Maleš1Remembering slavery –writing as filling the void of the past: agency, representation and identity in Toni Morrison’s Belovedand Nathan Harris’s The Sweetness of Water

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Remembering slavery – writing as filling the void of the past: agency, representation and identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Nathan Harris's *The Sweetness of Water*

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Introduction

The way people think about their past is related to their sense of identity. On a societal level, collective memory gives people a sense of who they are as a nation (Bergmann 11). This collective memory is produced on different levels. While historians try to understand the past through sources that survive from it, our understanding of history is also constructed through (popular) culture by artists, filmmakers, and novelists — both forms of a (re-)creation of the past influence people's memory of historical happenings. The historian David Harlan argues that unlike academic history, popular history, such as films and novels set in the past, can add a new aspect to our understanding of history (Harlan 111). He argues that through engaging with art, like viewing a painting, listening to a piece of music, or reading a novel, we have "the experience of hearing the voice of another resonate deeply within us" (Harlan 111). More than providing us with facts about a specific time, fiction can leave us with an impression of "slipping into [the] skin" of a historical persona or an ordinary person that lived in a particular period (119). While fictional accounts can thus add something to factual history, they are arguably also more at risk of creating distorted images of the past (119). At the same time, Harlan argues that this risk might also be part of their pervasiveness: A "creative reinterpretation of the past" enables us to choose our "ideal ancestor," thus an ancestry we want to identify with rather than a verifiable, 'genetic' ancestry:

> It is only by thinking of ourselves as the latest in a long line of such predecessors that we can hope to see ourselves as historical actors, bound and defined by the responsibilities and expectations of a tradition that we ourselves have constructed and populated (Harlan 119).

Harlan's idea is that how we imagine our past is part of our identity and, therefore, also endows us with an agency to influence the future as individuals and society. At the same time, in multi-ethnic societies with legacies of colonialism and racial subjugation, collective remembering is not necessarily homogenous. Especially in the US, with its legacy of slavery

and racism, what version of the past and whose ancestors are remembered remains very much contested and influences people's identification process.

In his study "Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity," the sociologist Ron Eyerman argues that slavery as a cultural trauma has generated a distinct and "unique African American identity" (Eyerman 60). This creation of a black American identity came about as generations of black Americans after emancipation were continuously othered by the dominant society and were thus compelled to create their own identity through the memory of slavery "in retrospect" (60). In his study, he explores the different forms this cultural memory of slavery took during the decades following the Civil War until the 1960s (69). Eyerman argues that slavery can be seen as a cultural trauma, which differs from individual trauma in that it can have significance not only for those who directly experienced it but for the generations that came after and identify with it through a "loss of identity and meaning" (61). Collective memory can be understood as a response to this cultural trauma (68) and is linked to issues of representation and the "possibility to make visible" (69). Since trauma has to be narrated in order to be overcome, Eyerman also argues that slavery as a cultural trauma had to go through different stages of narration in order to be transformed into a collective memory (74). As I am going to argue in the following paragraphs, historical novels can contribute to this “sense-making” of the past by representing historically marginalized people and creating a bridge between the past and the present. The sustained interest of contemporary culture in fictional and non-fictional narratives of slavery suggest that cultural memory and, therefore also, identity are constantly being constructed.

Toni Morrison was one of the first writers to address what she perceived to be a limitation in the historiography and memory culture of slavery. In 1987, she published her novel *Beloved* as a counter-narrative to what she perceived to be an incomplete picture of black history. As she explains in her essay "Site of Memory," although the nineteenth century saw the production of many slave narratives which depicted the lives of slaves in bondage and

their way to freedom, these narratives offered an incomplete picture of the lives of people that were formerly enslaved (Morrison, “The Site” 86). According to Morrison, this is because these narratives were written for a white audience and aimed at convincing them that enslaved people were "human beings worthy of God's grace" (86). In order not to deter the reader, many of these narratives avoided a detailed description of the atrocities of slavery and its psychological implications: "Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, 'But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate'" (90).

Morrison's aim in writing is thus to fill this gap in the narrative and thereby counteract the dominant collective memory of these events: "the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told – is precisely the problem in the discourse that proceeded without us" (92). In Morrison's view, the slave narratives lack a description of their trauma and psychological torment, something that would represent their lives more truthfully (91). The problem with this is that the slave narratives – which shaped the general perception and memory of slavery – drew an incomplete picture of it and thus did not transmit the trauma that slavery caused on an individual level as well as on an intergenerational, national level. She seems to lament that these authors would enact a kind of self-censorship because the missing of their "inner lives" from these accounts, along with the fact that these narratives represented slavery in public memory primarily, caused the memory of slavery to be distorted (92). The "discourse" on slavery thus "proceeded" without a representation of what the actual lives of enslaved people must have felt like (92).

In *Beloved*, Morrison thus imagines the life of a historical figure, Margaret Garner, a woman who, after having fled slavery, was recaptured and consequently killed her daughter to spare her from a life in bondage. Margaret Garner was a real person whose story appeared in several newspaper articles in 1855. Morrison imagines Garner's trauma by rewriting her story in a life after slavery, in which she is free but haunted by the ghost of the baby she killed. In doing this, *Beloved* restores a voice and an agency to a subject formerly represented by others.

Morrison’s novel shaped the memory culture of slavery, which she thought was incomplete. *Beloved* was written in a cultural context marked by postmodernist theories aimed at subverting historical metanarratives and dominant representations of marginalized people, especially women and black people (Davis 245). Her novel is thus very much concerned with questions of agency and a subversive representation as well as with the creation of a black identity. Many of these discourses remain influential today. It is, therefore, interesting to look at how these issues are reflected in contemporary fictional imaginations of the period of slavery.

Very recently, Nathan Harris published his debut novel *The Sweetness of Water*, in which he attempts to reimagine the time period following the Civil War and emancipation from the perspective of two formerly enslaved brothers who, after years in bondage, suddenly become free and have to navigate their lives in an environment that remains hostile towards them. Harris does not only focus on the brothers' lives in the immediate days and months after their emancipation but makes their plot also intertwine with that of a white couple who becomes the brothers' ally in their attempt at surviving in a Southern racist society. In the epilogue of the book, Harris explains his motivation in writing such a novel as triggered by what he perceived to be an absence of stories about the emotional impact of emancipation on the lives of formerly enslaved people:

> The world of fiction is rife with stories that document the life in bondage endured by slaves in the United States – but few detail the precise psychological experience that might have happened in the days immediately following emancipation. Suddenly, after envisioning those two brothers in the woods for so long, I knew they were free. And I realized how absolutely disorienting that moment must have been for them (Harris 409).

Harris's project mirrors Morrison's idea of accessing reality through the imagination and filling a gap in the representation of the emotional lives of formerly enslaved people and thus contributing to the collective memory of this event. This aspect can also be seen in the fact that Harris got the idea for his book after learning of his father's numerous failed attempts at researching his family's history (Ermelino). Considering fiction as a viable alternative to

retrieve such a history, Harris began to craft his own story (Ermelino). Like Morrison, Harris seems eager to recreate a part of his identity, which he perceives to be lost, through his imagination. At the same time, Harris's novel is written in a different cultural context than *Beloved*. While *Beloved* was one of the first and most influential novels to address the gap in the memory culture of slavery, *The Sweetness of Water* is written in a context where there already exists a rich and diverse body of contemporary fiction dealing with slavery, and where the memory of slavery has become much more visible in the public sphere. While Harris's motivation in writing the novel seems to be to imagine history through the perspective of the marginalized, his novel not only focusses on the lives of formerly enslaved people but also on marginal white characters. The story he ultimately transmits is not only one of a continuation of black subjugation after slavery but also one of the prevalence of inter-racial kinship and benevolence. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Harris states that he wanted to send a message to the nation as a whole: "We can come together in a way – there is hope" (Harris, "'The Sweetness of Water'"). This hope could arguably be seen as a faith in a shared ancestry and identity, something Harris tries to imagine in his novel.

In this thesis, I want to compare Harris's novel to *Beloved* since both can be seen as fictional interventions into the cultural memory of slavery. Since *Beloved* is a very influential novel from the 1980s and was one of the first ones to cast a light on issues such as the incompleteness of historiography, representation, and the importance of memory, it makes sense to compare it to a contemporary novel to see how far these issues are mirrored in historical fiction today and in how far a novel like *The Sweetness of Water* also reflects changes in how slavery is remembered. I will, therefore, also look at to what extent the two novels diverge in their representation of the relationship between black and white characters and what kind of American identities they create through their imaginations of the past. To answer these questions, I am going to draw on theories of cultural memory as well as on theories of historical fiction as a means of revising the past.

1. Theoretical framework

In her study "History, Fiction, and the USA," the literary scholar Ina Bergmann coins the term "new historical fiction," which she uses as an umbrella term for historical novels written at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first (Bergmann 9). She points out a trend in historical fiction writing that focuses on the nineteenth century and aims at a "revisionist rewriting of the past from the point of view of marginalized groups" (Bergmann 9). By coining the term "new historical fiction," Bergmann delineates it from the traditional realist historical novels popular in the eighteenth century and relates it to the changes in how people think about historiography influenced by postmodernist ideas. During the 1970s and 1980s, scholars increasingly questioned the idea that reality could be unequivocally represented in art and in historiography (Bergmann 18). This debate was accompanied by poststructuralist ideas of deconstruction and the fragmentation of reality.

The theorist Jean-François Lyotard defined "postmodern" as the condition of an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 73), such as "historical meaning, knowledge, or experience" (Bergmann 18), which excluded marginalized voices and counter-narratives (18). In his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), Hayden White argued that historians, like novelists, make use of narrativization in order to offer interpretations of history (White 7). Since narrativization underlies specific rules, any narrative of the past will necessarily be biased (White 7). The postmodernist scholar Linda Hutcheon furthered White's ideas about historiography by arguing that history, like literature, should be considered a "discourse" and therefore does not have an exclusive claim to truth (Hutcheon 93). Moreover, she suggested that the suspicion with which we approach fictional accounts of the past should be extended to include the realm of historiography: "storytellers certainly silence, exclude, and absent certain past events – and people – but […] historians have done the same: where are the women in the traditional histories of the eighteenth century?" (107). What follows from this argumentation is an embracement of "truths in the

plural" (Hutcheon 109) rather than the belief in a singular "Truth" (109) and the idea that "there is rarely falseness per se, just others' truths" (109). At the same time, other theorists of postmodernism, such as Frederic Jameson, lamented what he believed to be an abandonment of history and historicity altogether:

> [In postmodernism] The historical novel can no longer set out to represent the past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about the past […] Cultural production […] can no longer gaze directly on some putative world, at some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present (Jameson 71).

Jameson's critique is that if the idea of a verifiable history is abandoned, something he criticizes postmodernism for doing, then we can no longer make any viable assumptions about the past that would be invested in understanding 'what really happened.' Other theorists saw the suspicion towards traditional historiography as not an end to history itself but rather an end to the belief in historical "master narratives" (Bergmann 18). McKible defines 'master narratives' as narratives "a dominant culture tells about itself" (Mc Kible 223). Bergmann argues that this critique of historical master narratives does not necessarily equate with a total abandonment of the idea of history in general but is a critique of the claim to absoluteness of traditional historiography (Bergmann 19).

The way in which fiction responded to these changes in our understanding of historiography has been theorized by different scholars. Most notably, Linda Hutcheon coined the term "Historiographic Metafiction" (Hutcheon 114) to describe fiction that both comments on the ambiguity of historical knowledge by laying bare its reliance on historical master narratives and, at the same time, emphasizes its fictionality through a form of self-reflexivity (114). According to Hutcheon, this particular genre both displays a suspicion towards historiography and historical master narratives and constructs a counter-memory, while it also shows that this counter-memory is itself a fictional construct about the past (114). Amy J. Elias introduced the "Metahistorical Romance" concept to connect postmodern historical fiction to the historical romance genre of the nineteenth century (Elias 164). Taking into account White's and Hutcheon's theories on the unknowability of history, Elias argues that

postmodern historical novels mirror the historical romance novels of the nineteenth century in their – almost mythical – yearning for a knowledge of history, while simultaneously being aware of the fact that such knowledge cannot be obtained: "Scott's novels illustrated a stadialist view of history […] and today's metahistorical romance illustrates our own historiography's lack of faith in, but continuing desire for, 'historical knowledge'" (164). Elias argues that while in the historical fiction of Walter Scott, myth tends to give way to modernist empirical knowledge, postmodernist historical imagination is marked by an abandonment of a belief in "rationalist modernity" (164). This yearning for historical knowledge while simultaneously being aware that it is forever out of reach is what Elias calls "the Historical Sublime" (161). The Historical Sublime exists because we continue to seek out knowledge about history as it constitutes a significant part of our "self-formation," despite the realization that historiography and reality are fragmented (169).

According to Bergmann, the term "new historical fiction" is meant to encompass these debates and to open up the discussion to a more general assessment of contemporary historical fiction: "it is exactly the mix of more traditional features of the historical novel, indebted to the nineteenth-century literary tradition […], and innovative, postmodern elements that constitute the defining aspects of the new historical fiction" (Bergmann 54). While the terms "metahistorical" and "historiographic metafiction" refer to a questioning of "historical method rather than historical fact" (58), contemporary historical fiction can also display less self-conscious features, while still aiming at a "revisionist" retelling of the past (Nünning, qt. in Bergmann 55). In the introduction to her study "Exoticising the Past in Neo-Historical Fiction," Elodie Roussleot also argues that what she defines as "neo-historical fiction" tries to achieve "a high degree of historical accuracy" (Rousselot 5). At the same time, it is simultaneously aware "of the limitations of that project" (5). Although trying to represent the past accurately and somewhat "realist," she argues that the "neo-historical fiction" – her study is focused on neo-Victorian novels – still aims at a "critical engagement"

with the past (5). In contrast to historiographic metafiction, this critical engagement takes place on a much less explicit and formal level. Nevertheless, it looks at the past through the present; it is "very much aimed at answering the needs and preoccupations of the present" (5). New historical fiction is thus influenced by the development of how we look at traditional historiography, a development initiated by postmodernism (Bergmann 3). In recognizing that history is unknowable (Elias 164) and that historiography is able only to give very subjective accounts of the past (White 7), it can thus be argued that new historical fiction aims at filling the gaps of the past without meeting the demands of "academic" history. It thus ties in with Elias's idea that, although the past is unknowable, people still yearn for it (Elias 164). Arguably, Toni Morrison's and Nathan Harris's novels can be seen as new historical fictions, since they aim at a revisionist representation of the past. As I am going to argue, they can be seen as creating cultural memory as a way to circumvent the limitations of historiography.

As I have stated in the introduction, both Toni Morrison and Nathan Harris faced a void when trying to trace their ancestors' past since the lives of formerly enslaved people had been largely left out of the traditional historical record. In an essay on her novel, Morrison expresses her suspicion of "written history," a suspicion that originated in her perception of its undeniable "absences and silences" (Morrison, "On *Beloved*" 280). Morrison points to the fact that since historical records are only marginally able to address these silences, she would have to draw on memory rather than on history in order to gain access to her black cultural ancestry (Morrison, "Rememory" 323). For Morrison, memory is a "deliberate act of remembering" and a "form of willed creation" (Morrison, "Memory" 327). As she describes in "The Site of Memory," Morrison began imagining the story of *Beloved* with the help of her personal memory (Morrison, "The Site" 9). In a passage of the essay, Morrison describes how the memory of eating corn in her family's garden in the summer when she was a child and in the presence of neighbors served as an image she decided to use in *Beloved* (98). The symbol of corn connected her with her black ancestors, as the cornfield in *Beloved* is a plantation

where enslaved people are forced to work on as well as a place where they gather together and build a community. She uses the emotions connected to the eating of corn in her memory to infuse the lives of enslaved people of the past with thoughts and feelings, something that the historical sources on slavery do not provide (9).

The idea that personal memory and collective identity are interconnected has – among others – also been suggested by the Egyptologist and cultural theorist Jan Assmann. In his essay "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," Assmann argues that every day, "communicative memory" and "objectivized, cultural memory" in the form of rituals, monuments, or texts share similar characteristics and thus differ from a more 'scholarly' history (Assmann and Czaplicka 129). Assmann proceeds from the idea that group identities are manifested by an informal memory shared within families and domestic settings (127). He argues that "communicative memory" goes back no longer than a hundred years, "equal[ling] three or for generations" (127). As inter-generational memory can only go back so far, Assmann argues that there is another form of memory, namely "objectivized culture," which preserves events that go back further than a hundred years (128). At the same time, this kind of "cultural memory" retains the same kind of identity-building character as does communicative memory (128).

In contrast to the official memory culture Assmann points to, black Americans have a more complicated relationship with the memory of slavery (Christian 92). As Christian points out, with *Beloved*, Morrison spoke to a gap in the cultural memory of slavery caused by a lack of objects of official commemoration and "disrupted generational lines" (Christian 92). Eyerman also points to the fact that slavery is a cultural trauma, a "tear in the social fabric," and as such does not constitute cultural memory but first has to be "understood, explained, and made coherent" in order to transform it into a cultural and collective memory (Eyerman 61). In this way, cultural memory always speaks to the needs of the present and the future (Eyerman 63; Assmann 130). As Kimberley Chabot Davis argues, *Beloved* is a text that takes

into account the postmodern scepticism towards historical metanarratives and endorses the idea that "all history is 'imagined'" and that "the past is derived from representations, such as *Beloved* itself" (Davis 247). While acknowledging that history is “beyond representation” (Elias 161), Morrison's project also stresses the need for cultural remembering in the way Assmann sees it, namely as objectivized culture. Davis argues that Morrison was invested in the creation of "the truth about the past" (Morrison, qt. in Davis 247), which she saw threatened by a postmodern disdain for history as well as a romanticizing of the past by the Black Power movement who imagined it through "ancient African myths" (247). As Eyerman points out, the post-war generation of black Americans in the 1960s had a complex relationship with slavery – desiring to transcend its legacy (Eyerman 100) or downplay the impact it had on the formation of a black identity (108). For Morrison, on the contrary, it is only through a confronting and understanding of the trauma of slavery that a viable black identity can emerge (Morrison, "Memory" 327).

Beloved suggests that painful memories must be consciously recalled before they can be overcome. She, therefore, imagines the historical figure of Margaret Garner not as a woman who is taken back into slavery but as one who lives in freedom but is nevertheless haunted by the events of her past. This aspect mirrors the idea that contemporary Americans remain to be haunted by slavery as it has not been narrated and understood enough (Morrison, “On *Beloved*” 284). At the same time, memory remains ambivalent in *Beloved*, as it is not only something that can be consciously created and thus understood, but also something which eludes our comprehension. *Beloved* thus does not achieve narrative closure but remains an open text that has to be constantly re-interpreted by its readers in order to make sense of the possibly never fully-comprehensible reality of slavery. While an 'objectivized' memory culture of slavery only existed sparsely at the time of the publication of *Beloved*, and Morrison was thus one of the first writers to address this gap, the engagement of writers with

the period of slavery has expanded since the 1980s, and the memory of slavery has become more visible in the public discourse.

In the introduction to her study, "Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space", Ana Lucia Araujo calls attention to the fact that the number of cultural institutions that aim at memorizing slavery from the perspective of its victims has gradually increased since the 1990s, which can be most notably seen in the effort of building a national museum of African American History (Araujo 4). By drawing on Maurice Halbwachs, she also argues that through a transformation of the cultural trauma of slavery into "permanent forms" of memory, such as "museums, monuments, and memorials," the "historical memory" of slavery "can be 'crystallized'" (1). This also aligns with Assmann's theory of the transition between communicative and cultural memory, the latter referring to cultural objects (Assmann 128). As a black writer, Nathan Harris is also interested in contributing to a memory culture of slavery that is still evolving. In the epilogue of his book, he states that he wanted to add a story to a time period that he felt needed to be explored more in fiction (Harris 409). While Morrison understood slavery as something that 'haunts' Americans, Harris wrote his novel in a context in which historical fiction of slavery abounds but in which stories about different marginalized groups remain to be told and understood. As I will argue, Harris's novel aims at a different imagining of the past, namely one that involves black and white people and asks for a greater degree of closure than Morrison's novel.

2. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

2.1. Creating cultural memory in *Beloved*

As mentioned above, Toni Morrison's writing can be seen as invested in countering traditional narratives of slavery by offering alternative and new representations that focus on black subjects. Her novel thus critically engages with traditional historiography because it aims at filling the gaps left by history. At the same time, her novel also points to the fact that

the past cannot be recovered and thus – to a certain extent – remains in a transitory space in which it continues to ‘haunt’ us. *Beloved* thus ultimately stresses the necessity of memory as well as its limitations and perils. Before writing *Beloved*, Morrison published *The Black Book* in 1974, a compilation of historical "raw materials" such as newspaper clippings, photographs, letters, and artifacts documenting black people's lives in America in order to create an object of memory of what she perceived to be a general gap in history (Nishikawa). According to the scholar Nishikawa, Morrison obtained the book's content from various collectors (Nishikawa). Nishikawa reads *The Black Book* as a work of memory aimed at countering traditional history by focusing on the everyday and the lives of marginalized people and by refusing to "ascribe a telos to narratives about the past" (Nishikawa).

The seemingly random juxtapositions of texts and images in The Black Book – which also includes the newspaper clipping of Margaret Garner – can be read as a challenge to our reading of the past since it suggests that "people [can] access the past only through fragments, traces, the detritus and hauntings of history" (Nishikawa). The idea is that history tries to interpret events through imposing narratives (White 7), while sources like those in *The Black Book* defy interpretation, both due to their sheer quantity and because 'ordinary lives' do not constitute the primary interest of historians (Morrison, qt in. Nishikawa). Nishikawa sees the contents of *The Black Book* as something the French theorist Pierre Nora described as lieu de mémoire:

> [A]n apparently purely material site, like an archive, *becomes a lieu de mémoire* only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura. […] Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events (Nora 18).

Working in the context of French national memory culture, Nora argues that objects become 'sites of memory' because people consciously decide to link the memory of specific events to these sites (Nora 18). While Nishikawa sees *The Black Book* as such a 'site of memory,' Davis points to the fact that its contents, one of which is the article on Margaret Garner, are still representations created by the people in power (Davis 248). Although they might be 'real'

because they are verifiable documents, they are unable to tell the whole story because they were written about black subjects and not by them (Davis 248). As I have mentioned above, Morrison was suspicious of "recorded history" because it was written by the people in power and therefore would not offer her access to an understanding of her black ancestry ("I could not, should not trust recorded history to give me the insight into the cultural specificity I wanted" (Morrison, "Rememory" 322)). While *The Black Book* is compiled of actual, verifiable historical sources, in writing *Beloved*, Morrison seems to imply that this does not suffice to understand her ancestry and identity as historical sources about the lives of black people and the scholarly engagement with these remain to be on the margins of the dominant historical discourse (Morrison, "On *Beloved*" 281). The idea is that it is only through the work of the imagination, which draws on personal memory and the present time, as Morrison points out in "The Site of Memory" (Morrison, "The Site of" 86), that an understanding of the black past can be attained.

Morrison's project can thus be seen as an attempt at creating a "cultural memory," in the sense in which Assmann understands it, as an "objectivized culture," which black Americans lacked at the point at which Morrison published her novel (Assmann 129). The article of Margaret Garner that was – among others – published in a white abolitionist newspaper thus constitutes a historical ‘site’. However, it is only through the work of the imagination that Morrison can construct this site's 'culturally specific' meaning by infusing the figure of Margaret Garner with thoughts and feeling. As she states in the preface to *Beloved*, by infusing the historical figure of Margaret Garner with an 'inner life,' Morrison creates a sense of continuity of the past with the present:

> I would invent [Garner's] thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's "place" (Morrison, *Beloved* 11).

The quote underlines Assmann's idea that cultural memory always responds to and is closely related to a "contemporary situation" (Assmann 130). In *Beloved*, Morrison also explores

historical continuities of race and gender, and the difficulties women face in making choices about their bodies: “the shock of liberation drew my thoughts to what 'free' could possibly mean to woman" (Morrison, *Beloved* 10). Morrison's project can thus be seen as the creation of cultural memory, which according to Assmann, aims to make the past "accessible again across millennia (Assmann 129). Cultural memory can thus be seen as an addition to 'verifiable' history (Assmann 129). It also retains an identity-forming character since people can better understand their present by understanding the perspectives of these lost voices of history.

The idea of consciously remembering something of the past is also present in the concept of "rememory", a term that Morrison coined in an essay. She refers to "rememory" as "recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past" (Morrison, "Rememory"). "Rememory" can thus be seen as the conscious creation of a memory that has been lost, in the way in which the voices of formerly enslaved people have been lost throughout history. The concept of "rememory" thus epitomizes Toni Morrison's idea of the retrospective creation of a 'culturally specific' past and ties in with Assmann's concept of cultural memory. Through her narrative, Morrison retroactively ‘creates’ a memory of the past in which black people, and especially black women, are given a voice. On a national level, she therefore adds something to an understanding of black history. At the same time, in *Beloved*, "rememory" also indicates an involuntary remembering of traumatic events that the characters want to forget but are haunted by. Through the use of the magical element of the ghost and its fragmentary style, *Beloved* also engages with subjects that defy representation because their voices have been lost and suggests that it is still important to remember the 'disremembered.' While Eyerman argues that cultural trauma needs to be narrated to be "transformed" into cultural memory, Morrison also points to the limitations of such a project by defying closure in her novel. *Beloved* thus arguably also relates to postmodern theories of the past, such as Linda

Hutcheon's idea of historiographic metafiction and Amy J. Elias's concept of the Historical Sublime.

2.2. Subverting traditional representations of enslaved people

As mentioned above, *Beloved* speaks to a gap in black people's history. The story of Margaret Garner, which is preserved as a historical document, can only give a limited account of the dehumanization and trauma the system of slavery inflicted on generations of black people. As a figure that was only represented by others but had no voice herself, Margaret Garner arguably represents a historical master narrative that Morrison tries to counter by creating a character that has agency. In contrast to the historical figure of Margaret Garner, the character of Sethe in *Beloved* is not taken back into slavery but remains in freedom where she is nevertheless haunted by the trauma of the past. Sethe's story is thus not conclusive and therefore enables Morrison to explore the workings of trauma both on an individual and national level.

Margaret Garner's story survived through several newspaper accounts from 1856, most notably through an issue of the *American Baptist*, an abolitionist newspaper (Nikishawa). The story was meant to be "didactic […] highlighting for a white abolitionist readership the impossible decisions enslaved people were compelled to make" (Nikishawa). Mirroring Margaret Garner's representation in the *American Baptist*, Morrison inserts a newspaper clipping of Sethe's killing of her daughter into the story of her novel. The clipping is shown to Paul D by Stamp Paid as evidence of Sethe's deed (Morrison, *Beloved* 198). Meant to make Paul D understand Sethe's story, it only serves to convince him that the person depicted is not Sethe ("That ain't her mouth" (198)). Paul D refuses to recognize the representation of Sethe in the newspaper because he knows that any representation of a "black face" in a newspaper will be biased since it serves the needs and interests of white people:

> There was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story were about something anybody wanted to hear […] Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of the ordinary – something whitepeople would find interesting (200).

The quote suggests that verifiable documents, such as newspapers, legal documents, etc., are biased because they were written from the perspective of the people in power. The quote implies that from the perspective of the white society that supported the system of slavery, the 'maim[ing],' 'whipp[ing],' or 'rap[ing]' were 'ordinary' occurrences because they were legalized. At the same time, the murder of a child by its mother was something illegal and therefore aberrant – 'out of the ordinary.' What the narrator seems to imply through the thoughts of Paul D is that this representation leaves out the trauma the mother has experienced before killing her child, something a white newspaper would not have deemed interesting enough to record. Davis points to the fact that this passage underlines a "gap between representation and reality" and the fact that a "fictional account of the interior life of a former slave might be more historically 'real' than actual documents" (Davis 248).

Like historical documents written by the people in power, the nineteenth-century slave narratives also focused on meeting the needs of a white audience (Drake 190). Moreover, they aimed to demonstrate that enslaved people were capable of overcoming difficulties and deserved the same rights as white people (190). Andrews points to the fact that the writers of such slave narratives also refrained from conveying "all they felt or tell all they knew" to remain credible (Andrews 120). Drake argues that this might have made the narrators of these slave narratives "ironically […] fictionalize" their experiences (Drake 190). In contrast to the slave narratives' objective of emphasizing enslaved people's humanity by demonstrating their ability to overcome challenges (Drake 190), *Beloved* emphasizes how slavery destroys people's sense of identity and their futures. Instead of presenting reliable and coherent subjects as the slave narratives tried to do, the characters in *Beloved* are marked by a total loss of identity and self-love inflicted on them by the brutality of white people:

> Anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up (Morrison, *Beloved* 319).

'Being dirtied' refers to the various experiences of the characters in *Beloved* that had to endure rape, dehumanization, and imprisonment. These things destroy a person's sense of identity and one's sense of humanity. *Beloved* underlines how slavery enacts the destruction of people's subjecthood and how the contempt and inhumanity it inflicts on people leads them to emotional extremes.

Paul D keeps his heart shut in a tobacco tin: "that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lit rusted shut" (93). The tobacco tin, as a locked object, metaphorically replaces his heart and makes him repress his feelings, which threaten to make him relive his trauma. Although Sethe and Paul experience a form of "benign" slavery for a greater part of their lives under Mr. Garner, who takes pride in calling Paul D and the other male people "men" instead of the degrading expression of “boys” (12), this ostensibly benign form still robs them of a subjecthood. It is only on Mr. Garner's farm that they are allowed personhood ("only on Sweet Home, and by his leave" (281)). Their subjecthood is, therefore, not an innate right but dependent on the benevolence of their masters. Keizer argues that "in slave systems, masters establish themselves as the supreme Subject of their slaveholding ideology" (Keizer 28). Although Mr. Garner's "ideology" is more humane than the way the later plantation owner, "schoolteacher," degrades and infantilizes the enslaved, Mr. Garner still presents himself as the enslaved people’s “maker”, leaving them with an unstable sense of identity once he is gone.

Paul D’s experience of humiliation at the hands of schoolteacher and in the prisoner camp bring him into conflict with his masculine identity. He is not able to know with certainty whether his identity is something essential or whether it depends on the will and whims of white people: "Was [Mr. Garner] naming what he saw or creating what he did not?" (281). The instability of his masculine identity thus also contributes to his decision to repress his

emotions, as he is pressured to adhere to a specific idea of masculinity that he is afraid to lose. It can thus be argued that Beloved critically engages with historiography by bringing to the foreground formerly enslaved people's agencies and by portraying the struggles with their identity in ways in which it had not been done before.

2.3. Denial of freedom and closure

While *Beloved* represents a counter-memory to traditional representations of slavery, it is also a self-reflexive text that draws attention to its own fictionality by offering different perspectives, pointing to the constructiveness of stories and challenging linear perceptions of time. It thereby shares some characteristics with Linda Hutcheon's definition of “historiographic metafiction” (Ropero 173). This can be seen in the text's employment of "rememories" as both something that is consciously remembered and something that one tries to but cannot forget. While the slave narratives provided their readers with "ordered facts" and therefore allowed them to remain at a distance from the subjects (Travis 185), *Beloved* forces its readers to make sense of its jumbled and fragmented narrative and therefore take part in the characters' overcoming of the troubling past. Although the novel does not "simply catalogue violence" (189), it still conveys the physical and psychic wounds slavery leaves behind. Moreover, it requires the reader to take part in the reconstruction of the past of the main characters by offering only shreds of memory and flashbacks through different perspectives, which the reader has to put together to create a coherent story. As Morrison states in the preface to her novel, the reader is "thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment", mirroring the feeling of dislocation and alienation black people were exposed to as a result of enslavement and the Middle Passage (Morrison, *Beloved* 12).

Instead of offering the reader a coherent, linear narrative that proceeds from slavery to freedom and aims at a form of closure, *Beloved* highlights the difficulty of obtaining freedom after a troubling past. Sethe's life in freedom is marked by a constant fear of "rememories", a

re-experiencing of negative memories. Sethe's memories of "Sweet Home", the plantation she worked on and on which she experienced unspeakable things, lie dormant as long as they are not triggered by minor occurrences: "The plash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path […] and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes" (7). The repetition of the word 'rolling' points to Sethe's lack of control over her memories. The place's name 'Sweet Home' which suggests a kind of homeliness, contrasts the degradation Sethe experienced there. Pictures of an apparent tranquillity of the place are conflated with pictures of brutality in Sethe's mind: "Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world […]. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time, and she could not forgive her memory for that" (7).

Because trauma conflates the past and the present, whereby the past intrudes on the present, the novel is structured in a way that defies a clear distinction between these two. An explicit description of the baby's murder is withheld from the reader. Instead, the narrative offers fragmentary glimpses of the event from different perspectives. The closest the narrative gets to an elaborative description of the event of the baby's murder comes when schoolteacher and his nephews detect Sethe in the woodshed after she has cut the baby's throat (191). The passage shifts from schoolteacher's and his nephew's perspective who consider the formerly enslaved people as a wild mob ("the damnedest bunch of coons they'd ever seen" (193)) to Baby Sugg's view who seems to feel ambivalent about Sethe's act (194). With these multiple perspectives, Morrison also points to how narratives about the past compete with each other. Especially schoolteacher's degrading account of enslaved people as a mass of parts ("little nigger-boy eyes open in the sawdust, little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers […] little nigger-baby eyes crinkling up to cry in the arms of the old nigger" (193), allude to the historical bias of representation that weighed towards people in power, an imbalance that the novel tries to counter by imagining black people's agencies.

These agencies can be seen in the characters' demand for freedom against all odds. In the novel, freedom is not defined as a mere absence of enslavement but as the ability to love "anything you chose": "to get to a place where you […] not need permission for desire – well now, that was freedom" (208). Sethe's life in freedom is short-lived: After having run away from Sweet Home and living for twenty-eight days in the black community in Cincinnati, she is found by schoolteacher and his nephews who aim to take her back to slavery (190). Sethe senses their approach through a glimpse at "shoolteacher's hat", which triggers her to feel "little hummingbirds [sticking] their needle beaks right through her headcloth" (209). The reaction to the arrival of schoolteacher mirrors her reaction to witnessing him teaching his pupils how to divide her "animal characteristics" from her "human characteristics" on a piece of paper (246), at which she feels like "somebody was sticking fine needles in [her] scalp" (247). This experience of dehumanization has a traumatizing effect on Sethe.

Kimberely Drake argues that the image of the needles puncturing Sethe's head mirrors the way in which Freud describes trauma as the moment at which "external excitations are strong enough to break through the [psyche's] barrier against stimuli" (Freud, qt. in Drake 197). This argument is supported by the fact that Sethe experiences a flashback to the situation with schoolteacher's pupils: As schoolteacher's instruction to his pupils to list Sethe's "animal characteristics" (209) aims to rob her of something precious – her agency and humanity, she now fears that they might take away "all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful" (209), namely her children. She thus claims to be a mother, something that – as Morrison contended – was not allowed in the system of slavery: "birthing children was required, but 'having' them, being responsible for them – being, in other words, a parent – was as out of the question as freedom" (10). Sethe's killing of her daughter thus arguably represents an extreme form of this mother's love that is denied in slavery.

At the same time, Morrison also complicates the idea that Sethe's act is an assertion of agency by depicting the toll that this act takes on her and her surroundings. As the event is

never explicitly stated in the novel, so is Sethe unable to talk about it. She can never "close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask" (209). Since trauma can be seen as something that diminishes once it is narrated, Sethe's inability to talk about it thus points to her ongoing trauma. Sethe's infanticide is thus presented as something insurmountable in the novel. Morrison places the readers in an ambivalent position, which mirrors the position of Baby Suggs, who is unable to either "approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice" (229). By affirming Sethe's agency on the one hand, and showing the trauma the act inflicts on her on the other, Morrison points to the impossible choices formerly enslaved people had to make – between letting their children be taken away and "claiming" them – each involving loss and injury. She also shows that living in legal freedom does not equate with actual freedom since, "collective confrontation with the past" as Greg Forster argues, "is not enough to work through trauma in the absence of a reckoning by the larger social order" that remains intact through "white supremacy and patriarchy" (79). Even Baby Suggs, who is seen as a communal "healer," finally withdraws from her activity as a preacher and decides to "ponder color" (104), something abstract and removed from the world, which implies that she has lost hope of making sense of the past.

2.4. Remembering the Voiceless

As mentioned above, Morrison aims to subvert traditional representations of slavery and to fashion a cultural memory of slavery that includes black voices and engages the reader with the emotional burden slavery inflicts on individuals. As I will argue, *Beloved* also highlights the difficulties in remembering the voiceless and disremembered. At the same time, it nevertheless points to the necessity of doing so. In writing a book like *Beloved*, which would evoke the subject of slavery from the perspective of the voiceless and forgotten, Morrison was well aware that she was "pitch[ing] at tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts" (Morrison, *Beloved* 11). A ghost hovers in an intermediate space between life and death,

haunting the living as it demands attention and recognition from them. In one of the first pages of the novel, the narrator implies Baby Suggs' thoughts on memory: "The past had been like her present – intolerable – […] she knew death was anything but forgetfulness" (Morrison, *Beloved* 4). Baby Suggs knows that death does not equate with closure nor with forgetting, and her knowledge derives from the fact that her suffering has not ended and that her past has not been resolved in the present.

Like the house 124, which is haunted by the dead baby's ghost, many houses in Cincinnati seem to be haunted by their unacknowledged ancestors: "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (6). Not only is Sethe haunted by her daughter, who eventually appears in human form as Beloved, but ghosts seem to be omnipresent in the novel. As Stamp Paid approaches 124, he hears voices whose words he is unable to comprehend: "he couldn't cipher but one word, [but] he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (231). The people that the narrator – through Stamp Paid's perspective – refers to all suffered from some form of violence at the hands of white people. All Stamp Paid can remember from the people he thinks about are fragments ('broken necks,' 'lost ribbons', 'fire-cooked blood'). As all that remains from them are fragments, their stories are not remembered, so the injustice they suffered cannot be acknowledged.

Similarly, the character of Beloved epitomizes all the people who lack representation. In the preface to the novel, Morrison states that "the figure most central to the story would have to be her, the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it" (xii). The character of Beloved encompasses a multitude of voices: she is not just the killed baby child that returns to demand "due recognition of the pain and loss" of her life (King 150), but she also carries the "symbolic weight of the repressed or forgotten histories of people" (150). The 'repressed or forgotten histories of people' are also all those who suffered and died during the Middle Passage – the "Sixty Million and More" that Morrison mentions

in the epigraph of the novel and which defy any representation. In an interview, Morrison mentions that the "millions of people" that died in the Middle Passage are disremembered: "no one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them, not in the United States nor in Africa" (Morrison, qt. in Terry 4). The fact that Morrison inserts the memory of the Middle Passage into the narrative can be seen in the fragmented stream-of-consciousness of *Beloved* in which she relates her experiences of being dead:

> We are not crouching now […] I cannot fall because there is no room to the men without skin are making loud noises I am not dead the bread is sea-colored I am too hungry to eat it the sun closes my eyes those able to die are in a pile […] the woman is there with the face I want the face that is mine they fall into the sea which is the color of bread she has nothing in her ears (294).

Many critics read this passage as a description of the Middle Passage (Wisker; Travis), since it gives the impression of a slave ship where people are crouched together, pushed into the sea, while the "men without skin" might allude to white overseers. The incoherent and fragmented style and the somewhat simple language suggest that this experience is transmitted through the dead baby ghost. Having died as a baby, it is only able to express itself in an infantile language. The passage could also refer to Sethe's mother, who experienced the middle passage (Beloved 74) and whose memories Sethe has "inherited" (Wisker 91). Wisker points out that trauma is inter-generationally "re-enacted" in Sethe's case (91). The trauma of Sethe's mother is passed on to Sethe and returns in the form of violence Sethe experiences herself (91).

By conflating the ghost of the killed child with the memories of the unburied and unaccounted-for deaths of the Middle Passage, *Beloved* suggests that personal and cultural trauma can only be overcome by re-calling it, something that is expressed in the concept of "rememory". Paul D's appearance in Sethe's house forces her to confront earlier buried memories of Sweet Home, something she dreads doing at first but finally embraces as a way to move forward:

> She wanted Paul D. […] No matter what he told and knew, she wanted him in her life.

> […] Trust and rememory, yes, she believed it could be when he cradled her before the cooking stove. Her story was bearable because it was also his to tell, refine and tell again (Morrison, *Beloved* 116).

Instead of trying to "disremember" the past, one of the ways to overcome trauma is to narrate it in a safe environment of 'trust' and appreciation. Sethe's wish to overcome her trauma with the help of Paul D is, however, compromised by the appearance of Beloved, who demands Sethe's full attention and forces Paul D to eventually leave 124. Instead of overcoming her trauma, Beloved's presence eventually makes Sethe lose all contact with the outside world and retreat to 124 with Beloved and her daughter Denver (233). Like ghosts that can "hardly be spoken but not forgotten" (Wilker 75), Beloved's presence in Sethe's life creates a spatial and temporal limbo (she is "wrapped in a timeless present" (235)), which she is not able to overcome on her own. It is only with the help of Denver and the community of black women who exorcise Beloved in a communal prayer that Sethe is released of Beloved's destructive presence that threatens to kill her (Morrison, *Beloved* 333).

Beloved is forgotten by the community in the end of the novel: "Remembering seemed unwise. They never knew where or why she crouched […] so they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep" (324). The novel also ends with the assertion that "it was not a story to pass on" (324), highlighting the tricky balance between forgetting and remembering. On the one hand, the story cannot be passed on, that is, "passed over," emphasizing the importance of remembering and confronting the past. On the other hand, it suggests that the story should also not be "passed on" to the next generations, thereby repeating the cycles of trauma that haunt the characters in *Beloved*. Thus, the novel both points to the necessity of remembering the past and of moving beyond it.

3. Nathan Harris's *The Sweetness of Water*

3.1. Exploring the Past in *The Sweetness of Water*

Nathan Harris's novel *The Sweetness of Water* was published in 2021 and thus reflects a different time context than *Beloved*. While Morrison was one of the first writers to confront the lack of cultural memory of slavery, Harris's novel is part of a mass of new historical fiction about the period, which reflects the ongoing relevance of and interest in the subject of slavery and its aftermath. *The Sweetness of Water*, which is set in a fictional Southern town at the end of the Civil War, centers around the two formerly enslaved brothers Prentiss and Landry, who are set free by the Unionist army upon which they have to find a way to sustain themselves in a hostile environment, which puts off their hopes for actual freedom of equal rights and opportunities to the future. Harris intersects the story of the brothers with that of a white couple, Isabelle and George, who mourn the loss of their son Caleb who they believe has died in the war. Through intersecting the spheres of the black brothers and the white couple by turning them into allies in the course of the story, Harris entertains the idea of black and white friendship in a racist past.

While stories about the Civil War and the end of slavery used to "focus on the lives of […] white-skinned men […] drowning out the experience of others", Nathan Harris focuses on the experiences of marginalized characters (Preston). He thereby includes the subject position of white people who are opposed to slavery but also unwilling supporters of it and are intricated in the system of slavery due to their socioeconomic status, their gender, and sexuality. In an interview, Harris named Morrison one of the writers that inspired his writing (Harris, "Nathan Harris"). As I have discussed above, Morrison both accepted the postmodern premise that the past could never be fully known but was at the same time invested in creating a counter-memory of the past that would fill the gaps of "historical master narratives" and thereby also create a distinctly black American history which she found to be only marginally

present in historiography (Morrison, "On Beloved" 281**).** While Morrison aimed at creating a memory of what she perceived to be a lack of cultural knowledge about the past, Harris arguably continues this project by writing a novel about an experience that has not been "detail[ed] [enough] in fiction" (Harris 409). Harris's novel thus builds on a bulk of new historical fiction that engages with "stories that document the life in bondage endured by slaves in the United States" (409). His contribution to the memory culture of slavery is thus a different one: he seeks to fill the gaps of what stories have not yet been able to explore enough yet, such as the "precise psychological experience" (409) of people that were formerly enslaved and became emancipated and of white people that were opposed to slavery but were in a marginalized position themselves.

Morrison suggested that slavery was 'haunting' American society, and the continuous engagement of writers with the topic suggests that this haunting continues until today. However, the continuous engagement with the subject of slavery during the last decades also allows for an exploration of new and yet un-investigated stories. Harris, therefore, focuses on two experiences that have not yet been addressed enough in fiction – the meaning of freedom for formerly enslaved people and the subject position of ambivalent white figures. In doing so, he – like Morrison – also fulfils his wish to understand his past: to "look back and wonder" and imagine how [his ancestors] would have acted" (Harris 410), which is something that contributes to his sense of identity.

Like *Beloved*, Harris's novel is also concerned with the difficulty of obtaining freedom and closure after the troubling past of slavery: it addresses how formerly enslaved people are trapped in a present state, unable to move on from the past, both due to the workings of trauma as well as due to the hostile environment that stalls their newly won freedom. At the same time, Harris's narrative spends considerable time dwelling on the inner lives of the formerly enslaved characters Prentiss and Landry and those of the white family of George, Isabelle, and their son Caleb who eventually become the brothers' allies. As I am going to

argue, as the plotlines of these characters meet and are interwoven with each other, the white family becomes aware of the racial injustice the black characters face and thus turns into their ally, while the black characters in the novel decide to cooperate with the white characters and thus form a basis for a shared future. As a black writer, Harris thus also aims to insert black voices into our knowledge of the past. However, in contrast to Morrison, he seems to understand his ancestry not only as black, but rather as an American identity that transcends race.

3.2. Suspended freedom

As I have argued above, Harris's novel explores the psychological impact emancipation had on formerly enslaved people and the difficulties that accompanied this newly-won freedom, which he feels has not yet been addressed enough in fiction, much less in historiography. Like *Beloved, The Sweetness of Water* depicts formerly enslaved people whose path from slavery to freedom is made difficult by the burden of trauma. At the same time, Harris's novel also focuses on the Southern racist society that aims to obtain a system of white supremacy after the Civil War, within which black people's subjugation continues even after their emancipation. While pointing to how this society systematically neglected black people's subjecthood, Harris also constructs characters that reclaim their agency even when this puts their lives at risk.

The story begins with the sudden emancipation of the two brothers, Prentiss and Landry, by the Union army (Harris 24) and their belief that "their lives would now begin and it was time to craft them in whatever way they saw fit" (23). As the story progresses, this newly obtained freedom is complicated by the aftereffects of trauma, the continuation of a racist system, and the lack of true justice to stall the brothers' journey toward a self-determined life. Harris focuses on how – although formally free – formerly enslaved people remain at the mercy of white people and have little capacity to act upon their own needs. Not

knowing where to go and lacking resources to move away, black people in the novel continue to work for their former owners in slavery-like conditions for low wages (85). At the same time, they are seen as disposable and lack protection from mistreatment and violence. In the cases in which they manage to escape the dependency on their former owners, they are fugitives, moving "on the borders of town, hidden among the trees" (33). In one of the first scenes, Harris confronts the reader about what is wrong with this newly-won freedom: "For every pound of weight they'd carried, for every drop of sweat that had poured off, no inch of the land was theirs" (33). Having worked all their lives to increase the wealth of their owners and cultivate their land, formerly enslaved people do not have a share in their owners' profits but had to start building their fortune from scratch. In contrast, their former owners continue to profit from the wealth built on their backs.

Set in a fictional Georgian town named Old Ox, the novel also depicts how the town's wealthy are conspiring with the Northern occupants to restore the old order: The Unionist General installed in the town proves to be more interested in serving the demands of the town's bourgeoisie rather than in implementing the new law of justice and equality: "[The General's] Glass's assignment, he said, was to maintain peace. If necessary, politics had to be pushed aside" (131). The General represents the only authority figure in the book capable of enforcing the law. However, he appears to be corruptible and disinterested when he refuses to investigate the murder of Landry, "this business with one dead free Negro" (225). The absence of an authority that would enforce the law gives way to "vigilante justice" (Charles), in which marginalized people are at the mercy of those in power. Against this background, Harris constructs the two characters, Prentiss and Landry, who, in addition to the lack of legal protection and the means to move forward, also carry the burden of trauma from the past.

The idea of being stuck in a present state due to trauma can be seen in the figure of Landry, who has experienced violence to the degree that he has become "halved" (23) and who, in turn, is unable to face the unknown: "There were places and sounds that brought

Landry comfort, and all that fell outside this sphere of the known was met with resistance. […] A single step forward for Landry became an impossibility" (23). The dehumanization and humiliation Landry faced during slavery seem to have made him lose a sense of agency which can be seen in his inability to move forward. At the same time, he seems to restore his sense of agency by refusing to speak:

> He could not bring the words forth in whole units and began to wonder why he wished to do so in the first place, considering how little the act of speaking had ever done for him. In the months to come, his mother would […] be sold […] there was more freedom in silence (153).

Under normal circumstances, when a person expresses his/her feelings or thoughts, others register them, and a person can assert his/her agency. In a system of slavery, this agency is repressed because people are dehumanized, and their ability to determine their own life is taken away from them – Landry counters this by refusing to speak and, therefore, by refusing to submit to this dehumanization. Since he knows that his words will not avert the separation from his mother and the violence he is subjected to, his silence seems to be a way to assert his agency against all odds.

Notably, Landry breaks his silence only once when he becomes an involuntary witness to a secret affair between the two ex-Confederate soldiers Caleb and August, the latter of which threatens to kill Landry lest he should tell someone about their forbidden love:

> Caleb shouted to August that Landry could not speak. […] He would never tell a soul what he had seen" [upon which Landry] "stammered endlessly, […] insistent that his voice be heard. […] "I c-c-c can speak. Ain't no different from you (183).

In this scene, the power dynamic is turned upside down: Landry's subjecthood is denied to him because of his silence, and he asserts his agency by speaking up – even if the consequence of this assertion is his death (183). His precise articulation of the words underlines this need to make his voice heard against all odds.

Similarly, the other black protagonist in the novel, Prentiss, is also presented as a character ready to stand up against injustice, even if this puts his life at risk. This can be seen in the scene in which the wealthy former enslaver Wade Webler manages to disavow what he

perceives to be false accusations against his son, who had been charged with the murder of Landry (239). Wade Webler's disavowal appears not as a solid defense but as a demonstration of power since the authorities are already on his side. It is this show of power that Prentiss rebels against by spitting into Webler's face in a rush of fury: "[Prentiss] could not shake the hold of Wade Webler: the grandeur of his costume, the smugness of his countenance, the self-assurance in his total control of the situation" (240). Although he knows he stands no chance against the overly powerful white supremacist society, Prentiss still takes a stand against it, as his act of disobedience seems to counter the 'total control' of a character like Wade Webler, who seems to be confident in his victory. Like Landry, Prentiss thus seems to reclaim the agency that has been denied to him after the end of slavery through the continuation of old power structures. Thus, while pointing to the state of being trapped that formerly enslaved people experienced even after emancipation, Harris also seems to point to how people would assert their subjecthood against the odds of an overly-powerful system.

3.3. Marginalized white characters as proponents of racial justice

While Harris's novel addresses the incomplete freedom of formerly enslaved people and recreates black people's agencies like *Beloved*, *The Sweetness of Water* also focuses on marginalized white characters and explores the diverse subject positions that influence people's behavior in times of social transformation. As I will argue, by portraying how the white characters are shaped by gender, class, and sexuality, Harris suggests that social and historical forces influence people's actions. However, he also suggests that individuals can influence historical events. As "new historical fiction" is shaped by a focus on "marginalized voices" and can "explore the possibilities of history" without claiming historical accuracy (Bergmann 69), *The Sweetness of Water* shifts our focus on history from historical persona and people in power to smaller-scale actors that might not have been acknowledged enough in

our understanding of history. The characters of George, Caleb, and Isabelle are determined by their subject positions in society but also break out of their limitations. It can be argued, then, that, unlike *Beloved*, a formally inventive novel, *The Sweetness of Water* creates a "revisionist" understanding of the past more on a thematic level, comparable to what Rousselot sees as a "critical engagement" of neo-historical fiction that is less structurally explicit (Rousselot 5).

The character of George seems to be set apart from the rest of society both on his own accord ("The movements of other men interested him so little that the indifference was his chief reason for living far from society" (Harris 4)) and due to his Northern origin and social standing. In the first couple of chapters, the reader learns that George has inherited the land from his father, who has moved there from a Northern state in search of "cheap land" (39), suggesting a migration for financial rather than ideological reasons. His land borders that of an enslaver, and the peace and tranquillity of it ("the large red oaks" and "the soft flicker in the sky" (1)) stands in stark contrast to the force with which his neighbor 'holds together' the slave plantation: "overseers and large-snouted dogs, lanterns of such illumination that they kept the entire household awake" (3).

In contrast to his zealous fellow citizens striving to accumulate their wealth on the backs of enslaved people, George comes off as an unambitious person who would rather sell his land than try to cultivate it (34). The town's anger at George's employment of the two brothers after their emancipation seems to stem from the town's claim that George belongs to a lower class and, as a social outsider, is not permitted to share in the profits of the system of forcibly held enslaved people that are now set free (65). The idea that George belongs to a lower social class and therefore does not occupy the same subject position as his fellow citizens can also be seen in the fact that, in contrast to the wealthy and well-respected Wade Webler, George cannot "buy out" his son from the war (14). George's lower social status ultimately leads him to sympathize with Prentiss and Landry, who are even lower on the

social ladder. Through their shared outsider status, George is able to connect with the brothers. At the same time, his outsider status allows him to better understand their plight and the injustice they face at the hands of corrupt local authorities (317).

Like George, the character of Caleb is also delineated from the rest of society both by his class and by the sexuality he tries to hide in order to be further accepted by it. Unable to be 'bought out' from the war, Caleb deserts and is punished for it by the Unionist army as he has broken a code of honor ("they said […] even if it wasn't from their side, the action itself was worthy of punishment, regardless of the colors of his uniform" (89)). His act has to be hidden from society, like his love for his childhood friend and co-soldier, August. As a result, Caleb is in a marginalized position where he is in constant danger of being found out and losing what little respect he still has in the eyes of the town. Since he is at the mercy of society himself, he is unable to act upon August's murder of Landry, who has witnessed their secret love: "Caleb squeezed his eyes shut and covered his ears from the sound of vicious thuds. He could not move. […] He sat clutching himself, waiting hopelessly for the barbarity to end" (183). In this scene, fear of society finding out about his sexuality seems to keep Caleb from acting on Landry's murder.

However, his access to society is limited not only because of his sexuality, but also because of his class. Because of his lower status, the relationship between Caleb and August is presented as unequal and exploitative (239). Caleb's submissiveness towards August can be seen in one of the first scenes of the novel, in which George recounts the boys playing a roleplay as children:

> George pulled the boy's trousers down. Slash marks, some still flush with blood, the others bruised to a deep purple, covered his backside. He told George of the game August had hatched, *Master and Slave,* and that they had only been assuming their proper roles for the afternoon. The pain was not from the marks, Caleb went on, but from the fact that he could not conceal them and that George might tell August's father. He had to swear to the boy that he would keep it secret (184).

Although Caleb is the one who is beaten by August in the game, he is the one who is afraid of being found out and branded with shame. Caleb's enslavement in this game, which he sees as a natural order ("they were just playing their role"), points to his overall lower status in social hierarchy, which is related to his lower class status and lack of traditional "male" conduct. Caleb's subordination to August is only reversed in the confrontation with Landry, whose racial status places him even lower on the social ladder and thus elevates Caleb in relation to August. Through the character of Caleb, who ultimately changes his behavior and takes responsibility for Prentiss's innocent charge ("[Prentiss is] [s]et to die for a crime he did not commit." Then he pointed at himself. "At blame. At blame" (290)), Harris underscores the complexity of how people choose to act in the face of injustice and how those choices are shaped by the intersections of class and sexuality.

Like George and Caleb, the character of Isabelle also faces disapproval from the rest of society because she does not conform to gender roles and expectations. In contrast to the rest of the "polite society" (103), Isabelle lives "off in the woods" (102) and only engages little in the social activities of the other women in town (103). She does not seem to conform to traditional gender expectations: contrary to what is expected of a woman in marriage, it is her husband who does the cooking, and she seems to be quite autonomous in her actions (228). As an unusual female figure, Isabelle also seems to be excluded from the rest of society, with the exception of her friend Mildred, who also does not adhere to classical gender roles ("[Mildred had] upon the death of Jon Foster […] assumed the role of father to their four boys, and in turn had become more of a man in widowhood than Jon himself" (52). Thus, Mildred and Isabelle do not fully fit into Old Ox society and are not afraid to break social rules. For example, when Isabelle defends her husband's employment of Prentiss and Landry, she insults the women of society and is subsequently ostracized by the rest of society (243). At the same time, when she decides to rent her and George's land to formerly enslaved people after George's death (367), she also shows a great deal of autonomy and willpower. Thus, as

in the case of George and Caleb, Isabelle represents a white character who is herself marginalized because she does not conform to gender conventions. Her experience of being restricted by society due to her status as a woman arguably also seems to allow her to empathize with characters who are excluded from society due to their race.

3.4. A shared past and a shared future – closure in *The Sweetness of Water*

As I have argued above, Harris fills the gaps in the history of slavery differently than Morrison. On the one hand, his novel also seems concerned with the incompleteness of freedom after slavery and the assertation of black agency. On the other hand, Harris's novel does not engage with the difficulty of remembering the voiceless, as does *Beloved*. On the contrary, Harris's novel offers the reader more closure than *Beloved*. This can be seen both on the level of narrative form and content. *Beloved'*s fragmentary style forces the reader to engage with the painful past of slavery by mirroring how memory presents itself to the traumatized protagonists. By consciously remembering the painful past events, the protagonists can partially overcome their trauma, even though the novel's end suggests that dwelling on memories can also harm our prospects for the future. *The Sweetness of Water* functions very differently: traumatic memories of slavery are not absent from the book, but they give way to more optimistic memories, which could form the basis of a shared identification of black and white people with the past.

On the level of form, *The Sweetness of Water* represents a much more chronological style than *Beloved*, which makes it easier for the readers to immerse themselves in the narrative. In *Beloved*, the readers have to take part in a puzzling back together of the past since the novel proceeds from the idea that the past is only accessible through fragments and defies any definite closure and understanding. Harris's novel does not proceed from fragments of the past since it does not depart from a historical reference point – like the historical figure of

Margaret Garner in Morrison's case. On the contrary, Harris's project can instead be seen as an imaginative conjuring of the past. As I have discussed above, Harris does not engage in a possibly fruitless search for hints and fragments of his ancestors, but he seems to accept that the past is lost forever. Departing from this premise, Harris engages with a more optimistic image of the past in his novel, offering a form of closure on the level of individuals while not denying the systemic injustice that went on beyond the novel's frame.

The novel is not blind to the fact that individuals like Isabelle or George could not have changed the order of society, which can be seen in one of the characters' assertion close to the end of the novel: "Things'll carry on. Them Yankees with their little uniforms and swords won't be here forever. They'll go back where they belong. Them Negroes will keep working as we see fit" (403). This comment by one of the former enslavers of the town mirrors the way history proceeded from this point on and how racial injustice persisted for centuries after the end of slavery. While Harris's novel thus hints at this lack of historical closure, it nevertheless suggests a narrative closure through the characters' stories. The novel starts with several couples: George and Isabelle, Prentiss and Landry, and August and Caleb – these pairs of people become intermixed at the end of the novel. Each of the couples is separated to make way for a new pair. While Landry's and George's graves lie next to each other and thus present the sacrifices made by both black and white people for racial justice, Prentiss and Caleb represent hope for the future. Both of these pairs exist and are remembered in Isabelle's mind. Isabelle engages in the memory of each of these pairs in different ways:

> She would sit in the space between [Landry's] grave and George's and speak as though they were there with her – catch up on her work […] The memories of her son and Prentiss were preserved for […] a prayer late at night, […] when she would pull her knees to her chest and ask God to keep them from harm, wherever they might be (368).

While the past, in the form of Landry and George, seems to be over, Isabelle can speak with them 'as though they were with her.' They can no more constitute a cause for anxiety as Prentiss and Caleb move into the realm of the unknowable future. Isabelle's worry for them is

only mitigated when she receives a letter from her son in which he informs her of their wellbeing (404). The fact that the letter provides little information makes her engage in "the closest reading of each sentence, each word," which nevertheless "never revealed the information she wished for most" (405). The letter contains gaps that cannot be filled even by 'the closest reading,' such as history does not yield all the hints that might make us better understand the past.

The Sweetness of Water entertains the idea that an imagination which takes into account the more upbeat and promising aspects of history might help people endure the present and keep up their hope for the future. Isabelle engages in such an idealistic imagination when she envisions Prentiss and Caleb prospering in their newly established New York home or fantasizing about them returning to the farm (405). The idea that black and white people, as exemplified in the two characters, are facing the past and the future together and not separately is a "hope," as the novel suggests in its conclusion (407). The last sentence, "Yet sometimes – just sometimes – hope was enough" (407), suggests that Harris sees this hope for a shared future between black and white people in envisioning a shared past rather than reckoning with its more divisive aspects. *Beloved* does not seem to rule out a shared future, but it also suggests that the black experience that has been so long neglected by historiography must first be conjured in order to make way for such a future. As I have argued, *Beloved* is a novel that defies closure and univocal interpretations. While the voiceless, such as the baby ghost can never fully be given a voice and Morrison shows us that imaginative creations of the past are, in the end, also only fictional representations, the novel also suggests that we can, to some extent, still make peace with the past once we are able to acknowledge its horrors and injustices.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that the two historical novels, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *The Sweetness of Water* by Nathan Harris, both contribute to filling in the gaps of the history of slavery. Both Nathan Harris and Toni Morrison are black writers who respond to what they perceive to be a lack of knowledge of and identification with slavery at different times. Since Morrison was one of the first writers to address this gap in the historiography and memory of slavery, it made sense to compare her novel to a more contemporary novel with the same goal in order to see in how far it mirrors Morrison's project of creating new representations of marginalized people. As a ground for comparison of the two novels, I drew on theories of historical fiction and memory studies. Ina Bergmann's understanding of "new historical fiction" offered a viable lens for interpreting the two novels. According to Bergmann, new historical fiction as a genre emerged at the end of the twentieth century and was influenced by the changes in the way people thought about historiography, representation and marginality, which were in turn influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist ideas on the fragmentation of reality and the partiality of all knowledge. Bergmann argues that new historical fiction does not aim at a recreation of the past, but instead at a revisionist perspective on it. People and voices that have been formerly neglected by historians and society are put into focus by the new historical fiction. Bergmann deliberately uses the term "new historical fiction" instead of other genre conceptualizations such as "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 114) or "metahistorical romance" (Elias 164) in order to create a common ground on which diverse forms of contemporary fictions about the past can be compared. While Morrison's novel is written in a much more fragmentary and self-conscious style, Harris's novel has a rather linear plot structure. The different thematic and stylistic focus of the two novels reflect the different cultural and time-contexts in which they were written.

Morrison published *Beloved* in 1987, a time at which memory culture of slavery was still sparse. As Eyerman has argued in his study, many generations of black Americans did identify with slavery as a ground for their identities. At the same time, Morrison criticized the lack of more authentic reckonings with the legacy of slavery and lamented that there were large omissions in the ways generations of black people spoke about and interpreted the legacy of slavery, as she stated in a radio interview that "somebody forgot to tell somebody something" (Morrison, qt. in Christian). Her novel *Beloved* is thus an intervention into these omissions of stories about the past, since one of its messages is that the trauma slavery caused for generations of black people needs to be reckoned with before it can be overcome. As I have argued by drawing on Jan Assmann's concept of "cultural memory", this intervention is based on the idea that memory that goes back further than a few generations has to be commemorated in cultural objects in order for people to understand the past in relation to their identity, something scholarly history can only do to an extent (Assmann 128). In the cultural context of Morrison's novel *Beloved,* official commemorations were still sparse or were not focused on the perspective of the marginalized. At the same time, Morrison also criticized that the available historical sources of the slave narratives, which omitted large parts of the horrors and trauma on black people, had distorted the public discourse on slavery.

In *Beloved,* Morrison thus creates a public memory of slavery in which she subverts earlier representation of formerly enslaved people and gives them an agency. The traditional slave narratives that Morrison criticized presented a clear progression from slavery to freedom and in which formerly enslaved people aimed at demonstrating their unshakable subjecthood to a white audience in order to prove themselves worthy of the same rights. In *Beloved,* Morrison turns this representation upside-down by showing, through the characters of Sethe, Paul D and Baby Suggs, that the end of bondage does not equal freedom for formerly enslaved people, since they are haunted by the trauma of the past. This can especially be seen in the character of Sethe whose act of infanticide makes it impossible for the reader to issue a

judgment and thus underlines the persistence of trauma that cannot be resolved easily. At the same time, the novel also shows the way in which slavery damages people's sense of identity and subjecthood, something the slave narratives did not acknowledge enough.

Nathan Harris's novel *The Sweetness of Water* both reflects a continuation and changes in the way slavery is commemorated since the 1980s: As I have argued, Harris's novel also contributes to memory rather than historiography, since it is an imagination rather than a recreation of the past and as such does not attempt to achieve historical accuracy. On the contrary, the novel aims at contributing to an already existing body of memory texts, such as contemporary novels about the period and an increasing amount of public commemoration of slavery. Since the publication of *Beloved*, the U.S. has seen an increase in public objects of commemoration, such as the establishment of the *National Museum of African American History and Culture* in Washington D.C., as Araujo points out (Araujo 4), or the establishment of Juneteenth as a federal holiday. *The Sweetness of Water* builds on this already existing cultural memory and its focus, in comparison to *Beloved*, is thus shifted towards other still unexplored issues of slavery. On the one hand, *The Sweetness of Water* also focuses on giving an agency and a voice to formerly enslaved people. On the other hand, it also takes into account the subject positions of white people that were themselves marginalized by society due to their class, gender and sexuality and explores the ways in which these both prevented and enabled them to become black people's allies.

It can thus be argued that *The Sweetness of Water* can be seen as an addition to Morrison's as well as the work of other black writers who are filling the gaps of the past with new stories. This can be seen in the way in which *The Sweetness of Water* resumes the idea that freedom was not the immediate consequence of formerly enslaved people's emancipation. Instead, the novel shows how the racist structures in the South remain in place after the Civil War, making it impossible for the two black brothers, Prentiss and Landry, to build a future for themselves, leaving them trapped. Arguably continuing Morrison's project

of asserting black people's agencies, the formerly enslaved people in *The Sweetness of Water* stand up against injustices even if they are faced with an overly powerful system. At the same time, Harris's novel also puts into focus another less explored issue in history, namely the subject positions of white people that became black people's allies. Harris depicts white characters who are outsiders themselves due to their gender, class and sexuality and are therefore more able to empathize with the marginalized subject position of the black characters. His interweaving of the fates of Prentiss and Landry with the white family of George, Isabelle and Caleb suggests that he understands the overcoming of the history of slavery as a joined effort of both black and white people. Morrison aimed at a "culturally specific" creation of memory that emphasized on black people's experiences, something that Harris with his writing does not neglect, but rather builds onto.

I have also argued that the two novels differ on a formal level, which also reflect changes in the time contexts in which they were written. Since *Beloved* is not written in the chronological order of the events, it requires the reader to take part in a puzzling back together of the past, which mirrors the way in which the main characters have to narrate the past in order to make sense of it. While this is suggested as a way to overcome trauma in *Beloved*, the novel nevertheless still suggests that the lost voices of the past can never be recreated and that they – to an extent – remain ungraspable to us. In a way, Morrison thus mirrors Amy J. Elias theory of the metahistorical sublime and in which she describes the postmodern relation to history as a knowledge that eludes us and that we cannot recreate, but which we still long for. The end of *Beloved* thus remains ambivalent, as it both calls for remembering and forgetting at the same time. *The Sweetness of Water,* on the contrary, displays a much more linear narrative that immerses the reader in its story and offers a greater amount of closure than *Beloved*. Instead of drawing attention to its own constructed-ness and the impossibility of recreating the past, it presents a much more confident attitude towards remembering as something constructive that can help shape the future. It can be argued that the difference

between the two novels in regards to their form also suggest a development of culture from a more critical postmodernist view on history and memory to a more assertive acknowledgement of its importance for social cohesion.

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