has not even committed and soon his life is in ruins; he has lost the respect he had earned around the plantation and the love of his wife. His shame is so great that he loses his mind and finally commits suicide; in Kim's words, "slavery not only treats black slaves as working chattel; it also engraves a sense of inferiority on their psyche" (425). This tale suggests how hard life was for slaves in America, being taken away from their communities in Africa where they were respected and valued, and brought by force to America where they are forced to live a life full of punishments for a crime they have not committed, and after their freedom haunted by the stigma of their skin colour and the myth that they belong to an inferior class. Therefore, even when Julius's tale does not portray any fantastic transformations, it alludes to a

much greater transformation: that of free people into a psychologically and physically subjugated race of slaves.

In “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare” the subjugation process is reversed: by means of a powerful conjure Mars Jeems, a cruel slave owner, is transformed into a black man and brought to work on his own plantation, which at that moment is under the charge of Mars Johnson, the overseer. According to Jeems’s own orders, he has to be stricter than ever with the slaves, so that Jeems can cut down expenses and have more work done. The transformation leaves Mars Jeems in a state of total confusion, which resembles that of the Africans at their arrival in America after surviving the Middle Passage. He cannot remember anything about his past, not even his name or the place where he comes from; as he admits, “’My head is all kin’ er mix’ up’” (62). At the plantation he is taught, through physical punishment, what his role is now: he must work and live for his master. Jeems must work regardless of the pain he is suffering; otherwise, he is accused of laziness and lack of respect towards his superiors. Jeems is considered mere chattel, and due to deficient functioning he is sold away. Thus, by experiencing the injustices and cruelties of slavery he becomes aware of the hard and oppressive life that slaves endure. When he recovers his usual form, even though he believes that everything has been a bad dream, he feels the urge to change his manners towards his slaves. However, having experienced the oppressive system of slavery is not sufficient reason for Jeems to abolish its practice on his plantation; he barely makes some improvements on his slaves' living conditions, such as giving them some free time for celebration or allowing them to get married. This tale suggests that being aware of the injustices of the slave system and proclaiming its abolition is not enough to dissipate its evils. In order to eradicate all forms of slavery or exploitation of human beings one should avoid and reject being part of any activity related to these practices.

The use of the gothic and the supernatural in order to recreate the horrors of slavery allows skeptical readers, such as John, to take distance from the tales and find relief in the idea that all those terrible accounts belong to a fantasy world. This is reflected in the way in which John reacts to Julius's stories. As Kim points out, “John’s frame story repeatedly ridicules blacks’ acceptance of ‘irrationality’ and supernaturalism, defining black people as inferior, irrational, and ignorant” (416). Because John considers Julius a primitive and superstitious man, he does not give any credit to his revisionary plantation tales other than emphasizing the economic profit that Julius is intending to obtain from his tales, since owing to these tales he is able to be hired as a coachman, continue with his honey monopoly, use the old black school’s wood for building a new church, find jobs for his relatives, buy a new suit, and so on. However, Chesnutt compensates for John's "blindness" with Annie's sensitivity. Whereas John is unable to grasp any interpretation beyond the literal words of the tales, Annie understands the symbolism present in them and is able to empathize with the oppressive lives of the slaves. After listening to the story of Sandy, the slave who preferred being turned into a tree to continuing with a life of rootlessness, Annie comments, “’What a system it was,’ ... ‘under which such things were possible!’”(53), to which John responds, ”’What things? ... ‘Are you seriously considering the possibility of a man’s being turned into a tree?’” (53). This interchange shows that while Annie is able to break the code of symbolism and understand the cruelties of the slave system, John can only interpret the story as mere fantasy. He considers Julius’s tales as entertaining “plantation legends,” offering a welcome relief of the monotony of Sabbath (72) or as a means of shortening the waiting time on the road (57). This is evidenced by the wry comments John makes after listening to “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny:” “’That is a very ingenious fairy tale, Julius … ‘especially the humming bird episode, and the mocking-bird digression, to say nothing of the doings of the

hornet and the sparrow'" (92). On this occasion Annie again shows to have a better understanding of the covert significance of the story: "'Why John! ... 'the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did. ... The story is true to nature, and might have happened half a hundred times, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war'" (92). Annie comprehends that the conjures and transformations are not merely "ornamental details" (92) within the tales, but that their relevance lies in the horrible consequences of slavery for those who were subjected to the system.

Chesnutt's aim is not simply entertaining his readers; he intends to give voice to the oppressed and make white people aware that everybody shares part of the responsibility of creating a more egalitarian society. As he writes in his journal:

> The object of my writing would not be so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the white − for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insiduous as to pervade the whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism − I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people; and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. (139-140)

With this purpose in mind, Chesnutt uses the well-known white conservative genre of the plantation romance, and adapts it to his own political agenda. By including gothic elements, he portrays the horrors of the slave system. Transformation within his tales reflects the way in which African peoples under the dominion of white Americans were repeatedly metamorphosed: first, from free peoples into slaves, forced to work, objectified and dehumanized, and after the abolition of slavery, as second-class citizens, labeled as superstitious and intellectually inferior.

Chesnutt's tales demonstrate that plantation life had not been as idyllic as described in the works of Dixon, Harris and Page, and that the true and complete integration of African Americans into American society after the Civil War was still far from becoming a reality.

Chapter 2: Individual and Collective Hauntings in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

"What's a ghost? Unfinished business is what." (Salman Rushdie, qtd. in Christol 172)

Gothic and supernatural events are abundant in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Haunted houses, revengeful ghosts, cruel masters, and horrific images of torture are some of the elements borrowed from the traditional gothic novel. However, *Beloved* goes beyond tradition, and the use of these conventional gothic elements aims at conveying a clear message: The past is always present, and if this past is hurtful and traumatic, it is necessary to work through it in order to hope for a better future; otherwise, it will always come back to impede any prospect of happiness. As Allan Lloyd-Smith puts it, "Gothic … is about the *return* of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare to tell itself" (1). The past will continually haunt those who do not dare to confront it. *Beloved* is the story of Sethe, a woman who has been able to escape from slavery, but is still prisoner of her memories. Sethe, like many other members of her community, carry the burden of the terrifying past of slavery and white oppression. Sethe's daughter Denver has never lived under the slave system; however, she has inherited the trauma of the system because she has seen how much it affected those who surround her, especially her mother, her grandmother, Baby Suggs, and later on Paul D. Therefore, the haunting memory of slavery also has a traumatic effect on her, even though she is not a direct witness of its cruelties. I will argue that Morrison uses the gothic to reveal the truth about slavery through the characters' memories of it, giving the enslaved a voice. Moreover, her allusion to the Middle Passage conveys the idea that the experience of each black slave is

representative of the history of all the enslaved, and for this reason it is of utmost importance to keep these memories alive and integrate them into American public memory. As Melanie R. Anderson argues:

> [T]he work of the specter is cultural and generational, helping the second generation understand specific cultural moments of dispossession and slavery, important events that are elided in the greater American historical purview. The specter provides connection and identity to confused, and subsequently, "ghosted" characters. Ghosts create spaces that indicate issues of dispossession and trauma, and they can create places for memorializing and healing. (2)

In this chapter I will explore how the gothic elements of the novel, such as ghosts and specters, serve to articulate the trauma in *Beloved's* characters. Whereas Chesnutt used the gothic to reveal the horrors of slavery, Morrison uses the genre's tropes to confront former slaves with their traumatic pasts and to foreground the necessity of remembering, even when this is difficult and painful.

Chesnutt appropriated a well-known genre and diverted from it in order to raise his readers' awareness of the hard life of slaves. However, Morrison, as she explains in her preface to the Vintage edition of her novel, based *Beloved* on a historical event that she came across while working on other project: "[a] newspaper clipping in *The Black Book* summarized the story of Margaret Garner, a young mother who, having escaped from slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner's plantation" (Morrison xi). Morrison decides to use gothic conventions to convey Garner's case since "the gothic has served as a useful mode in which to resurrect and resist America's racial

history" (Goddu, "Haunting Back" 154). Naturally, Morrison added many elements to Margaret Garner's story, but she kept some biographical data intact, for instance the number of children Garner had, the location where the events took place (Cincinnati), and the approximate date (the 1850s). Morrison wanted to "relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom responsibility, and women's 'place'" (xi). In her novel, Morrison explores the internal thoughts of a mother who has gone to the extreme act of killing her own offspring in order to protect them from the horror of life under the slave system. Both in the historical case and in the novel, the intention of the mother is putting an end to the lives of her four children, but in both cases they only succeeded in killing one of their daughters. For Sethe, this act resulted in a life full of guilt and pride. In the novel, the ghost that haunts Sethe stands not only for her murdered daughter, but also for all the women in Sethe's family who were denied a dignified life and condemned to endless oppression and suffering. While, on the one hand, the ghost suggest that death can actually function as a relief from a terrible life, it also suggests that only if the ghosts of the past are confronted can Sethe have a future. Morrison writes that "she [Margaret Garner] had the intellect, the ferocity and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom" (xi). In this way, Morrison brings back to life one of the many tragic events that took place during, and also after, slavery.

One of the most salient examples of the gothic in *Beloved* is 124 Bluestone Road, the haunted house where Sethe and her family live. This house is located in the outskirts of the city of Cincinnati, a desolate place where not even the mail is delivered. In the same way that the decaying and abandoned plantation where Julius lives in Chesnutt's tales reflects the state of former slaves during the Reconstruction era, 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved* mirrors the condition of its dwellers, who are like the house, desolate, detached from their community and

haunted, in their case, by painful memories. As Andrew Hock Soon Ng argues, “124 Bluestone is unmistakably an architecture that reifies pastness and entrapment. Here Sethe and Denver are locked in a persistent memory that refuses to set them free” (231). Therefore, far from being a place of security and comfort for those who inhabit it, 124 is, as Baby Suggs puts it, “packed with Negro’s grief” (6). In this particular case, the ghost of an angry baby is responsible for the supernatural events which take place at 124, such as a mirror being shattered by only looking at it, two tiny hand prints appearing on the cake, crumbled crackers strewn in line on the floor, and so on. This baby ghost is what Mbiti terms the “living-dead,” that is ”a departed individual who has not fully transitioned into the world of the spirits and can still communicate with the living, either for good, or in some cases if angered, for ill” (qtd. in Anderson 8). Sethe is certain of who this angry baby is, “[f]or they understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light” (4), but she is not willing or able to confront it yet. Even the numeration of the house −124− hints at the source of this ghostly presence, since the number 3 is absent just as Sethe’s third daughter is no longer alive. Thus, this haunting presence, which seems to give life to the house, since it can be “spiteful,” “loud,” or “quiet,” produces different reactions in those who share its space within 124.

Each one of the inhabitants of the house deals with the ghost in a different manner. Howard and Buglar, Sethe’s sons, consider that coping with a ghost and a frightening mother – they have witnessed Sethe’s crime and are afraid it could happen again− is too much of a burden for them, and decide to leave their house for good. Baby Suggs feels too weak to do something about the ghost and devotes her last years to rest in her bed “pondering color” (4). She has had a terrible life and its end is not much better; “’[t]hose white things have taken all I had or dreamed,’ she said, ‘and broke my heartstrings as well. There is no bad luck in the world but

whitefolks.' 124 was shut down and put up with the venom of its ghost. No more lamp all night, or neighbors dropping by" (105). Thus, Baby Suggs gives up and while she tolerates the ghost's presence, she does not tolerate life anymore. On the other hand, the baby ghost is Denver's only company and she enjoys its presence. As Anderson argues, "Denver lacks a self, either individual or communal, and after Baby Suggs died, Denver is isolated from her cultural history, trapped in a haunted house, with only her outcast mother and a ghost" (72). Sethe allows the ghost to stay, since she knows that it is the ghost of her baby girl, killed by her own hands, and she is proud of her act, since she knows it was the only way to keep her children safe from Sweet Home's cruel master, Schoolteacher. As she tells Paul D "I couldn't let her [her third daughter] nor any of em [*sic*] live under Schoolteacher. That was out" (192). It is precisely this prideful act what triggered the changes that took place in 124, because her community did not approve of what she had done or how she had acted afterwards. Ella, one of the women in the community, thinks that "[Sethe's act] was prideful, misdirected, and Sethe herself too complicated. When she got out of jail and made no gesture toward anybody, and lived as though she were alone, Ella junked her and wouldn't give her the time of day" (302). 124 used to be a busy place, full of visitors all the time, a space of celebration where messages came and went permanently, but now nobody visits them anymore: "before it had become the plaything of spirits and the home of the chafed, 124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long" (102). But for Sethe all that lasted too briefly, her new blissful life was just beginning when it suddenly came to pieces: "Sethe's taste of freedom: she had had twenty-eight days–the travel of one whole moon−of unslaved life. From the pure clear stream of spit that the little girl dribbled into her face to her oily blood was twenty-eight days. Days of healing, ease

and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the name of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done [*sic*]; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her, which made it better" (111). There was one day in which all that changed drastically. One day which Sethe prefers to forget and leave behind in spite of its insistent presence in the form of an enraged baby ghost. Since then, 124 became lonely, desolate and depressed, reflecting the condition of its inhabitants.

When the baby ghost is finally exorcized by Paul D, a new spectral character makes its entrance, and its actions prove to have a deeper influence than those of the baby ghost on those who cohabit with it. Paul D's words confronting the ghost make it move out. Feeling his legs shaken by the ghost, he exclaims: "Leave the place alone! Get the hell out! … She [Sethe] got enough!" (22). The ghost's departure and the interest that Paul D manifests in Sethe, generate in Sethe the illusion that a promising future is possible for her, that perhaps she can love and be loved again and that her painful past can be buried, forgotten and left behind: "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The 'better life' she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one. The fact that Paul D had come out of 'that other one' into her bed was better too; and the notion of a future with him, or for that matter without him, was beginning to stroke her mind" (51). However, Beloved is about to enter their lives, and she will turn things in a different direction. When returning from the summer carnival, they find her outside 124. She is sleepy, thirsty, and looks like a baby with "new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hand" (61). The only thing she can remember is her name: Beloved. Denver immediately adopts her as a sister and takes care of her. Sethe decides to let her stay because she knows it is too dangerous for a girl to be roaming the roads alone. Paul D, on the other hand, feels suspicious about the girl and "wants her out," but even he recognizes that it

is too dangerous to "throw a helpless coloredgirl out in territory infected by the Klan. Desperately thirsty for black blood" (79). However, after some time the three of them discover that Beloved's presence exerts a power on them that is beyond their control.

Despite her human form, Beloved is clearly, as Denver later realizes, "something more" (314), and this otherworldly nature grants her the power to influence those around her to confront the trauma of slavery. As Carol Schmudde argues, "[Beloved] knows things no human being could know. She has supernatural strength and the ability to change shape and to appear and disappear at will. She puts a spell on Paul D which moves him out of the house, and she is finally exorcised by a ritual act of prayers and chanting" (409). All these characteristics are common to "phantoms in human form" (Schmudde 409) and reveal Beloved's true nature. Just a few days after Beloved's arrival, Paul D starts noticing that there is something peculiar about her, he notes that "'[Beloved] acts sick, sounds sick, but she don't look sick. Good skin, bright eyes and strong as a bull'… [She] can't walk but I've seen her pick up the rocker with one hand'" (67). As Denver contradicts his words, and he is not the owner of the house, Paul D has no other option than accepting Beloved's stay in Sethe's home. But his distrustful feelings about Beloved do not vanish so easily, and they prove to be right, since little by little Beloved moves Paul D out of 124. At first he does not realize that it is an external force which convinces him to sleep each night further away from Sethe, "whom he loved a little bit more every day" (136). It is only after he finds himself sleeping in a cold shed outside the house that he realizes that "he was moving involuntarily" (136). He knows that Beloved is responsible for his detachment, and decides to wait and confront her. However, he underestimates her power, and he soon discovers that the tobacco tin inside his chest which could not be "pr[ied] open" by anything in this world (133) is easily exposed by Beloved, who evidently has come from outside this world. This tobacco tin

stands for his heart and he had locked there all the memories of shame and humiliation that he had suffered in his slave days. Beloved seduces him and "[u]nable to resist, he does what she demands. He feels deeply ashamed, because Beloved has made him relive what for him was the most bitter part of slavery, the loss of his manhood in powerless obedience to the commands of others. He moves out of 124 in defeat" (Schmudde 414). In this way, Beloved gets rid of what was interfering with her relationship with Sethe. Now, Beloved has Sethe all for herself, and Sethe will have to confront her past all by herself, without Paul D's help.

Even though Sethe immediately accepts Beloved in her house, she only realizes that this mysterious young woman is the reincarnation of her dead daughter after Paul D leaves 124; and this recognition triggers Sethe's revision of her past, which means confronting her own traumas. Sethe's way of keeping some control over her present and some hope for the future is by "keeping the past at bay" (51). Since her "rememory" (43) is full of traumatic images that continually haunt her thoughts, she engages in mechanical tasks which prevent her mind from going into those dark places:

> Sethe walked over to a chair, lifted a sheet and stretched it as wide as her arms would go. Then she folded, refolded and double-folded it. She took another. Neither was completely dry but the folding felt too fine to stop. She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross. (73)

As this passage suggests, house chores divert Sethe's mind from those places that she does not dare to revisit. Her painful past comes to her in the form of flashbacks, which are "a form of

recall that survives at the cost of willed memory or of very continuity of conscious thought" (Caruth 152). Morrison uses the gothic trope of the specter to prompt Sethe's articulation of her traumas. Since Beloved seems to be "hungry for Sethe's narrations," and she wants to know more and more about her past: "It became a way to feed her. … Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. … Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing−in any case it was an unexpected pleasure" (69). Sethe begins to put into words memories that she thought she had forgotten, and one of her most painful recollections is that of her own mother. As Deborah Horvitz argues, "her memories of Ma'am are buried not only because those recollections are inextricably woven with feelings of painful abandonment. If Sethe remembers her mother, she must also remember that she believes her mother deserted her" (159). When Sethe realizes that Beloved is her dead daughter she feels an urge to make up for what she has done, and in order to find a justification for her terrible act – cutting her baby's throat− she needs to go over all the traumatic experiences of her past, since these are the experiences that she does not want her children to go through; she would rather kill them than see them enslaved.

But nothing seems to be enough for Beloved. Sethe quits her job and devotes all her attention and resources to make Beloved happy, but she always demands more. Beloved becomes a gothic monster which will not stop demanding until it has drained all of Sethe's energy. In David Lawrence's words, "[l]ike a vampire, she sucks out Sethe's vitality, fattening on her mother's attempts to 'make her understand,' to explain and justify the necessity of murdering her own child to save her from slavery" (195). Denver describes their connection in the following way: "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and

infuriated her" (295). Finally, Sethe is freed from this vicious circle of demanding and apologizing when, due to Denver's call for help, the women of the community intercede in her aid and exorcise Beloved out of 124. After Beloved's departure Sethe lies in bed, weakened by the exercise of digging into her memories. However, Paul D's visit to her once Beloved has gone suggests the possibility of a peaceful future for them. As Paul D tells Sethe, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (322). Despite their heavily loaded pasts, Paul D still believes in the possibility of a future at Sethe's side.

Denver also undergoes the powerful influence of Beloved, and after spending some time in her company she goes through an inner transformation: When Beloved arrives Denver is a fearful child, and when Beloved has vanished she is a self-confident woman. At seeing Beloved for the first time, Denver recognizes her baby sister's ghost immediately; therefore she adopts her and considers Beloved as a unique source of company and delight for her. However, as time passes she discovers that her interest in Beloved is not reciprocal, since Beloved's focus of interest is in Sethe: "[Denver] was certain that Beloved was the white dress that had knelt with her mother in the keeping room, the true-to-life presence of the baby that had kept her company most of her life. And to be looked at by her, however briefly, kept her grateful for the rest of the time when she was merely the looker" (141). Initially she accepts her role of passive observer, but as her mother's relationship with Beloved becomes more and more destructive for both of them, Denver recognizes that she has to confront her fears and go out of 124 in order to find help: "Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (286). Denver realizes the outside world is not as harsh as she had imagined, and the humility she demonstrates−in contrast to Sethe's prideful attitude− by asking her community for help is welcomed by her neighbors: "the

daughter … appeared to have some sense after all. At least she had stepped out of the door, asked for help she needed and wanted work" (302). In this way, Beloved's presence helps Denver to overcome her fears, and obtain the self-esteem that she needs to become an independent woman.

Beloved also stands for the memory of many past generations of women in Sethe's family line. As Anderson argues, "[s]upernatural figures have an uncanny ability to violate the limitations of physical and temporal spaces and to dissolve traditionally Western binaries" (4). Her recollection of past events is not limited to her short life as Sethe's daughter; she can remember images from the "other side" (Africa) and of the appalling voyage to America inside a slave ship. This voyage is represented in the form of unarticulated images in Beloved's interior monologue in the second part of the novel. These images are extremely hard to articulate: "how can I say things that are pictures" (248). When she attempts to put them into words, her language becomes more abstract; which is reflected in Morrison's writing in the form of short utterances and the omission of punctuation. This fragmented style represents the inaccessibility of traumatic recall, but it is clear enough to understand that she is talking about an experience which is part of the history of African Americans, and needs to be acknowledged and reflected upon in order to be integrated into their collective memory. From the moment Beloved appears, there are many indications that she is the reincarnation of Sethe's daughter. To start with, as soon as Sethe sees Beloved she feels an intense urge to urinate, and this extreme urgency reminds her of Denver's birth: "there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now" (61). Therefore, the arrival of Beloved connects Sethe with her maternal experience. However, Beloved turns out to be more than Sethe's baby, since the images stored in her memory reveal that she has seen much more than what a baby could have witnessed during her brief life. Therefore, "[n]ot only does Beloved serve as the catalyst for Sethe's remembering and

the subsequent empowering of Denver through family history and strength, but she also serves as a physical presence memorializing the horrors of slavery for the entire African American community" (Anderson 75). The first mention of these images comes when Denver interrogates Beloved about her past; Denver asks her where she was before, what that place was like, and if she could see other people there. Beloved's answers are rather enigmatic, since she does not seem to refer to any known time or place. She mentions a dark place and adds, "'I'm small in that place. I'm like this here,'" and Beloved curls up to show Denver her position in that place. This place is, according to Beloved, "'[h]ot nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in. … A lot of people is down there. Some is dead'" (88). As Horvitz suggests, "[a]s Sethe's mother [Beloved] comes from the geographic other side of the world, Africa; as Sethe's daughter, she comes from the physical other side of life, death" (157). Obviously, these recollections do not belong to a two-year-old child: Beloved is "something more."

These traumatic and painful images are recurrent in Beloved's thoughts, but it is not easy for her to organize them into a coherent narration. In her attempt to explain her memories, Beloved makes it clear that there is no specific point in time for them: "[a]ll of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too" (248). This phrase means that the past is always present; like a haunting ghost, its presence cannot be ignored. Many of the images articulated by Beloved suggest that she is describing the appalling conditions in which captured Africans were brought to America. For instance, in her interior monologue, Beloved remembers "if we had more to drink we could make tears we cannot make sweat or morning water so the men without skin bring us theirs … we are all trying to leave our bodies behind" (248-249). Even for African Americans who did not undergo the Middle Passage, this is a known experience, since most of them heard stories of the

"other side" from older members of their communities. For instance, when Sethe tells Denver the story of her birth, she compares the kicking child inside her womb to an antelope even when she has never seen one (36). The movements of the unborn baby remind Sethe of the dances that her mother and others performed in the place they lived when she was a child, dances which evoked their earlier freedom in Africa (37). As Roy Eyerman argues, "[s]lavery formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent collective memory, one that signified and distinguished a race, a people, or a community" (1). All these images belong to the collective memory of African Americans, and even though many of them are extremely painful, it is important to keep them alive as a way of recognizing African-American culture and history.

In order to rescue Sethe from her haunting past represented by Beloved, all the women of the community must confront it together and leave their prejudices aside. After all, they all share personal and communal memories of terror which haunt their lives. For instance,

> Ella had been beaten every way but down. She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake and the scars from the belt were thick as rope around her waist. She had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by "the lowest yet." It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working, and then Ella hollered. (305)

Ella shares with Sethe the traumatic memory of being physically abused and of committing infanticide. As Goddu argues, "[s]haring the past makes its burden bearable –communal comfort offers some protection. Refusing to deny history's horrors or the difficulty of speaking them, Beloved suggests how to productively face the past: everyone must collectively participate in bearing witness to its horror" ("Haunting Back" 155). Once gathered, the women head towards

124 Bluestone Road, and with their united voices begin the ritual of exorcism. As Lawrence suggests, "[i]n order to free itself of the haunting past embodied in 124, the community must tap a deeper level of language, a more primitive source of cultural experience that creates communal bonds rather than destroying them" (197). The recognition that the story of one of them is part of the history of all African Americans is vital to achieve a common identity and a cultural history. Therefore, the reincarnation of Beloved has been not only transformative for those who interacted with her, Sethe, Denver and Paul D, but also for the whole community, helping them realize the importance of mutual support and solidarity. Since they all have the same origin, African Americans should stand together to fight for recognition in American society and public history. As Helene Christol argues, "[t]he intervention of the fantastic thus frees the community and the characters. Connecting mythical and historical structures, the ghost makes life possible, restores the lost code and text, and becomes a necessary instrument in the healing of personal and collective wounds" (170). As Sethe's daughter, Beloved prompts a change in Sethe and those around her (Denver and Paul D); as the reincarnation of older generations, Beloved helps the community to come together and acknowledge their collective memory.

Most of the traumatic memories that torment the characters' minds stem from the physical punishments and psychological humiliations that they had to endure under the slave system. Even though these are presented within the novel's fictional world, they might as well belong to a history book. The horror of these images lies in the fact that they actually took place, but they escape any logic or reasoning, and, therefore, they seem to fit better in a fictional work. As Goddu argues, "[s]ince the African-American gothic's horrors are actual, not fictional – written in the flesh as well as the text−any attempt to resurrect them can be painful and difficult" ("Haunting Back" 154). According to Stamp Paid, the enslaved and their descendants had to live

extremely hard lives: “Very few had died in bed like Baby Suggs, and none that he knew of, including Baby, had lived a livable life. Even the educated colored: the long-school people, the doctors, the teachers, the paper writers and businessmen had a hard row to hoe. … They had the weight of the whole race sitting there” (234). Thus, the gothic genre enables Morrison to access the horrors of slavery. Through the use of gothic tropes such as a ghost she brings back the repressed past; the gothic villain conveys the torture that slaves endured; the isolated and haunted house reflects the situation of black people after the abolition of slavery; and so on.

One of the most terrible consequences of living under the slavery system is the impossibility of creating permanent bonds with family members, or other individuals from the community, since “men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won stolen or seized” (27-28). By denying slaves the possibility of building lasting relationships among themselves, slave owners denied them part of their humanity. For instance, Baby Suggs was not able to exercise her role of mother, since all her children, except her last son Halle, were separated from her at a very young age: “’I had eight [children]. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody’s house into evil.’ … ‘My first born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread’” (6). As a result, for slaves love is too dangerous, according to Paul D: “the best thing, he knew, was to love just a bit; everything just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one” (54). Therefore, Paul D considers one of the most valuable aspects of freedom is the possibility to love: “to get to a place where you could love anything you chose−no need permission for desire−well now, that was freedom” (191). However, even after obtaining

freedom, many former slaves are haunted by their memories, showing that slavery leaves indelible marks in both body and mind.

Schoolteacher, the cruel master of Sweet Home, is represented as a gothic villain. He is a firm believer in white supremacy, and he considers that his slaves are inferior creatures who are more similar to animals than to human beings. This is reflected in the harsh manner in which Schoolteacher treats Sweet Home's black slaves and the degrading comments he makes when referring to them. Under the rule of Mr. Garner, Sweet Home's previous owner, Paul D and the other slaves had had a fairly decent life; as Baby Suggs remembers it, "[t]he Garners … ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted to know" (165). However, after Mr. Garner's death, Schoolteacher is left in charge of the estate and his ways of treating slaves are radically different from those of Mr. Garner. As Paul D puts it, "Schoolteacher broke into children what Garner had raised into men" (260). In accordance to his beliefs, Schoolteacher teaches his nephews to identify and distinguish the human and animal characteristics in blacks (228), and when he discovers that Sethe has murdered her own child he compares her behavior to that of an animal that has been ruined by overbeating:

> [N]ow she'd [Sethe] gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think−just think−what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education. … Suppose you beat the hounds past that point thataway [*sic*]. Never again you could trust them in the woods or anywhere else. (176)

The degrading treatment that slaves received, together with their master's regard of them as mere chattel had terrible consequences for the slaves' psyche, occasioning life-long traumas and sometimes a complete loss of self-esteem. This is the case for Paul D, who admits that "Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun" (86). He has been repeatedly humiliated by his master, and his memories of slavery are so overwhelming that he represses them in "a tobacco tin buried in his chest" (86), which is a metaphor for his hardened heart. This shows that a cruel master such as Schoolteacher can cause severe psychological damage as well as physical suffering.

Though not all slaves and former slaves had physical marks of the horrors experienced during slavery, some have permanent scars on their body, which are a visual testimony to the atrocities of the system. When Sethe meets Paul D after eighteen years, she tells him, "You looking good," to which he answers, "Devil's confusion. He lets me look good as I feel bad" (8). Paul D's traumas are not visible, they are hidden in his "tobacco tin" inside his chest. Sethe, on the other hand, not only has haunting memories, but also carries them inscribed on her body. One of the most traumatic events that Sethe suffered during her time in Sweet Home is when Schoolteacher's nephews took her breast milk (20), which her baby needed: "two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" (83). After this rape scene, Sethe's back is whipped until it looks like, as Amy, the runaway indentured servant Sethe meets after her escape from Sweet Home, describes it, a "chokeberry tree … red and split wide open, full of sap, and [with] a mighty lot of branches. Leaves too … and little cherry blossoms" (93). Sethe recognizes that this tree on her back is part of the price she had to pay for her freedom (18). Amy's calling of her scars a "tree" is a way of dignifying her courageous determination to escape from slavery and seek a better

future for her children. But, in fact, they look like “a revolting clump of scars” (25), which stand for the horrors Sethe had to go through.

Another mark of horror is the brand on the body of Sethe’s mother. The only physical trait by which Sethe could identify her mother was “a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin” right under her breast; she is the only one with this mark since the rest who had it are dead by that time (72). Sethe also remembers that her mother “had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn’t smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile” (240). This memory of Sethe’s mother merges with the images in Beloved’s interior monologue: “I see her face which is mine it is the face that was going to smile at me in the place where we crouched… she is not smiling she is chewing and swallowing” (251). Neither Sethe’s mother nor Sethe were able to be a mother for their children. Both Sethe and Beloved were expecting their mothers’ smiles but received violence in its place−the chewing and swallowing suggest the use of the iron bit− and both bear the burden of maternal abandonment. The circle and the cross branded on Sethe’s mother and the permanent smile on her face due to the iron bit are a proof of the dehumanizing manner in which she was treated, since she is branded as cattle to mark her as her owner’s property.

The last in the family line to show a mark of the horror of slavery is Beloved. Even though she was only a baby when she and her brothers were taken out of Sweet Home, the arrival of Schoolteacher to fetch her and her family back to that place triggered her mother to murder her. Sethe assumed that death was better than a life under the slave system. Beloved, as the specter of Sethe’s daughter, presents the scars of that terrible act: her mother’s fingernail prints in her forehead (239) and a “little curved shadow of a smile” under her chin (281), where

her mother cut her throat. These terrible examples of three generations marked by the horrors of slavery suggest that the trauma of slavery is passed to the following generations.

Morrison does not use the gothic to create a conventional ghost story. For instance, it is not the ghost that produces a shocking effect on the readers, but the characters' reactions to it and the exposition of all the terrors which they had to endure throughout their lives. In Schumedde's words, "[i]n contrast to most conventional ghost stories, suspense and terror are created not by the supernatural per se but by the effect on the main characters of confronting the undead past in the context of the present" (409). Therefore, what is shocking is that Denver is less afraid of the baby ghost than of her mother, who might at any time lash out and murder her children. In this way, the supernatural reveals the inner feelings of the characters, who are more afraid of real life than of spectral apparitions. In addition, Morrison uses the gothic as a subversive narrative strategy to bring to the foreground parts of history that have been erased from public memory. Facts which were too shameful to be included in mainstream American history books come back as a ghostly presence which claims recognition. As Goddu writes, "Morrison revises the horrifying history of slavery by transforming it into a tale. While the gothic, as a site of excess, haunting, and ill health, threatens to resurrect a history that can never be exorcised, it also offers a way to signify against that history" (155). Therefore, while Chesnutt uses the gothic to subvert a literary genre which looked nostalgically at slavery times, Morrison uses the gothic genre to resurrect the ghost of slavery and bring it into public memory. Only after the "sixty million and more"(*Beloved's* epigraph) victims of the transatlantic slave trade are recognized as human beings who were violently enslaved, and even murdered, will the ghosts of the past finally rest in peace.

Chapter 3: Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and A Narration of the Horrors of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

African-American history begins with the forced migration of millions of Africans to the Americas. For four centuries the commerce in human beings for their use as slaves in European colonies in the Americas meant for Africans their forced transportation from Africa across the Atlantic. This is the context in which Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* unfolds. Its narrator, Rutherford Calhoun, is a freed slave who has obtained his manumission after his master's death. Disappointed by his father's abandonment, and dwarfed by his brother, Rutherford settles in New Orleans, "a city tailored to my [Rutherford's] taste for the excessive, exotic fringes of life" (1), where he becomes a "petty thief" and devotes his time to gambling, drinking, and visiting prostitutes. But his idle life suddenly comes to an end when his sweetheart Isadora tries to blackmail him into marriage, which was for a man of his temperament "worse than imprisonment"(1). This situation leads him to become part of Captain Ebenezer Falcon's "ragtag" crew, a company of forty social misfits and refugees from responsibility, aboard what turns out to be a slave ship (40). However, Rutherford does not know that his fortune at sea will be far worse than what he has fled in New Orleans. This direct witnessing of the dehumanization and torture to which the African captives are subjected, together with instances of murder, sickness and even cannibalism, marks him for good. Therefore, I argue that as a way to work through his trauma, Rutherford assumes the role of narrator of the voyage, and in order to put into words the unspeakable experience of the Middle Passage and all the atrocities that he witnesses during this journey, he resorts to the use of gothic tropes, turning the *Republic* into a tomb-like ship that is run by devilish masters who subject their slaves to violent treatment, and

transport otherworldly tribesmen and a mysterious god. Thus re-writing the *Republic's* log and transforming it into a gothic tale with humorous and satiric tone.

In this chapter, I will argue that due to Rutherford's traumatized psyche, his retelling of the events on board of the *Republic* may not be an objective reproduction faithful to the facts, but his own interpretation of them. As Cathy Caruth argues "[t]he trauma … requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall" (153). By narrating his experience as a gothic story and larded with humour, Rutherford transforms an unspeakable event into a manageable narration.

Rutherford assumes the role of narrator of the story of the voyage in order to work through the terrible experience of witnessing the horrors of the Middle Passage. The ship's log is the retrospective narrative in which Calhoun is able to put into words the unspeakable atrocities he has seen during the journey. In the course of his stay on board of the *Juno*, the luxurious ship which rescues him and the few other survivors of the sinking of the *Republic*, Rutherford devotes most of his time to the writing and re-writing of Captain Falcon's log. Calhoun admits that he had never "dreamed how the full weight of all we'd endure would hit me like a falling masthead" (186), and he suffers from many of the symptoms of those who have gone through a traumatic episode, such as insomnia, nightmares, and involuntary reenactments of the horrors he went through: "I could not sleep for more than four hours at a stretch … Nightmares of the African god pestered my sleep. Now and then I felt the *Juno* was sinking, and I fell to the floor" (188). These symptoms, together with a great depression, feelings of guilt for being alive, and his

suicidal thoughts ("I considered how easy it would be, … to join my drowned shipmates by hanging myself") make him wonder how could he ever live on land again, since nothing makes sense to him anymore (188). Only by integrating traumatic recall into narrative memory (Bal viii) will Rutherford be able to overcome the symptoms of trauma, and he is able to do this through his writing and re-writing of the *Republic's* log. The exercise of writing has a liberating effect on him and "keep[s] him steady." He declares that he writes "as a means to free myself from the voices in my head," and only once he has poured his pain into the log's pages can he finally sleep (189). But his experiences on board of the *Republic* also change his perspective on life; for instance, before the voyage he had only been interested in superficial relationships with women and avoided marriage at all cost, but on board of the *Juno*, he reencounters Isadora, the woman who had precipitated his boarding on the *Republic* by blackmailing him into marriage, and realizes that the nature of his feelings for her have radically changed: "my memories of the Middle Passage kept coming back, reducing the velocity of my desire, its violence, and in place of my longing for feverish love-making left only a vast stillness that felt remarkably full, a feeling that, just now, I wanted our futures blended, not our limbs" (208). The journey on board of the *Republic* is a traumatic experience for Rutherford and even when he works through this trauma by his written narration into the ship's log, he will never be the same person again.

Both, Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson depict characters who are traumatized by the horrors of slavery. However, the narrative techniques used by these authors to convey their characters' trauma are quite different. Morrison resorts to different resources which point to the fact that their characters are struggling with their traumatic symptoms. For instance, Sethe engages in mechanical tasks, like house chores, to avoid remembering her painful past. As Vincent O'Keefe argues, "the traumatic memories of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver are fragmentary,

circular and revisionary bits that readers struggle to piece together. The ambiguity compels readers to cross perceptual boundaries and attempt to reinhabit the characters' psychological processes, as opposed to registering passively their thoughts and memories as finished products" (638). By presenting different perspectives and a non-linear plot, *Beloved* provides a wider representation of the events and requires an active reading. On the other hand, *Middle Passage* is narrated from Rutherford's perspective only. He looks back on the experiences he went through on board of the *Republic*, and he explicitly tells the consequences of these events for his mental state −nightmares, insomnia, depression, suicidal thoughts, and so on−(188), not leaving much room to interpretation.

Through his re-writing of Captain Falcon's journal, Rutherford transforms the events that took place on board of the *Republic* into a fantastic story in gothic style. As Roger Kurtz points out, "trauma somehow alters our perception of reality and how we communicate our experiences of it" (422). It is not an easy task to put into plain words all the terrible events that took place on the *Republic*, since Rutherford has not only been a witness, but also had an active role in them. Moreover, Rutherford's reliability as narrator is put into question by his own anecdotes, for instance, when he writes that his old master Reverend Peleg Chandler "had noticed this stickiness of my fingers when I was a child, and a tendency I had to tell preposterous lies for the hell of it" (3). As Fred Botting argues in reference to the gothic genre, "[b]y repeating the negative experience … the individual is able to move from a position of passive victim to someone who has, at least imaginatively, taken an active role in producing and expelling the disturbance. Like the sublime, the experience of loss and negativity which is initially overpowering is reconfigured through an imaginative and active process" (8). By interpreting his memories in gothic terms Rutherford is able to build a coherent narrative of the terrible

experiences he has lived during the Middle Passage. Captain Falcon asks Rutherford to keep the log because he wanted "others to know the truth of what happened on this voyage." Even though Rutherford admits that he is no writer, he reluctantly accepts the task. However, he declares that "it would be, first and foremost, as *I* saw it since my escape from New Orleans" (146; my emphasis), which hints at the idea that the "truth" of the events depends on the perspective of the writer. From Calhoun's point of view, the voyage on the *Republic* makes only sense as a gothic tale in which "[the *Republic*] was not a ship; it was a coffin" (105), Captain Falcon is the Devil in person, and the cargo comprises captives of a supernatural order and their god, an "infernal creature" (167).

In the same way in which Chesnutt subverts the genre of the plantation romance, Johnson deviates from the form of a slave ship's log by making Rutherford re-write it in the shape of a narrative, and not as the register of data that a ship's log usually is. Both writers re-write a well-known format in order to convey their messages. Chesnutt's tales give voice and identity to the oppressed black slaves by reproducing their particular stories and conveying their suffering. *Middle Passage* similarly allows Rutherford to narrate his story using a form of writing which was commonly used by slave traders, thus subverting the genre. As Ashraf Rushdy argues, "[t]his idea of writing a slave narrative as a palimpsest on a document otherwise meant to serve an economic order−or, more specifically, of rewriting a document otherwise intended to record the trade and traffick [*sic*] in slaves−is revolutionary" (99). In both cases the authors include elements which are not common to the format, such as gothic tropes, and adapt it to their necessities. But the idea of using a genre which is typically used by the oppressor to give voice to the oppressed is certainly an act of resistance and determination.

Most of the action in *Middle Passage* takes place on board of the *Republic*, "a ninety-ton square-rigger" (20), the decaying state of which, together with the rough weather the crew endure during the voyage, is reminiscent of gothic settings. From the moment Rutherford sets foot on the *Republic*, he feels invaded by an "odd sensation, difficult to explain." Rutherford realizes that he has not boarded an ordinary ship but "a kind of fantastic, floating Black Maria, a wooden sepulcher whose timbers moaned with the memory of too many runs of black gold between the New World and the Old" (21). This description suggests that the ghosts of the past journeys of the *Republic* and those who suffered and perished during them are still lingering in the air, yet, as Marc Steinberg argues, "as a free man Calhoun must call, if only temporarily, the grotesque *Republic* his home. This ship stands as a reminder of Calhoun's past, of the collective past of herded slaves" (377). Furthermore, the image of the ship as a "sepulcher" foreshadows the terrible events that will occur during the voyage. In fact, the image of the slave ship as a place of death has been frequently used by historians: as Joanne Chassot points out, "[t]he hazards of the journey were such that Europeans involved in the trade as captains, sailors, or surgeons commonly referred to the slave ship as 'slaughter-houses,' 'coffins,' or 'floating tombs'" (90). The association of the *Republic*, which is in fact a slave ship, with images of death produces anxiety and fear which are heightened by the circumstance that the ship is far from being in a good condition−"the *Republic* was physically unstable" (35)− and needs constant maintenance. In Rutherford words, "[s]he was perpetually flying apart and reforming during the voyage, falling to pieces beneath us, the great sails ripping to rags in high winds, the rot, cracks, and parasites in old wood so cancerously swift, springing up where least expected, that Captain Falcon's crew spent most of their time literally rebuilding the Republic" (36).

However, the feeling of danger is not only evoked by a ship in such bad shape and decay; the terrible weather conditions that Rutherford and his company go through during the journey also create a gothic atmosphere. As Fred Botting argues, "[c]onjoining ideas of home and prison, protection and fear, old buildings in gothic fiction are never secure or free from shadows, disorientation or danger. Nature is also divided between domesticated and dangerous forms. Landscapes stress isolation and wilderness, evoking vulnerability, exposure and insecurity" (4). On the one hand, the ship evokes a traditional gothic castle, since it is an insecure place full of danger and mystery. On the other, the sea is regarded by the crew as a hostile and unpredictable environment; as Peter Cringle, the first mate of the ship, puts it, "this bottomless chaos [the sea] breed[s] all manner of monstrosities and creatures that defy civilized law. These waters are littered with wrecked vessels" (42). The wilderness of nature is represented in the novel by the Atlantic ocean; as Rutherford describes it, "[a]nd then it was full upon us: a sea hot with anger, running in ranges like the Andes or the Rockies, and be dammed if in the topgallant sails I didn't see forks of blue lightning. The forecastle was hidden behind curtains of spray. The bows were deep in water" (80). In this way, the tomb-like image of the ship and the inclement weather conditions that are frequent during the journey give a gothic backdrop to Rutherford's narration.

As in the works discussed before, in *Middle Passage* the portrayal of the dehumanizing system of slavery and the horrors associated with it are described in gothic terms. As Botting argues, "[g]othic texts are not good in moral, aesthetic or social terms. Their concern is with vice: protagonists are selfish or evil; adventures involve decadence or crime" (2). Like the greedy plantation masters in Julius's stories who exploit their black slaves to the point of complete exhaustion, and Schoolteacher, the cruel master of Sweet Home in *Beloved*, who regards blacks as utterly inferior people and treats them as animals, Captain Falcon is also

represented as gothic villain. He is portrayed as a devilish character, being a "man known for his daring exploits and subjugation of the colored races from Africa to the West Indies," and an "infamous empire builder and explorer" (29), who is on his way to Africa with the intention of bringing African captives and selling them as slaves in America. As Falcon states in his log, he plans to "purchase forty Allmuseri tribesmen" (53), but he never stops to ponder the morality of his enterprise. Falcon's grotesque figure mirrors his cruel disposition. He is a dwarf, with legs shorter than those of his chart table. Rutherford observes the following about Falcon's appearance:

> [B]etween this knot of monstrously developed deltoids and latissimus dorsi a long head rose with an explosion of hair so black his face seemed dead in contrast: eye sockets like anthracites furnaces, medieval lines more complex than tracery on his maps, a nose slightly to one side, and a great bulging forehead. … His belly was unspeakable. His hands like roots. (29)

Thus, Falcon's physical appearance is a reflection of his personality and contributes to his portrayal as a gothic villain.

The dehumanization of the Allmuseri begins as soon as the tribesmen are captured and made ready for their sale. As Josiah Squibb, the ship's cook, describes it, first they are separated, "husbands from their wives, children from their parents, the infirm from the healthy," and their bodies are shaved, making them "smooth as babies from the womb, like mebbe they was born yesterday," and finally, they are bathed, soaked in palm oil and given a feast so that they look fat and healthy to their prospective buyers (59). This humiliating treatment resembles that given to cattle, and it continues once they are on board, where they stop being human beings and become

the “cargo.” The degrading treatment of the captives by Captain Falcon is described by Rutherford as if it belonged to a horror story; “they came half-dead from the depths, these eyeless contortionists emerging from a shadowy Platonic cave, they were stiff and sore and stank of their own vomit and feces. Right then I decided our captain was more than just evil. He was the devil” (120). Rutherford is aware that the witnessing of these scenes will leave an indelible mark on him, that he will never be the same again, and he wonders “how in God’s name I could go on after this? How could I feel whole after seeing it? How could I tell my children of it without placing a curse on them forever?” (67). The images of violence against the captives are so terrible that in order to narrate them Rutherford interprets them in gothic terms, turning the unspeakable horror of slavery into a fantastic story of devilish masters and otherworldly tribes; as Teresa Goddu points out in reference to the narration of the horrors of slavery, “[t]ranslating the event into a gothic symbol, turning it into a legend, [a passage translated into gothic tropes] reveals how the gothic can dematerialize and displace the source of its effect even while representing it” (“To Thrill” 134). Rutherford narrates the capture and forced transportation of the African captives to America as a fantastic adventure and not as what it really is, the dehumanization and commodification of human beings.

Part of the “cargo” that captain Falcon and his crew are taking to America consists of forty Allmuseri tribesmen. These peculiar people are portrayed as the “other” not only in terms of skin colour, physical appearance, and so on, but also because they are linked to superstition and black magic−elements considered inferior in Western culture: “’Sorcerers!’ [Cringle] said. ‘They are a whole tribe−men, women, and tykes−of devil-worship, spell casting wizards’” (43). The Allmuseri are a rare tribe, different from all other Africans. Even Rutherford, who is also of African descent, notes that their nature is unique, “[i]n every fiber of their lives you could sense

this same quiet magic. Truth to tell, they were not even 'Negroes.' They were Allmuseri" (76). And while Rutherford feels admiration and respect for them, saying that "they so shamed me I wanted their ageless culture to be my own" (78), Captain Falcon considers them to have an inferior and primitive perspective on the world: "the Allmuseri had no empirical science to speak of, at least not as we understood that term. To Falcon that made them savages" (78). Because of their uniqueness they are seen as monsters, since they "combine negative features that oppose and (define) norms, conventions and values; they suggest an excess of absence beyond those structures and bear the weight of projections and emotions (revulsion, horror, disgust) that result" (Botting 10). Their peculiar nature awakens feelings of anxiety and fear among the crew, who attribute all the hardships that occur during the voyage to their presence on board. For instance, after the terrible storm, one of the sailors swears, "the storm proved the ship was cursed by its black chattel and infernal cargo" (82). Similarly, the long list of defects that the *Republic* presents is also related to the influence of the Allmuseri, as one of the sailor says: "'Them niggers is weird. A tribe of witches and strangelings. They kin *do* things. And if you ain't noticed, sir, there's water under the keelson, one of the bloody winches is broken, sir, and the hand pumps are chokin' up'" (84; emphasis in the original). This attribution of otherworldly features to the Allmuseri increases the crew's disgust and distancing from them, making it easier for them to regard the Allmuseri as chattel and not human beings equal to them.

The rendering of the African captives as inferior and of a supernatural order is used as a justification for their subjugation and the perpetration of acts of violence towards them. As Botting argues, "[a]ssociated with magic, primitive violence and sexual corruption … members of colonized cultures lack civilization" which "supposedly justifies exploitation" (10-11). In the particular case of the Allmuseri, it is not corruption that justifies their enslavement, but their

noble values which, in theory, will make them excellent servants: “Eating no meat, they were easy to feed. Disliking property, they were simple to clothe. Able to heal themselves, they required no medication. They seldom fought. They could no steal, They felt sick, it was said, if they wronged anyone” (78). But the identity of the Allmuseri is not a fixed characteristic, and after their contact with their Western captors, their system of values also proves to be unstable. As Rutherford describes them when seeing them for the first time, “their palms were blank, bearing no lines. No fingerprints. … [W]hat I felt was the presence of countless others *in* them, a crowd spun from everything this vast continent had created” (61; emphasis in the original). Their lack of fingerprints signals a lack of identity, but, as Calhoun points out, he can see many others in them, suggesting that the Allmuseri stand for all those who have been captured and enslaved. But after the atrocious cruelties that Falcon and his crew inflict on them−burning their skins with their owner’s initials as if they were cattle, raping their women, having them bathe naked, in front of their own children, forcing them to eat by ramming fingers down their throats, and so on (134)−the Allmuseri’s identity and values alter, and they decide to take over the ship, committing crimes which had been unthinkable for them before their contact with Falcon and his crew. As Rutherford writes, “the horrors they experienced … were subtly reshaping their souls as thoroughly as Falcon’s tight-packing had contorted their flesh. … No longer Africans, yet not Americans either” (124-125). The consequence of Falcon’s ruthless treatment of the Allmuseri is that they become as brutal as he is: “[f]rom the perspective of the Allmuseri the captain had made Ngonyama and his tribesmen as bloodthirsty as himself, thereby placing upon these people a shackle, a breach of virtue, far tighter than any chain of common steel” (140). In Marc Steinberg’s words, “[t]he European desire to possess the Allmuseri leads to the Allmuseri desire to possess the Europeans. Perversely, notions of human ownership become cyclical” (387). The

change of roles after the ship's takeover−the slaves become the enslavers−demonstrates that the view of the other as inferior or primitive is a relative concept.

Falcon's cargo also includes the Allmuseri's god. The capturing of a deity sounds as something impossible to achieve, at least according to the Western conception of what a god is. However, as Rutherford's narration is encoded in gothic terms, it is "[n]ot tied to a natural order of things as defined by realism[;] gothic flights of imagination suggest supernatural possibility, mystery, magic, wonder and monstrosity" (Botting 2). Therefore, the transportation of a god on board of a ship is perfectly coherent within the novel's logic. The stealing of the Allmuseri's god reflects Falcon's imperialist nature, which seeks not only the domination of supposedly inferior peoples, but also the appropriation of their resources and the disregard of their cultural values. From Falcon's perspective, the Allmuseri's god is merely something which can be sold for a good price; as he writes in his log, the god is "a colossus he felt he could sell for a king's ransom in Europe" (53). As Steinberg points out, "[t]he very idea of capturing a god, oxymoronic though it might seem, speaks loudly of white American imperialism; it stands as an attempt to capture that which is beyond reach, an attempt to achieve illogical control−divine supremacy" (381). But even Falcon acknowledges that the god must be approached with care since "the Creature has a hundred ways to relieve men of their reason" (102). This god has an elusive nature and, as Falcon tells Rutherford, "'Sometimes it's physical, you know, like me and thee. But only for a few seconds at a time. Mostly, it's immaterial, the way gods and angels are supposed to be'" (101). Its ever-changing nature makes it materialize in different shapes to all those who dare to confront it, revealing to each person his particular weaknesses or making them lose their minds. For instance, Falcon declares that "'[w]ith me, it's a witty conversationalist, I can tell you that, though prone to periods of self-pity and depression'" (101). However, Tommy O'Toole, the

cabin boy, has a completely different experience when he encounters the Allmuseri's God, and he returns from his encounter with this deity "with only half his mind−or could be it was twice the mind he had before" (68). And Rutherford's visit to the god confronts him with his past:

> And I knew the infernal creature−this being who delighted in divesting men of their minds−had chosen to present itself to me in the form of the one man with whom I had bloody unfinished business: the runaway slave from Reverend Chandler's farm−my father, the fugitive Riley Calhoun. (167)

This encounter helps Rutherford not only to understand his father's motives for running away and finally make peace with his memory of him, but also to realize that his father's story is in part everyone's story: "I had to listen harder to isolate him from the We that swelled each particle and pore of him. ... He seemed everywhere, his presence, and that of countless others" (171). The encounter with the Allmuseri's god proves to have deep consequences on the minds of those who dare to confront it, showing how the contact with the other's culture influences those who try to appropriate it.

Rutherford's narrative of the Middle Passage offers his own interpretation of this chapter of history by adding not only gothic tropes, but also humor and satire. As Charles Johnson argues, "[w]riting doesn't so much record an experience−or even imitate or represent it− as it *creates* the experience" (qtd. in Rushdy 374; emphasis in the original). Rutherford manages to speak the unspeakable by interpreting his experience in gothic tropes. Like the antislavery movement of the nineteenth century, Rutherford's narration "converted slavery into a conventional Gothic plot replete with villainous slaveholders, suffering slaves and violent atrocities [and] described slavery as a diabolical system of merciless horrors and the slaveholder

as a relentless demon or a monster in human shape" (Goddu, "To Thrill" 74). This narrative helps Rutherford come to terms his trauma and find a new meaning to his life. After his adventure on the *Republic* he is finally able to take responsibility for those for whom he cares. Therefore, the *Republic's* log plays an important role in *Middle Passage*, since it is a testimony to the horrors that Rutherford went through on his voyage, and it is also a subversive text since it deviates from the purely commercial and legal content of a slave ship's log.

Conclusion

The fantastic is often linked with the primitive. Rationality, on the other hand, is related to order and progress. In the three works explored in this thesis, it can be seen how supporters of the slave system justified its principles by siding with the rational and scientific discourse and regarding those oppressed by slavery as inferior and primitive. The fantastic and gothic elements of these works allow their authors to create a new perspective on the issue of slavery, and to give voice to those who were oppressed under this perverse system. The gothic thus becomes a subversive narrative strategy which articulates the unspeakable atrocities of slavery, foregrounding the horrors of a supposedly rational system. As Helene Christol points out, "[b]y highlighting the instability, inconsistency, or underlying preposterousness of the normal, the fantastic permits an exploration of the potential that history fails to achieve" (168). Gothic tropes such as cruel masters, haunted and isolated settings, ghosts and otherworldly creatures, conjure and transformations, serve to illustrate not only the horrors of life under the slave system, but also how these terrifying images troubled those who were, in theory, already free from the system; the trope of haunting, for example, was used to suggest that the traumatic experience of the violent subjection and oppression that were integral to slavery caused severe psychological damage, even to those generations that were born after slavery was abolished.

Trauma theory can be used to understand how victims of trauma, including trauma caused by the slavery system and its legacies, can cope with their trauma. As van der Kolk and van der Hart point out, "[t]raumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into

narrative language" (176). This means that it is crucial to articulate the horrors of slavery in order to integrate them into personal and public memory. The novels discussed use gothic tropes to represent the atrocities of slavery, portraying slaveholders as gothic villains, including magic and conjure, resurrecting the voice of the oppressed in the form of haunting ghosts, and so on. As Goddu argues, referring to the nineteenth-century antislavery movement, "[the gothic] provided the discursive terms and rhetorical register by which the unspeakable about slavery was spoken" ("To Thrill" 74). This is why the works explored seem to be closer to fantastic stories than to realistic novels, even though they are dealing with historical facts.

The works discussed in this thesis depict different events in African-American history, and each of these scenes contain horror and violence. Christol argues that "three essential sources of disorder" are explored in Morrison's *Beloved*:

> [T]he Middle Passage is the first and essential catastrophe, provoking loss of space, culture, language, the uprooting from familiar faces and lands, and the irruption of new demons, "the men without skins," as the whites are termed. Then slavery develops, a colonizing experience, meaning loss of self and loss of humanity. Finally, amnesia symbolizes the ultimate loss, that of the past and of language, the loss of the code without which normality cannot be restored. (167)

Each of the three novels can be considered as focusing on one of these "sources of disorder" in particular. *Middle Passage* portrays the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade by retelling how African captives become the "cargo" of the *Republic*, turning men, women, and children into commodities (82). Chesnutt's tales depict the terrible lives that slaves endured on the plantation, where their identity and their status as human beings were erased; they were regarded as mere

cattle and treated as such. Finally, *Beloved* presents characters who are already free from slavery but so traumatized by the horrors of the system, that they prefer to repress their memories and "keep the past at bay"(51) instead of confronting the ghosts of slavery, thus revealing the difficulty of integrating African-American history into mainstream narratives.

The three works discussed portray different images of slavery and the responses of its victims to the system. In *Middle Passage*, the Allmuseri tribesmen are exposed to such terrible horrors that some of them, at least, give up their values and become as cruel as their captor. In Chesnutt's tales, slaves must resort to conjure and superstition to find some kind of relief to their oppressive lives. Finally, in *Beloved* characters need to confront the ghosts of their terrible past of slavery and infanticide in order to heal their wounds and find some peace of mind.

The stories are set in decaying locations: *Middle Passage* unfolds in a ship which needs constant repairing; Julius's stories take place in what once was a formidable estate; and Sethe and her family dwell in an haunted house, isolated from their community. These gothic settings reflect the unstable and insecure world in which slaves and former slaves lived. Instead of being a place of comfort and security, home, for the slaves and their descendants, meant fear and anxiety. For those who were being transported as captives to be sold, the ship was their temporary home and it was undoubtedly a place of death and uncertainty, since many died on the way, and the survivors could not know what was awaiting them on the shore. Life on the plantation was not much better, since slaves were subjected to hard labor and treated as chattel. Finally, as *Beloved* reveals, the life of freed slaves was often solitary and harsh, since many of them were so haunted by traumatic images that it impeded their integration into society.

The three works present subversive strategies which allow the authors to give voice to those oppressed by enslavement and foreground the injustices of the slave system and its degrading marks on those who were subjected to it. Chesnutt gave voice to the black slaves by deviating from a typically white genre like the plantation romance, and portraying the injustices of the system in the form of fantastic stories. Johnson makes Rutherford overcome his trauma produced by his witnessing of the horrors of the Middle Passage by re-writing Captains Falcon's log. Thus he transforms a legal and commercial document into a slave narrative which reveals the dehumanizing treatment that slaves received. Morrison's characters have to confront the ghosts of the past in order to be able to have a future. In this way, Denver learns to be independent; Paul D opens his "tobacco tin" (133) and revisits his repressed memories; and finally, Sethe is able to identify the true source of danger and direct her anger towards white people instead of towards her own children. Thus, the three works resort to subversive gothic devices to depict slavery and its horrifying consequences and allow both the characters and the novel's readers to work through this historical trauma.

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