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Magical Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives: an Analysis of
Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Colson Whitehead's
The Underground Railroad

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Abstract

'Slavernij weerklinkt in heel het oeuvre van de Afrikaans-Amerikaanse literatuur', aldus Timothy Spaulding. Er wordt nog steeds veel geschreven over het thema slavernij in zogenaamde *neo-slave narratives*. Dit zijn hedendaagse romans die kenmerken uit originele slavenverhalen gebruiken of heruitvinden om de effecten van de slavernij in het heden te benadrukken.

Een terugkerend thema in *neo-slave narratives* zijn magische of bovennatuurlijke elementen die worden verweven in een verder realistisch ogend verhaal. Ze worden geschreven in het genre magisch realisme, een term waarover al decennia lang wordt gesproken en gedebatteerd door bijvoorbeeld Alejo Carpentier, Lois Parkinson Zamora en Wendy B. Faris, en Amaryll Chanady.

Deze scriptie bekijkt twee *neo-slave narratives* in het genre magisch realisme (Toni Morrison's *Beloved* en Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*) en analyseert het gebruik van de magische of bovennatuurlijke elementen in de romans.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, magic realism, neo-slave narratives, trauma studies, cryptonymy

Acknowledgements

I buried this thesis in a crypt. Not literally, of course. I will explain what it means later. All I can say right now is that I have never doubted any theory less than I have Jacques Derrida's theory on how crypts affect language. The process of writing this thesis was definitely a challenge. Talking about it turned into one as well.

I sincerely want to thank the people that forced me to confront this crypt. I want to thank family, who helped find my train of thought again after it went hopelessly off-track. I want to thank my friends, both old and new, who agreed to read my drafts and were there for me with advice and kind words of motivation and support. Finally, I want to thank my supervisor Prof. Dr. Michael Boyden for putting up with my breakdowns in zoom calls and late e-mails. Or for correcting draft after draft full of typos because I wrote it on a laptop with a broken keyboard. This thesis would have been a mess without him.

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INTRODUCTION

The Inciting Incident for this Research

Throughout 2022, American parents were warned against the presence of controversial, radical books in their children’s school libraries. PEN America, an organisation defending literature and human rights, reports that this is the cause of advocacy organisations that have demanded certain books to be removed from schools because of their subject material.¹ A snapshot of the months of July and June reveals that, of the 1,648 unique book titles banned, 21% dealt with issues of race and racism. 41% featured protagonists or prominent secondary characters of colour.² Among the ‘controversial’ books are literary classics such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Glenn Youngkin, who successfully ran for Virginia governor in 2022, even went as far as to sponsor a campaign advertisement criticising the book specifically. The video featured a concerned mother who was appalled that her son was given ‘explicit material’ as a reading assignment.³

¹ Jonathan Friedman and Nadine Farid Johnson, “Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Ban Books in Schools,” PEN America, September 19, 2022, <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>.

² Friedman and Farid Johnson.

³ *Laura Murphy - McAuliffe Shut Us Out (:60)*, YouTube (YouTube, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDB4eLc5rfo>.

More recently, in January 2023, teachers and librarians in Florida were told by the government of Ron DeSantis to remove all books from their classrooms until they could be vetted.⁴ Earlier this month, Ron DeSantis also banned Black History classes and African-American Studies AP courses.⁵ These measures enforce the national amnesia surrounding the history and effects of slavery in the United States, which authors of slave narratives and neo-slave narratives have been trying to bring to light.

Thomas Laqueur writes that '[t]he United States sometimes seems to be committed to amnesia' when it comes to its violent, racist history.⁶ However, the topic of slavery cannot be omitted from its national literature. Timothy Spaulding asserts that '[s]lavery resonates in the entire oeuvre of African American literature'⁷ from the very slave narratives published in the 1760s to recent works by contemporary African American authors. Original Antebellum slave narratives contain books such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frederick Douglas' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*. These texts are an account of the lives of (formerly) enslaved people, either written or orally related by the enslaved person. These slave narratives directly influenced the fight to abolish slavery in the United States by giving their white readership a direct account of the cruelties of slavery during a time when it was still legal. Contemporary authors of so-called *neo-slave narratives* address the legacy of slavery by

⁴ Richard Hall, "'I've Never Seen Anything like It': Florida Teachers Strip Classroom Shelves of Books in Response to DeSantis Ban," *Independent*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/ron-desantis-book-bans-florida-b2270116.html>.

⁵ Jelani Cobb, "Ron DeSantis Battles the African American A.P. Course—and History," *The New Yorker*, January 29, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/02/06/ron-desantis-battles-the-african-american-ap-course-and-history>.

⁶ Thomas Laqueur, "Lynched for Drinking from a White Man's Well," *London Review of Books* 40, no. 19 (October 11, 2018): pp. 11-15, <https://doi.org/https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n19/thomas-laqueur/lynched-for-drinking-from-a-white-man-s-well>, 11.

⁷ A. Timothy Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 1.

reinventing the slave experience. Their novels compel the reader to re-examine American history and keep it and its legacy in the present and alive.

Slave narratives and their modern counterpart, the neo-slave narratives, constitute their own genres in the history of American literature. Spaulding, along with many other literary analysts, has noted in neo-slave narratives the common occurrence of elements out of line with Western rationalism and realism. Among these texts that ‘reject the boundaries of narrative realism’ are, for example, Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), James McBride’s *Song Yet Sung* (2008), and Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *The Water Dancer* (2019).⁸ The texts in this thesis (*Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad*) also fit within this category. The way slavery is being told has been redefined by these ‘subjective, fantastic, and anti-realistic’ representations of slavery.⁹

This thesis will examine neo-slave narrative from the mode of magical realism, a mode that is characterised by duality and the interplay between two ways of thinking: the ‘rational’ and the ‘supernatural’. The discourse of magical realism has often been criticised for exoticising or othering marginalised communities and their belief systems. As Jenni Adams states:

magic realism as ‘ex-centric’, in its potential alignment of ‘magic’ with indigenous culture, may be considered problematic in its positioning of the Other as marvellous and exotic¹⁰

It merits mentioning then, that this thesis uses terms such as *magical*, *supernatural*, and *fantastical* meaning ‘not aligning with Western empirical thought’ and does not intend to question the validity of these different belief systems. If anything, magical realism as it was re-invented by Latin American critics has made the mode capable of accommodating these alternative perspectives and gives them equal status next to Western empiricism. The mode’s

⁸ Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 1.

⁹ Spaulding, 2.

¹⁰ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 13-14.

main focus is intertwining the magical/fantastical/supernatural with the realistic/empirical/rational, creating a paradoxical tension in the text that is not resolved. This, in turn, creates a space in which the reader can re-evaluate the truth behind both modes of thinking.

Thesis Question and Scope

This thesis will examine the question: why do Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead use magical realism in their neo-slave narratives *Beloved* (1987) and *The Underground Railroad* (2016) respectively?

These novels are both highly successful, critically acclaimed novels from different periods of history and can be representative of their respective time periods. The analysis portions of this thesis will focus on these two novels, but the theories about the purpose of magical realism in neo-slave narratives will be more broadly applicable to the genre.

I will analyse how these novels challenge the dominant Western culture, and the ways these two authors use magical realist elements to portray trauma. To answer why and how *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad* use magical realism, this thesis will first attempt to define magical realism – a highly debated term for many decades – and give more information on magical realism's connection to post-colonialism, slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, and trauma theory.

Hypothesis

I hypothesise that the reason behind the use of magical realism in neo-slave narratives, including *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad* is twofold. Firstly, magical realism provides authors of marginalised communities with the tools to question the dominance of Western modes of thinking. They can, for example, show that Western empirical thinking and Western historiography do not align with the way marginalised communities experience that history. Secondly, I hypothesise that these authors use magical realism to address the legacy of slavery and show how this trauma of slavery still affects the present. Morrison and Whitehead then use magic realism to create a distance in their work that makes that trauma approachable instead of overwhelming, so that readers can work through it.

Methodology

For the analysis of trauma in *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad*, I will be using books with literary analyses in Holocaust studies such as Jenni Adams's *Magic Realism in Holocaust Studies* (2011) and Gabriele Schwab's *Haunting Legacies* (2010). I will specifically be focusing on the presence of crypts in both novels. The theory of cryptonymy, as defined by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, will show how transgenerational trauma and its suppression affects characters within the novel and shows how these novels become 'transformational objects' that help the descendants of slavery and the Black community heal from the legacy of slavery. While analyses of trauma in both novels have been made before, there are still theories in Holocaust studies that can be adapted to serve *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad*. For example, I have not yet seen any analysis for Denver as a replacement child in *Beloved*. *The*

Underground Railroad has also not been explored fully yet and there is still a lot of room for analyses that explore, for example, cryptonymy in the novel.

Order of Information and Literature Review

In the first two chapters, I will explain the main concepts I will need for my analysis of the two novels: magical realism, neo-slave narratives, and trauma studies (cryptonymy in particular). First, I will give a more thorough explanation of the definition of magical realism I will be using for these analyses to provide a clear definition from the start. This will be the definition mapped out by Amaryll Chanady in *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (1985), which is a definition a lot of critics have agreed on since Chanady's book's publication. Then, I will attempt to briefly explain the history of magical realism as a term. The discourse around magical realism and its proper definition has been going for decades but, using Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris's anthology *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), I will go over the main events and contributors in magical realism's history, including Novalis, Franz Roh, Alejo Carpentier, and Amaryll Chanady. I will continue by explaining the ties between magical realism and post-colonial thinking, using Christopher Warnes's *Magical Realism and the Postcolonialism Novel* (2009).

In the second chapter, I will go into more detail on the definition of slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, and trauma studies. For this, I will mainly be using Ashraf Rushdy's work *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999). Then, I will explain the concepts of trauma studies that I think are important for my analyses of the two neo-slave narratives, namely: replacement children, cryptonymy, transgenerational trauma, and transformational objects. For this, I will need the work of academics in Holocaust studies and

trauma theory, such as Jenni Adams's *Magic Realism in Holocaust Studies* (2011), Gabriele Schwab's *Haunting Legacies* (2010), and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's works on cryptonymy *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994) and *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (2005). The theory on cryptonymy, particularly as it pertains to language, will be supported by Jacques Derrida.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - MAGICAL REALISM

Defining Magical Realism: A Difficult Task

For decades, there has been a lot of debate over what magical realism is supposed to be and what it does. Matei Calinescu calls magical realism ‘a major, perhaps *the* major, component of postmodern fiction.’¹¹ It has become a popular term in the literary world, appearing in academic texts, the press, and it is used by the marketing industry to sell fantasy novels such as JRR Tolkien’s or JK Rowling’s. Some critics, such as Jean Franco, say magical realism is ‘little more than a brand name for exoticism.’¹² It is a mistake to dismiss magical realism as such, according to Jo Langdon, who reports that ‘the mode is easily and frequently misconstrued’ as just ‘an exoticist commodity designed for a Western marketplace that wants to escape into fantasies or mysterious, non-Western places.’¹³ It is perhaps easier to state what magical realism is *not* than it is to find a concise, agreed upon definition. This thesis will by no means be able to bring that debate to a definitive close, but an attempt to describe the confusion will be made in order to at least come to a working definition of the term.

This thesis will use Amaryll Chanady’s *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* as its starting point in defining magical realism. Chanady states that the concept of magical realism is ‘extremely vague’ and has been used throughout history to ‘[refer] to three distinct activities – pictorial art, the expression of a national literature, and

¹¹ Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

¹² Jean Franco, “What’s Left of the Intelligentsia.” in *Critical Passions: Selected Essays*. Ed. Mary Louise Pratt and Kathleen Newman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), quoted in Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism*, 1.

¹³ Jo Langdon, “Magical Realism and Experiences of Extremity,” *Losing the Plot - Tangling with Narrative Complexity* 1, no. 3 (December 2011): pp. 14-24, <https://doi.org/https://ro.uow.edu.au/currentnarratives/vol1/iss3/4>, 15.

literary criticism' that have no true relationship of continuity between them.¹⁴ The history of these three different 'magical realisms' will be explained in more detail. This thesis will first focus on Chanady's explanation of magical realism in literature to avoid additional confusion. In magical realist literature, she states that there are three characteristics that separate the magical realist genre from other closely related genres such as science-fiction or legends. These three characteristics will be explained in detail and can serve as a guideline for identifying magical realism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and, from there, the thesis will try to illustrate why neo-slave narratives, Morrison and Whitehead in particular, use this narrative mode.

Defining Magical Realism: Amaryll Chanady's Three Characteristics of Magical Realism

According to Chanady, the three main characteristics of magical realist texts are: the presence of the natural and the supernatural, the emphasis on antinomy in the fictitious world, and authorial reticence.¹⁵ These characteristics deserve a more thorough explanation.

Firstly, the text must display two 'different levels of reality, the natural and the supernatural.'¹⁶ One level is in accordance with empirical, rational thinking. The other is in accordance with superstition or myth.

Secondly, the presence of both levels simultaneously must make 'the reader [hesitate] between accepting an apparently supernatural event, and finding a rational explanation.'¹⁷ The

¹⁴ Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York, NY: Garland, 1985), 30.

¹⁵ Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 175.

¹⁶ Chanady, 22.

reader does not necessarily have to believe in the supernatural but they must believe that the supernatural event is real to the characters of the fictitious world. By relating to the characters in this way, the reader must temporarily adopt a new way of thinking that 'differ[s] from our rational way of thinking.'¹⁸ The representation of both the realistic and the fantastic must be consistent and the narrator must be believable because neither explanation can eclipse the other in the text. Both codes must be developed to the point that they seem equally acceptable by the end of the novel:

If there is insufficient realistic detail, the story tends towards the fairy tale or other types of pure fantasy. If the supernatural does not constitute a coherent code, it is perceived as out of place or absurd, or as a dream or hallucination within a realistic narrative.¹⁹

The simultaneous acceptance of magic and realism is what Chanady calls antinomy, 'the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes in the text.'²⁰

Thirdly, Chanady explains that a certain degree of authorial reticence is necessary to keep this antinomy unresolved:

authorial reticence serves to maintain the ambiguity of an event, object or situation throughout the narrative, and prevents the reader from resolving the antinomy between the natural and the supernatural.²¹

Divulging too much information on the supernatural event, for example, would cause the world to '[transform] into one that could be defined by a new set of norms' that would establish a 'logical framework' which would destroy the antinomy of the text.²² Because of authorial

¹⁷ Chanady, 23.

¹⁸ Chanady, 55.

¹⁹ Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 70.

²⁰ Chanady, 35.

²¹ Chanady, 135.

²² Chanady, 29.

reticence, the author can refrain from authenticating either the mystical or the realistic explanation, and therefore forces the reader to accept both.

Defining Magical Realism: *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad* as a quick case-study of Chanady's Characteristics

Both *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad* conform Chanady's description, which will be elaborated upon later.

Right from the start of *Beloved*, the presence of ghosts is naturalised in the novel. Based on a real story, *Beloved* is grounded in realism. However, the presence of ghosts throughout the story is treated as a completely normal occurrence. Even more, it is to be expected. Grandma Baby Suggs tells the main character Sethe that

Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil.²³

Baby Suggs's statement makes it clear that the presence of ghosts is a widespread occurrence all over the country, or at least in Black households. Paul D, a visitor, is not phased at all when they tell him the house is haunted. Instead, he casually remarks that it '[r]eminds [him] of that headless bride back behind Sweet Home. Remember that, Sethe? Used to roam them woods regular.'²⁴

²³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, NY: Vintage Classics, 2004), 5.

²⁴ Morrison, 13.

The second characteristic, the antinomy between the natural and supernatural is still not resolved by the end of the novel. Characters still ask each other if Beloved, Sethe's dead daughter and the woman who showed up at their doorstep were one and the same. Some aspects of her character point towards that explanation, other dispute it. Denver, Sethe's second daughter, is unsure. When Paul D asks her if Beloved was her sister, she answers: "At times. At times I think she was-- more."²⁵ The true nature of Beloved remains a mystery and neither the code of the supernatural or the natural is privileged over the other.

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* blends elements of the mythical, historical, and the realistic in order to re-write the story of American history. In this book, Whitehead turns the semi-historical, semi-mythical story of the historical Underground Railroad from a secret network of safe houses and abolitionists into a literal train. The characters move from station to station, ending up in anachronous moments of American history, all connected by a seemingly impossible underground railway. The nature of these tunnels is never explained and neither is the way they seem to be able to transport Cora and Caesar through time. The characters seem to accept the impossibility of the tunnel existing without much convincing. Nor do they question the different setting they end up in. Of course, this could be because they, as formerly enslaved people, have no way of knowing what the world outside of the plantation is supposed to look like and therefore they do not question the existence of sky scrapers, for example. However, other characters also do not question their situations.

"And if you get lost, just head for that"—he pointed at the skyscraping wonder—"and make a right when you hit Main Street." He would contact them when he had more information.

²⁵ Morrison, 266.

Caesar and Cora made their way up the dusty road into town, unbelieving. A buggy rounded the turn and the pair nearly dove into the woods. The driver was a colored boy who tipped his cap in a jaunty fashion. Nonchalant, as if it were nothing.²⁶

The supernatural in *The Underground Railroad* is ultimately naturalised either way. The reader never gets any logical explanation for the time travel or the existence of the railroad and the antinomy is thus never resolved.

Defining Magical Realism: The History of the Term

Amaryll Chanady focuses on the antinomy between the natural and the supernatural in her definition of magical realism. To better understand the importance of antinomy in particular, it is best to take a closer look at the history of magical realism as a term. Magical realism's history has always been concerned with the oxymoronic interplay between the natural and the supernatural. Historically, there have been many different interpretations of magical realism, spread across multiple fields of study. Antinomy is one of the things these definitions seem to have in common.

In 1798, Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, the German poet and philosopher known by his pen-name Novalis, first coined the term magical realism. Novalis described 'two kinds of prophet who might live outside the boundaries of enlightened discourse without losing touch with the real' and named them the *magischer Idealist* (magical idealist) and the *magischer Realist* (magical realist).²⁷ According to Novalis, the magical realist was someone who could 'integrate ordinary phenomena and magical meanings.'²⁸ Novalis' explanation of magic realism

²⁶ Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (London: Fleet, 2016), 112.

²⁷ Warnes, *Magical Realism*, 20.

²⁸ Irene Guenther, "Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts During the Weimar Republic," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Zamora Lois Parkinson and Faris Wendy B. Durham and London:

was never developed further. He focused more on magical idealism. However, his definition already shows the importance of the simultaneous presence of and interplay between Empirical thinking and the supernatural.

In 1925, the term re-appeared in the work of the German art critic Franz Roh. Roh originally used the term to describe a post-expressionist art style. It was meant to describe the way paintings of that time combined realism and expressionism to show the hidden secrets and deeper meanings behind ordinary scenes by dissecting them and presenting them in a new, unfamiliar way.²⁹ Magical realism never caught on in the art world but the first hints of antinomy are again present in this definition, although Roh is more concerned with *representing* the unfamiliar instead of *believing* in it. Roh's definition deals with the familiar and the unfamiliar, and the ways the familiar can become a gateway to representing the unfamiliar.

Defining Magical Realism: The History of the Term and its Connection with Post-Colonialism

In 1927, the term magical realism became literary when José Ortega y Gasset published a Spanish translation of Roh's text in the literary magazine *Revista de Occidente*. The term was then picked up by Latin American literary analysts and subsequently became highly influential in Latin American cultural movements around the 1940s. The term magical realism was introduced at exactly the right time to have had this large of an impact, Kenneth Reeds explains.

Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 33–73, quoted in Kenneth Reeds, "Magical Realism: A Problem of Definition," *Neophilologus* 90, no. 2 (2006): pp. 175-196, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-005-4228-z>, 176-177.

²⁹ Reeds, "Magical Realism," 177-178.

It was a time where Latin America was looking for its own cultural identity and there was 'increased interest in a new kind of writing unifying the continent.'³⁰

One of the most influential Latin American critics was Alejo Carpentier, who further established magical realism as 'inherent in Latin American nature and culture'.³¹ He 'devise[d] his own term, *lo real maravilloso Americano*',³² which he described as 'a uniquely American form of magical realism'.³³ In Carpentier's *real maravilloso*,

the fantastic inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place, where improbable juxtapositions and marvellous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demography, and politics.³⁴

Similarly to Chanady's definition, Carpentier's *real maravilloso* again focuses on the interplay between the marvellous or supernatural and the real but he connects the mode explicitly to Latin American culture. Carpentier had recognised Latin America's move away from European influences but

believed the fantastic was not to be discovered undermining or surpassing reality with theoretical structures and manufactured images ... Instead, he argued, it was natural to Latin America ... that unlikely combinations of events occurred producing marvelous results.³⁵

This constitutes the biggest change from Roh's definition to Carpentier's: believing *lo real maravilloso* requires faith and the ability to see the magical in reality. Carpentier believes that the magical exists in reality, while Roh only concerned himself with how the magical might be *represented* through the use of simple, ordinary objects.

³⁰ Reeds, 181.

³¹ Alejo Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real in America," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 75-88.

³² Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(Ie)s," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 1-11, 7.

³³ Carpentier, 75.

³⁴ Carpentier, 75.

³⁵ Reeds, "Magical Realism," 182.

Lois Parkinson Zamora notes that there is a certain double-vision going on in *lo real maravilloso*: the characters in *real maravilloso* novels must 'select one or another of the contradictory meanings according to their own cultural positioning', but 'the reader must envision them all at once.'³⁶ *Lo real maravilloso* requires faith, the ability to see the magical in reality, one which is strongly tied to Latin American culture. Thus, the concept of magical realism moves away from European definitions and towards a magical realism that is more broadly applicable to other cultures. As magical realism became more popular in Latin America, it eventually spread to other countries, where magical realism was a tool used to explore the ways 'marvelous results' were produced in different cultures in which 'people were looking to analyze traditional ways of living' in hybrid cultures.³⁷ Peter Hinchcliffe and Ed Jewinski's book is an example of this. Their book on Canadian magical realism indicates that magical realism had departed from purely Latin American context and was moving towards examining hybrid cultures in general.

Stephen Slemon states that 'magic realism, as a socially symbolic contract, carries a residuum of resistance towards the imperial center' and that the term '[signifies] resistance to monumental theories of literary practice.'³⁸ Colonisation is, after all, not simply fixed by replacing a country's ruling force or government. A large part of colonisation is psychological and has to do with the colonised taking over the values of the coloniser. The colonised's culture, in turn, became devalued in the eyes of its own people. One way this devaluation is noticeable is

³⁶ Lois Parkinson Zamora. "Swords and Silver Rings: Magical Objects in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garc a Marquez," in *A Companion to Magical Realism*. Eds. Stephen Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang. (London: Tamesis, 2005), quoted in Reeds, "Magical Realism," 188.

³⁷ Reeds, "Magical Realism," 190.

³⁸ Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 407-426, 408.

in culture's perception of their belief systems. Warnes, using research from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Stanley Tambiah, notes that the magic, religion and science were once all considered to be 'rational attempts to make sense of the world' but '[w]hen the Victorians related magic, religion and science to their cultural contexts, they came up with an evolutionary sequence ... from barbarism to civilization.'³⁹ Since then, people have questioned whether or not this supposed evolutionary sequence holds up. Tambiah, for example, suggests that 'complexes labelled "religion" [, including magic,] and "science"' are 'complementary and coexisting orientations to the world.'⁴⁰ Post-colonial subjects are an excellent example of this being the case: they, according to post-colonial theory, live according to a double consciousness, perceiving the world from both the colonised and coloniser's perspective.

Warnes uses Lévy-Bruhl's terminology and argues that magical realism is representative of an attempt to extend or subvert the 'causal paradigm' (the logical mentality) with the 'participation paradigm' (the mystic mentality). The mystic mentality was ruled by the law of participation, characterised by things such as rituals, myths, and continuity in space and time. The logical mentality was ruled by the law of causality, which was rational and empirical. Warnes believes that, in modern times, the 'causal paradigm', has triumphed over the 'participation paradigm' but magical realism responds to this imbalance by 'supplement[ing], extend[ing] or overwhelm[ing]' the discourse of science. He believes that the discourse of science and rationality 'has been too limited by preconceptions and prejudices born of the circumstances of its development from the early modern period.'⁴¹ Moreover, for post-colonial

³⁹ Warnes, *Magical Realism*, 9.

⁴⁰ Stanley Tambiah, "Form and Meaning of Magical Acts." in *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1985), 60–86. quoted in Warnes, *Magical Realism*, 10.

⁴¹ Warnes, *Magical Realism*, 11-12.

writers, 'it [the causal paradigm] is tainted by its association with colonialism and neo-colonialism'.⁴²

As a postcolonial response to colonialism's often brutal enforcing of a selectively conceived modernity, magical realism of this kind seeks to reclaim what has been lost: knowledge, values, traditions, ways of seeing, beliefs.⁴³

By challenging the Western focus on science and the empirical method and supplanting it with myths and magic, post-colonial writers can write novels that promote alternative ways of thinking.

Magical realism offers the perspective of an alternative mode of thinking by 'calling upon the reader to suspend rational-empirical judgments about the way things are in favour of an expanded order of reality'.⁴⁴ As Anne Hegerfeldt explains:

magic realism functions to question realism's claim to a transparent representation of reality, thereby undermining its position as the privileged discursive mode of Western rationalism and '[foregrounding] the possibility of alternative forms of experience, knowledge and truth'.⁴⁵

Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris believe that the concepts of 'in-betweenness' and 'all-at-onceness' can foster opposition to dominant political and cultural systems, ' [making] the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures' because they are a 'counter to conventional hierarchies in its presentation of a conflict that cannot be hierarchically resolved'.⁴⁶

⁴² Warnes, 12

⁴³ Warnes, *Magical Realism*, 12.

⁴⁴ Warnes, 12.

⁴⁵ Anne C. Hegerfeldt, *Lies that Tell the Truth: Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005,) quoted in Jenni Adams, *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature: Troping the Traumatic Real* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 12.

⁴⁶ Zamora and Faris, "Introduction," 6.

Stephen Slemon notes that this magical realism has aligned itself with cultures that are ‘on the fringes of mainstream literary traditions.’⁴⁷ These authors are writing back from the margins, challenging dominant Western ideologies, and priming their readers into accepting different worldviews and realities.

In this way, magic realism can serve as a tool to create counter narratives. Counter narratives can take many forms, such as rewriting history from the perspective of marginalised groups, or depicting the lives and experiences of those who have been excluded from mainstream narratives. These theories can all be applied to *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad*, both neo-slave counter narratives written from the point of view of the enslaved protagonists.

⁴⁷ Slemon, “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse,” 408.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - ORIGINAL SLAVE NARRATIVES, NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES AND TRAUMA STUDIES

This thesis will now go into more detail on the original slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, and the latter's connection to magical realism. Then, this thesis will give more information on relevant topics in trauma theory, such as: transgenerational trauma, cryptonymy, and transformational objects. This will show how slavery continues to affect contemporary authors. This contributes to my hypothesis that the authors of neo-slave narratives use magical realism to work through trauma and enable others to do so as well.

Original Slave Narratives

The history of African American authors began with the first slave narratives in the eighteenth century and contained the biographical accounts of the life of fugitive or former enslaved people that were either written or orally related by the enslaved persons themselves. Slave narratives are one of the most impactful genres in American literature and the history of the United States.

Slave narratives were produced and disseminated in order to make white Northern audiences aware of the horrors of slavery and to make them active participants in the Abolitionist movement.⁴⁸ The texts were meant to prove that people of African descent were ‘fully human’ by showing, for example, that they were capable of writing poetry. For so long, slave holders had

⁴⁸ Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “Slavery Represented,” *American Literary History* 23, no. 2 (2011): pp. 423-434, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajr003>, 423.

thought enslaved people to be of inferior intelligence and slavery had stripped enslaved people of their humanity that this was something white people needed to be convinced of.

Thus, slave narratives are counter narratives because they challenge the dominant societal narrative that enslaved people were not inferior or somehow less than human. They also challenge the dominant history by providing firsthand accounts of enslaved individuals about the reality of slavery.

Christopher Mulvey believes that slave narratives, as well as neo-slave narratives after them, have always had to deal with the question of authenticity.⁴⁹ It was very important that the author and events in the book were considered authentic. Despite slave narratives being autobiographical, Mulvey states that '[t]he border between fact and fiction is a broad territory, not a dividing line.'⁵⁰ The authorship of several slave narratives is unknown and authors borrowed from each other heavily.⁵¹ The original slave narratives might have some fictional elements, in line with magical realism; things that are not 'factual' can still hold truth.

Of the roughly five hundred known pre-Civil War slave narratives, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) was one of the first to become influential. It provided a model for later slave narratives, which mostly follow a formulaic, 'invariant', and 'repetitive' pattern, according to James Olney.⁵² He lists some of the characteristics of the original slave narrative such as: some variant of a "Written by Himself" claim, testimonials 'by a white abolitionist friend ... or by a white amanuensis/editor/author', a bondage to freedom story

⁴⁹ Christopher Mulvey, "Freeing the Voice, Creating the Self: the Novel and Slavery," in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham (New York and Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 17-33, 17.

⁵⁰ Mulvey, 17.

⁵¹ Mulvey, 17-8.

⁵² James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo*, no. 20 (1984): pp. 46-73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930678>, 46.

that starts with the sentence “I was born ...”, and an appendix validating the story’s truthful account.⁵³ A lot of these overlapping characteristics between different slave narratives have to do with the question of authenticity: slave narratives had to be factual. Or, at least, people at the time needed to believe they were. However, the formulaic format of slave narratives simultaneously calls that authenticity into question. As Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Lima point out, ‘slave narrators often took great liberties in the telling of their ... stories ... shaping their narratives in such a manner as to produce the greatest political and emotional effect.’⁵⁴ . Readers and historians might lament the partial loss of historical fact or the loss of authenticity of these slave narratives because of fictional elements or similarities. However, it is important to remember that these people had the right ‘to have some authority in constructing the version of their lives they wished known.’⁵⁵

There may, however, be other reasons as to why these slave narratives were less than strictly authentic. These are reasons that have less to do with the author’s personal choice of what to retell and more with the presence of the white abolitionist editor . The editor's contributions to the text were meant to convince the white reader of the factuality of the story. However, despite being used as a tool to authenticate the formally enslaved author’s story, the presence of a white editor calls the authenticity into question as well. Abolitionists may have edited or co-authored slave narratives to make them more appealing to white readers or more politically effective. It results in paragraphs in which, for example, the narrator shields the audience from the worst recollections by claiming events are too painful to recall, or paragraphs detailing the enslaved subject’s journey to Christianity. Of course, these paragraphs may have

⁵³ Olney, “‘I Was Born,’ 50-51.

⁵⁴ Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Helena Lima, “The Power of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre,” *Callaloo* 41, no. 1 (2018): pp. 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2018.0000>, 1.

⁵⁵ Anim-Addo and Lima, 1.

been left out by the author themselves, but, as Anim-Addo and Lima believe, it is a combination of both ‘compromises to white audiences’ and ‘self-masking from a painful past’ that leaves gaps in the stories of original slave narratives.⁵⁶

Neo-slave narratives

Authors of neo-slave narratives are no longer forced to adhere to the expectations of authenticity in the same way the original slave narratives had to. While in the original slave narratives, the veracity of a text was assumed by the author’s ‘personal and authoritative experience’, the authors of neo-slave narratives find new ways to ‘establish the veracity of their texts.’⁵⁷ Authors such as Toni Morrison, for example, believe that the true account of history has been left out of both traditional historiography and original slave narratives. Morrison writes that she intended to ‘fill in the blanks that the slave narrative left’, especially the parts pertaining to the ‘interior life of slaves.’⁵⁸ The term ‘neo-slave narrative’ originated with Bernard W. Bell’s analysis of Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966). Bell defined neo-slave narratives as ‘residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom’.⁵⁹ Bell’s definition has been expanded on since then and has come to include a more diverse set of works. Ashraf Rushdy, one of the most influential academics studying neo-slave narratives, describes writing neo-slave narrative as ‘fiction in which a contemporary African American character is forced to adopt a bi-temporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuities from the period of slavery’ in which ‘the present is always written against a background where the past is erased but still

⁵⁶ Anim-Addo and Lima, “The Power,” 1-2.

⁵⁷ Sherryl Vint, “‘Only by Experience’: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives,” *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (July 2007): pp. 241-261, 244.

⁵⁸ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Knowlton Zinsser, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp. 83-102, 93-94.

⁵⁹ Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Univ of Massachusetts Press, Year: 1989, 289.

visible.’⁶⁰ Rushdy identifies three major forms a neo-slave narrative can take: the third person historical novel of slavery, the first person account in the words of the enslaved person themselves, and novels that focus on the traumatic legacy of slavery on later generations.⁶¹ Sheryll Vint, however, argues against this strict definition of neo-slave narratives, writing that ‘[Ashraf Rushdy’s] schema separates historical novels from those that trace the continued effects of slavery into the present and neglects the importance of the fantastic.’⁶² This thesis will not be using Rushdy’s typology for this reason, despite his prevalence in the academic field of neo-slave narratives. Forcing magical realist novels such as Morrison’s or Whitehead’s into one category cannot do the work justice and the emphasis on ‘historical’ neo-slave narratives is too limiting because it enforces the Western empirical idea that history and the fantastic are mutually exclusive. Timothy A. Spaulding offers a more general approach for the use of the term ‘neo-slave narratives’, which he uses to refer to

contemporary texts that deal with slavery in its historical contexts ... through its resonance in our contemporary moment ... or through a reinvention of the formal characteristics of the original slave narratives.⁶³

Spaulding’s more general definition of the neo-slave narratives make room for texts such as *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad*, who fall under more than one category in Rushdy’s typology as both Morrison and Whitehead’s works are third-person accounts of slavery that *also* trace its legacy into the present.

Rushdy credits the emergence of neo-slave narratives to the rise of political movements in the 1960s, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, which

⁶⁰ Ashraf Rushdy, *The Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), quoted in Anim-Addo and Lima, "The Power," 4.

⁶¹ Ashraf Rushdy, *The Neo-Slave Narrative*, 95.

⁶² Vint, ““Only by Experience,”” 241.

⁶³ Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 1.

‘raise[d] anew questions about race and racial identity, literature, and literary history, texts and intertextuality.’⁶⁴ He notes that the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power movement resulted in historians seeing the ‘possibility of revising their vision of the past and write history “from the bottom up.”’⁶⁵ Spaulding adds that postmodern writers of neo-slave narratives also questioned the ‘historical and fictional representations that rely on claims of verisimilitude.’⁶⁶ The genre of neo-slave narratives specifically addressed the ‘gaps and misrepresentations of dominant history through narrative’.⁶⁷ Here, the concept of counter narratives is useful again. Most academics agree with writer Sherley Anne Williams that the Black Power Movement has given authors the ‘pride and perspective necessary to pierce the myths and lies that have grown up around the antebellum period’ and gave Black authors the ‘authority to tell it as we felt it.’⁶⁸ Fiction became a way to fill in the gaps of history and magical realism in particular was a helpful genre to do so.

Rushdy notes the ‘generational continuity’ Walker’s *Jubilee* had to the original slave narratives: Walker based her novel on her great-grandmother’s stories which have been passed on to her. Rushdy believes that Walker’s novel is an anomaly, though, as later generations of Black writers are ‘not so directly connected to the people or the institution they were writing about in their novels.’⁶⁹ However, they still write about slavery to show how it continues into the present. The lack of connection may be explained as ‘most colonial testimonies of slavery have disappeared from the working memory of today’s Black Atlantic societies’, as Lars Eckstein

⁶⁴ Ashraf Rushdy, *The Neo-Slave Narrative*, 7.

⁶⁵ Rushdy, 88.

⁶⁶ Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 21.

⁶⁷ Anim-Addo and Lima, “The Power,” 4.

⁶⁸ Sherley Anne Williams, “The Lion’s History: The GhettoWrites B[l]ack,” in Eugene Genovese, *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), quoted in Ashraf Rushdy, “The neo-slave narrative,” 89.

Ashraf Rushdy, *The Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), quoted in Anim-Addo and Lima, “The Power,” 4.

⁶⁹ Rushdy, 88.

writes, ‘but the prejudice and stereotypes they conveyed have not.’⁷⁰ Magical realist elements such as time-travel in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* or temporal anomalies in Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* offer writers a way to write about the lasting effects of slavery and acknowledge the ways in which it still affects Black communities today.

The Neo-Slave Narratives and their Connection to Magical Realism

Timothy Spaulding mentions that the writers of neo-slave narratives attempt to simultaneously address the gaps left behind in official history while also critiquing traditional, Western historiography’s ‘reliance on objectivity, authenticity, and realism.’⁷¹ Magical realism’s ties to post-colonial literatures have made it an attractive mode for many diasporic writers to explore their history, myths, and cultural legacy, as Laura Alonso Gallo explains.⁷² Homi Bhabha, using research by Frantz Fanon, believes that the construction of ‘the people’s history’ is

a practice that destroys the constant principles of the national culture that attempt to hark back to a “true” national past, which is often represented in the reified forms of realism and stereotype.⁷³

While traditional Western history is represented by realism, the history of the margins and minorities is represented by the imaginary and the magical. Many authors with hybrid cultures, such as authors in the African-American community, use elements of the fantastic to pay respect to their ancestor's culture. They show how this culture's values differ from dominant Western

⁷⁰ Lars Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: on the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*. (Rodopi, 2006), quoted in Anim-Addo, "The Power," 5.

⁷¹ Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 2.

⁷² Laura P. Alonso Gallo, “Discourses on Transcultural Nations: Latino/a Literary Rewritings of Caribbean History,” in *American Mirrors: (Self)Reflections and (Self)Distortions*, ed. López Lique Felisa (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 2003), quoted in María Alonso Alonso, “Marvellous Realism and Female Representation from the Caribbean Diaspora,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47, no. 1 (March 2012): pp. 59-71, 69.

⁷³ Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).

ones. This all relates back to magical realism's critiques of Western empiricism and the combination of the magical and the realistic. As Christopher Warnes notes, the magical realist narrative creates a smooth blend of these different cultures.⁷⁴ Neo-slave narratives such as Morrison's and Whitehead's are postmodern slave narratives that 'force us to question the ideologies embedded within 'realistic' representation of slavery in traditional history and historical fiction'⁷⁵

Magical realism is thus a way to undermine the idea of factual historiography, Western empiricism, and a way to continue writing novels about slavery even when the direct connection writers have to the institution of slavery is weakening. However, Jenni Adams, in a book on Holocaust literature, notes that there may be another reason behind the use of magical realism in novels. She writes that:

Magic realism, I suggest, offers an important strategy in attempts to continue the project of Holocaust representation into the post-testimonial era, permitting a form of literary engagement with these events that nevertheless acknowledges its ethical and experiential distance from the real.⁷⁶

Adams' book focuses on the ways in which events from violent histories such as the Holocaust can be reconstructed by later generations in a 'postmemorial perspective'. Violent histories leave a lasting trauma on later generations and it is important that this trauma is addressed and worked through.

⁷⁴ Warnes, *Magical Realism*, 15

⁷⁵ Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 2.

⁷⁶ Jenni Adams, *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature: Troping the Traumatic Real* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-2/

Trauma Theory:

Trauma Studies' Beginnings

Trauma was first diagnosed by Sigmund Freud in soldiers who returned from World War I. Freud suggests that there might be a gap between the conscious and unconscious of traumatised people that results in 'latency', the suppression of memories that can be triggered later.⁷⁷ Freud describes trauma itself as a 'pattern of suffering [...] in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have gone through them'.⁷⁸ People suffering from trauma, as Freud describes it, are subjected to these painful repetitions that are entirely outside of their control.

Transgenerational Hauntings and Magical Realism

Freud's definition, especially the part in which he claims that trauma can only occur when people have experienced something traumatic for themselves, has been the topic of much debate. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok argue that trauma can transplant itself onto a next generation like a phantom that continues to haunt the living.⁷⁹ The concept of haunting is inextricably tied to the Derridean concept of 'hauntology', the 'dark double of ontology'.⁸⁰ Christine Berthin describes Derridean hauntology thusly:

⁷⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (Letchworth: The Hogarth Press, 1939), 109-110.

⁷⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), Epub, 6.4/253.

⁷⁹ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 181.

⁸⁰ Christine Berthin, *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 3.

it deconstructs and empties out ontology, being and presence. Neither alive nor dead, the Derridean specter hovers between presence and absence, making it impossible to assign definite meanings to things.⁸¹

Jacques Derrida connects spectres to anachronism and the uncanny:

the specter ... was there without being there. It was not yet there. It will never be there ... without the strange familiarity (*Unheimlichkeit*) of some specter. What is a specter? What is its history and what is its time?⁸²

In this way, spectres and magical realism are connected through the uncanny. Amaryll Chanady explains that the uncanny and magical realism have always been close to one another. Critics such as Todorov have even argued that the uncanny is magical realism's neighbouring genre.⁸³ According to Chanady, the only thing separating the two is that, in the uncanny, the supernatural uneasiness can be explained rationally at the end. However, theories about spectres can thus easily be connected to magical realism, especially the anachronistic elements that Derrida discusses. The magical realist neo-slave narratives of both Morrison and Whitehead show that American society is haunted by a spectre, which manifests itself in the novel as disjointed anachronisms and transmitted traumas.

It becomes increasingly important to understand the concept of post-memory because, in many cases such as in Holocaust literature and Holocaust studies, the situation is 'approaching the end of the testimonial era and Holocaust representation is increasingly taken over by members of the second and third generations.'⁸⁴ In the case of American slavery, we are already in the age of post-memory. The last known surviving American born into slavery died in 1972. Writers of neo-slave narratives, like later generations of Holocaust writers, 'stand in a post-memorial relationship to the experiences of their antecedents' and have to recognise a trauma

⁸¹ Berthin, 3.

⁸² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London, NY: Routledge, 1994), 125.

⁸³ Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 16.

⁸⁴ Jenni Adams, *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature*, 14.

that they did not experience themselves but nevertheless have to work through.⁸⁵ It is what Abraham and Torok refer to as ‘transgenerational haunting’, which

takes the shape of a secret transmitted within a family or a community without being stated because it is associated with repressed guilt, shame, or is the result of a trauma that has not been worked through.⁸⁶

Ashraf Rushdy states that ‘[s]lavery is the family secret of America’, one that continues to haunt the collective psyche of the United States.⁸⁷ It is simultaneously a familial haunting and a national one. Laura Murphy argues that the trauma of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is still felt in the twenty-first century and that the inheritance of this trauma needs to be addressed and analysed.

Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome

Another postcolonial critic that argues for an analysis of the transgenerational trauma of slavery is Joy DeGruy, who calls it the 'Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome':

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today.⁸⁸

She says that descendants of slaves still learn vicariously the practices of individuals and families that survived slavery. These survivors raised their children while they struggled with their own trauma and unconsciously taught their children behaviours that upheld the master/enslaved dynamic of the past. James P Comer writes:

⁸⁵ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York, NY, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012), 103.

⁸⁶ Christine Bertin, *Gothic Hauntings*, 4.

⁸⁷ Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations. Race and Family in Contemporary American Fiction* (Chapel Hill and London: The North Carolina Press, 2003), quoted in Valérie Croisille, *Black American Women's Voices and Transgenerational Trauma: Re(-)Membering in Neo-Slave Narratives* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 1.

⁸⁸ Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Portland, OR: Joy DeGruy Publications Inc., 2005), epub, 197.2/352.

The slave family existed only to serve the master and in order to survive physically, psychologically and socially the slave family had to develop a system which made survival possible under degrading conditions. The slave society prepared the young to accept exploitation and abuse, to ignore the absence of dignity and respect for themselves as blacks.⁸⁹

It is for this reason that the intersection between trauma studies and post-colonialism is important.

While slavery may have ended, the descendants of enslaved people still deal with the trauma that has been unconsciously passed onto them. This is not an issue of the past.

Cryptonomy

Slavery, while ‘one of the cornerstones on which the American economic system has been built’,⁹⁰ has largely been ignored by the American public, aided by, for example, the proposed ban on teaching children about slavery in Texan schools.⁹¹ As historian Thomas Laqueur writes:

The United States sometimes seems to be committed to amnesia, to forgetting its great national sin of chattel slavery and the violence, repression, endless injustices and humiliations that have sustained racial hierarchies since emancipation.⁹²

An understanding of this national amnesia may be found in the field of cryptonymy.

Gabriele Schwab describes the ways parents who have been subjected to violent histories such as slavery will try to bury their traumatic history in a crypt, a ‘psychic tomb’ in which they try to keep ‘an undead ghost’ of their past.⁹³ Abraham describes the crypt as a place 'in which

⁸⁹ James P. Comer, *The Black Family: An Adaptive Perspective*. (Unpublished manuscript, Yale University Study Center, 1980), quoted in Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, epub, 193.3-352.

⁹⁰ Valérie Croisille, *Black American Women's Voices and Transgenerational Trauma: Re(-)Membering in Neo-Slave Narratives* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 1.

⁹¹ Simon Romero, “Texas Pushes to Obscure the State's History of Slavery and Racism,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/20/us/texas-history-1836-project.html>.

⁹² Thomas Laqueur, “Lynched for Drinking from a White Man’s Well,” *London Review of Books*, October 11, 2018, pp. 1-11, <https://doi.org/https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n19/thomas-laqueur/lynched-for-drinking-from-a-white-mans-well>, 1.

⁹³ Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), I.

people bury unspeakable events or unbearable, if not disavowed, losses or injuries during violent histories.⁹⁴ People do this because the act of constantly remembering the violence is too painful and the temptation to forget about it is too large. They may try to bury the traumatic memories, but the memories are ‘undead’ and able to be passed on to their children. Schwab’s theory on intergenerational haunting is based on Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s work on cryptonymy. By ignoring these traumatic memories, the victim is unable to properly mourn, and will therefore not be able to integrate the loss of a person or object into their life, causing their descendants to be ‘haunted by what is buried in this tomb, even if they do not know of its existence or contents and even if the history that produced the ghost is shrouded in silence.’⁹⁵ These unspeakable histories, if buried, remain in the unconsciousness of future generations. The concept of cryptonymy was further elaborated upon by Jacques Derrida, who introduced a linguistic analysis into the theory. Derrida believes that the effects of the crypt can leave ‘linguistic scars of trauma’ that present themselves in the ways of, for example, ‘ruptures, gaps, designifications, and mutilated or invented words.’^{96,97} Books about the trauma of slavery such as Morrison’s and Whitehead’s should, according to Derrida, bear some of these linguistic scars.

Healing From Trauma: Transformational Objects

The way to heal from trauma, according to Abraham and Torok, is through introjection, which is an integration of the loss they have experienced. It needs the traumatised person to accept their trauma and come to peace with it. Incorporation, on the other hand, ‘disavow[s] the loss, thus keeping the object “alive” inside.’⁹⁸ To heal from trauma, one must first break open the

⁹⁴ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies* 1.

⁹⁵ Schwab, 4.

⁹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Fors,” trans. Barbara Johnson, *Georgia Review* 31 (1977), quoted in Schwab, 4.

⁹⁷ Schwab, 33.

⁹⁸ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 1-2.

walls of the crypt in which it is buried. Literature and cryptographic writing especially, functions as a way to heal from violent histories as 'transformational objects' that can '[break] through the walls of silence or the sealed boundaries of a crypt.'⁹⁹ Transformational objects are objects that 'evoke a distant, often unconscious memory of the traumatic event or history.'¹⁰⁰ Schwab explains that '*writing* trauma matters' because '[i]t counters the work of death and breathes life back into the silences haunted by dead words' and writing can 'offer a more protected space to explore the effects of violence.'^{101 102} Valerie Croisille lists some of the benefits of neo-slave narratives as transformational objects in healing transgenerational trauma. She writes that neo-slave narratives mimic narrative characteristics of trauma, echoing Derrida's linguistic analysis, and they provide catharsis through storytelling by giving a voice to silenced people.¹⁰³

Magical realism can be an important tool in writing these transformational objects. Jenni Adams explains that elements of, for example, folk belief have the ability to console both the readers and the survivors of traumatic events. In the aftermath of violence, it may be difficult to return back to a world that is 'rational'. Eliach, writing about the effect of Hasidic tales of the Holocaust, stories in which righteous Jewish people gain supernatural abilities, can 'restore order to a chaotic world.'¹⁰⁴ Adams also quotes Rabbi Israel Spira, who states that '[t]elling the tales is an attempt to understand and come to terms with a most difficult reality.'¹⁰⁵ When realism fails to explain the reality after a violent event, people turn towards the magical to explain their feelings and to find comfort in different belief systems.

⁹⁹ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Schwab, 119.

¹⁰¹ Schwab, 33-34.

¹⁰² Schwab, 5.

¹⁰³ Croisille, *Black American Women's Voices*, 106.

¹⁰⁴ Yaffa Eliach, 'Foreword' to *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, compiled by Yaffa Eliach (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. xv-xxxii, quoted in Adams, *Magic Realism*, 17.

¹⁰⁵ 'On the Waiting Bench at the Gallows (II)', based on a conversation between Rabbi Israel Spira and Aaron Frankel, in Eliach (1982), pp. 112-14 (p. 114), quoted in Adams, *Magic Realism*, 17.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* as Magical Realist Neo-Slave Narratives and Transformational Objects

I will now bring the concepts of magical realism, original slave narratives, neo-slave narratives and trauma studies together and show how they are all connected to each other.

I have shown how magic realism has become engrained in post-colonial studies and how it has become a helpful mode for authors to explore hybrid cultures and marginalised voices, such as African-American authors of neo-slave narratives. These authors can find magical realism a useful mode to explore their history and to rewrite it from the margins. The authors of original slave narratives have, of course, already written from their marginalised perspective. However, due to editorial interference and outside pressure from their white audiences to adept their narratives, authors of original slave narratives have left gaps in the history of slavery that have gone unaddressed. The history of African-American authors is, unfortunately, plagued by transgenerational trauma. The ghosts of the American past have been buried in the dominant narrative of American history. People have unsuccessfully tried to bury the history of slavery but as long as its ghosts go unaddressed, the past will continue to haunt them. The Black community will have to confront the past in order to heal from it. This is how the entire process comes back to magical realism. In Holocaust Studies, magical realism has been analysed as a mode to confront trauma. It has provided Holocaust survivors and their descendants with a mode to make sense of a world that did not seem rational anymore. Furthermore, it provides authors with a degree of distance to respectfully talk about violent legacies. This is why authors such as Morrison and Whitehead may have chosen magic realism as a genre. They want to enable themselves and their community to work through transgenerational trauma.

The crypt of slavery is a cultural haunting that both Morrison and Whitehead explore in their novels. In Morrison's *Beloved*, this is made explicit as the buried past of Sethe comes back to haunt Sethe and the people around her. This thesis will examine how the characters in *Beloved* have been psychologically injured by slavery, particularly focusing on the ways Sethe has transferred her trauma onto her daughter Denver.

In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead shows the ways in which the present is still haunted by the past. His novel is a challenge to Western historiography, a destruction of the way the narrative has been compartmentalised when it should not have been.

Both of these novels use fantastic elements such as time travel, the presence of ghosts, and 'rememory' to bring to light different aspects of American history that have been buried and provide a counter narrative to dominant history by giving a voice to communities that have been silenced. *Beloved* famously focuses on exposing the interior lives of enslaved people, while *The Underground Railroad* investigates the myths in American history and criticises the ways the experiences of enslaved people have been exploited and commercialised.

Neo-slave narratives like Morrison's and Whitehead's offer the ancestors of enslaved people and the Black community in general an outlet to reflect on their national past, with an alternative view on slavery that keeps a respectful distance to the experiences of people in the past. It is a different view, removed from the empirical Western version of history, which both novels criticise and undermine. The novels respond to the gaps that have been left in dominant history. They pull the phantoms of slavery and racism out of their crypts and make the reader confront them. This way, the transformational objects that their novels have become can help the community heal.

CHAPTER 3 – TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

*This is not a story to pass on. – Toni Morrison*¹⁰⁶

Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief –

*Toni Morrison*¹⁰⁷

This chapter will provide some background information including: some facts about the novel's reception, a detailed analysis of the necessary historical context for *Beloved*, a short summary of its plot, and some statements about Toni Morrison's role as an author.

Then, this chapter will analyse how *Beloved* fits into Chanady's definition of magical realism. After that, the chapter will show how *Beloved* challenges the dominant narratives of Western empirical thought and historiography. Morrison shows the necessity of counter narratives that portray slavery from the margins. Finally, this chapter will show how the novel portrays concepts of trauma theory such as: cryptonymy, transgenerational trauma, and replacement children.

Consequently, this analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* will confirm this thesis' hypothesis that the novel uses magical realism to challenge Western ideologies and to help the Black community heal from trauma. Morrison takes on the enormous responsibility of making slavery speak-able. It makes the reader confront the intergenerational trauma that descendants of enslaved people have suffered under colonialism and afterwards.

¹⁰⁶ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 272-175.

¹⁰⁷ Morrison, 5.

Reception:

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* was originally published in 1987 and is still considered to be one of the most well-known and influential books in American literature. The novel was highly acclaimed. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Annisfield-Wolf Book Award for Fiction, and the American Book Award in 1988. Toni Morrison was the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012. Additionally, *Beloved* received high praise among regular readers as well. Lydia Magras links the novel's success largely to its popularity with BUPPIES, or 'Black Urban Professionals'.¹⁰⁸ Magras writes that these well-educated Black men and women were looking for 'the re-emergence and ascendancy of Black writers' and that 'Black women, especially, were excited by Morrison's forays into the world of fiction.'¹⁰⁹ It was a highly political publication and would be linked with the Black Power Movement. Morrison's novel resonated with their cause because 'the literature was being read by the daughters (and sons) of those who marched, bled, and died in the cause of social change.'¹¹⁰ Morrison's writing was for them, 'for the village, for the tribe'¹¹¹ and it was 'the call of a mother to her daughters, the call of the crossings of the diaspora', according to Magras.¹¹²

Historical Context

Between 1776 and 1804, northerners started abolishing slavery in their states. In the South, slavery remained. Southerners recognised they were economically dependent on slavery

¹⁰⁸ Lydia Magras, "Popular Reception of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 7, no. 1 (January 2015): pp. 29-44, <https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.7.1.0029>, 30.

¹⁰⁹ Magras, 32.

¹¹⁰ Magras, 32.

¹¹¹ LeClair and Morrison, *The New Republic*, March 21, 1981, <https://newrepublic.com/article/95923/the-language-must-not-sweat>, quoted in Magras, 36.

¹¹² Magras, 36.

and feared the consequences of 'releasing hordes of "Africans"'.¹¹³ In 1787, the debate resulted in a compromise that allowed states to 'determine the nature of their own internal institutions.'¹¹⁴ It became a local issue instead of a national one. Matters that concerned the nation, such as the importation of enslaved people and the return of fugitive slaves were settled in 1787. It was decided that the importation of slaves was to be prohibited from 1806 onwards and Southern slave owners had the right to recollect fugitive slaves from Free states. In 1807, Congress passed a law outlawing the import of enslaved people into the United States. Domestic slave trade within the country was still legal, making the children of enslaved people into desired 'commodities'. Tensions between the North and the South continued to rise throughout the starting decades of the 19th century. Northerners became more aggressive in their fight against the sinful institution of slavery and Southerners became more hostile towards Northern interference in their states. A compromise was reached in 1850. The compromise included, among other things, a new Fugitive Slave Act that added more provisions regarding fugitive slaves and harsher punishments for people helping them. This, however, did not stop the hostility between the North and the South for long. Abolition movements continued and the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 caused seven southern states to form the Confederate States of America. In 1862, Lincoln announced his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which added the objective of destroying slavery while the Confederate States claimed the institution of slavery was protected. After four years of Civil War, the deadliest war ever to have been fought on American soil, the Confederate States surrendered and the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery for men, women, and children. The Fourteenth Amendment affirmed the citizenship of

¹¹³ Donald Ratcliffe, "Chapter 1: The State of the Union, 1776–1860," in *Themes of the American Civil War: The War Between the States*, ed. Susan-Mary Grant and Brian Holden Reid (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 3-35, 24.

¹¹⁴ Ratcliffe, 24.

everyone born in the United States, although only men had the right to vote. Women were still largely seen as the property of their husbands.

One important thing to note when it comes to *Beloved's* historical context is that the import of enslaved people did not fully stop after it had been outlawed in 1806. Martha Cutter states that, while '[t]he importation of slaves to the United States was banned in 1807 [...]' historical research suggests that violations were prevalent well into the 1850s and 1860s.¹¹⁵

Summary of the Plot

The main character of the novel is Sethe, who lives in a free state with her daughter Denver, at 124 Bluestone Road. They have been isolated from the community ever since Sethe's mother-in-law, grandma Baby Suggs, died. Men are absent from the Suggs household. Sethe's husband, Halle, never met up with Sethe on the night they were supposed to escape together. She does not know what happened to him. Both of Sethe's sons have left the house. Then, Paul D moves in with Sethe and Denver. He is another enslaved person Sethe knew from the plantation they both belonged to. Sethe, Denver, and Paul D are all haunted by the past in their own ways. The house is also literally haunted, or at least Sethe and Denver seem to think so. Sethe believes it is the ghost of her baby daughter, who she killed in desperation years ago to save her from a life in slavery.

After Paul D moves in, a woman appears near the house. She calls herself Beloved, which was the only word that engraved on Sethe's daughter's tombstone. Beloved bears a striking resemblance to Sethe, and looks to be the same age as Sethe's daughter would have been

¹¹⁵ Martha J. Cutter, "The Story Must Go on and on: The Fantastic, Narration, and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*," *African American Review* 34, no. 1 (2000): pp. 61-75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2901184>, 64.

if she were still alive. Soon enough, the characters start to believe that Beloved and Sethe's daughter are one and the same.

The story of *Beloved* is founded in realism, based on the real story of Margaret Garner. Garner escaped her master Archibald Gaines in 1856, crossed the Ohio River, and was pursued by Gaines into Cincinnati. When it became clear that Garner and her family were going to be taken back to Kentucky by Gaines, her husband shot one of the officers before he was overpowered. Garner, seeing no other option that would let them escape, killed her youngest daughter before attempting to kill the others and then herself. Death seemed like a more humane fate than slavery. Morrison's attempt to make sense of this polarising act of mother love served as the inspiration for *Beloved*. Garner's story is one of the many thousands of untold stories in the history of slavery and in *Beloved*, Morrison tries to give women such as Margaret Garner a voice. Morrison reclaims the voice of women in slavery and incorporates them in a narrative centred on womanhood, motherhood, and femininity, highlighting especially the impossibility of being a simultaneously a mother and an enslaved woman.

Toni Morrison on Slave Narratives and on Her Role as an Author

Toni Morrison, in *The Site of Memory*, talks about her reasons for writing neo-slave narratives. She says that she missed any 'mention of their interior life'¹¹⁶ and that 'memories and recollections won't give [her] total access to the unwritten interior life of these people', which is why it must be supplemented by 'imagination'.¹¹⁷ In *Beloved*, Morrison was

¹¹⁶ Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Knowlton Zinsser, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp. 83-102, 91.

¹¹⁷ Morrison, 92.

looking to expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it (which doesn't mean they didn't have it); I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left.¹¹⁸

She does this by combining the accounts and memoirs of enslaved people and her own imagination. Morrison believes that facts are not necessarily 'truer' than fiction, 'just that [fiction is] stranger.'¹¹⁹ She can combine established history with 'fiction', and uses the combination to 'rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate"' in order to show to the reader the reality of slavery. It includes all the heartbreaking details that were kept out of slave-narratives because it was too gruesome to be told.¹²⁰ In *TIME*, Morrison says that she believed *Beloved* would be her least read book because

it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia.¹²¹

Morrison believes that it is her job as a writer (and especially as a Black woman writer) to make the present speak-able. She wanted to make slavery a 'personal experience' instead of an institution involving anonymous people.¹²²

The Divergent Use of Magical Realism in *Beloved*: How Chanady's Definition Applies to the Novel

Toni Morrison's usage of magical realism may sometimes seem at odds with the definition of magical realism as proposed by Amaryll Chanady. However, this thesis will prove

¹¹⁸ Morrison, 93-4.

¹¹⁹ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 93.

¹²⁰ Toni Morrison, 91.

¹²¹ Bonnie Angelo and Toni Morrison, *TIME*, May 22, 1989, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,957724-1,00.html>.

¹²² Angelo and Morrison.

that Morrison's *Beloved* still fits Chanady's definitions. The following paragraphs will try to explain in more detail *how* and *why* Morrison uses magical realism the way she does.

One could argue that Morrison's *Beloved* does not fit Chanady's definitions of magical realism because the antinomy between the magical and the realistic is not balanced. As previously mentioned, Chanady emphasises the importance of the antinomy between realism and the fantastic: neither code can overshadow the other in magical realism. However, in *Beloved*, the fantastic seems to overshadow the realism, at least for a lot of readers. This is supported, for example, by Martha Cutter, who writes: in teaching this book, I am always surprised by how ready students are to resolve the issue of *Beloved*'s status in this novel, to decide unambiguously that she is a ghost'.¹²³ Cutter asks:

[w]hy do students ignore the text's balance between the realistic and the marvellous? And even more puzzling, why has this tendency to fix on a particular meaning of *Beloved* been replicated by literary scholars, most of whom view *Beloved* as a ghost?¹²⁴

Chanady also explains that magical realism's required antinomy does not allow any realistic explanations to be given for the fantastic elements in magical realist novels. This is, again, a point on which *Beloved* diverges from Chanady's guidelines on magical realism. For example, Stamp Paid, who is one of the recurring characters in *Beloved*, says that there 'was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek' and he tells Sethe that people '[f]ound him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that's her.'¹²⁵ This provides a more realistic explanation for *Beloved*'s sudden appearance and would threaten the antinomy of the text. The balance should tip more in favour of realism by giving the reader a more reasonable explanation that does not rely on fantastical concepts such as ghosts and resurrection.

¹²³ Cutter, "The Story Must Go on and on," 61.

¹²⁴ Cutter, "The Story Must Go on and on," 62.

¹²⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 235.

The novel thus seems to go against Chanady's rules for magical realism, but this thesis argues that this is done purposefully and that the explanation does not threaten the antinomy between magic and realism in *Beloved*. The elements of the realistic explanation that, according to Chanady, should not be given, do not negate the fantastic explanation that *Beloved* is a ghost. If anything, the realistic explanation make the antinomy in *Beloved* more balanced.

Cutter explains that most readers believe *Beloved* to be a ghost. This assumption is not challenged for a long time.¹²⁶ However, the realistic explanation brings to light the inconsistencies in the readers' assumption. Both the realist and the magical origin stories have elements that cannot be explained. On the one hand, *Beloved* knows things she could only know if she really were Sethe's daughter. She knows about Sethe's earrings¹²⁷ and she knows the song Sethe used to sing to her.¹²⁸ On the other hand, *Beloved* knows dances that no-one taught her¹²⁹ and has a different accent than both Denver and Sethe.¹³⁰ The realistic explanation does not break the magical realism in the novel; it only serves to add more layers of truth to both the magical and realistic explanations of *Beloved*'s presence. It is important to note that, as Martha Cutter explains, the antinomy is further restored in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, the sequel to *Beloved* that is more realistic than fantastical.¹³¹

It is even more interesting, then, that so many scholars and students are inclined to believe that *Beloved* is a ghost, considering they have been given an equally likely explanation that falls more in line with Western empirical thinking. This is the remarkable thing about *Beloved* as a novel. By the time these realistic explanations are given, the reader is already

¹²⁶ Cutter, "The Story Must Go on and on."

¹²⁷ Morrison, 213.

¹²⁸ Morrison, 240.

¹²⁹ Morrison, 74.

¹³⁰ Morrison, 60.

¹³¹ Cutter, "The Story Must Go on and on," 64.

convinced that Beloved is the resurrected ghost of Sethe's baby daughter, especially since the main characters of the novel, Sethe and Denver, believe that to be the case.¹³² As a result, the reader is less likely to believe the realistic explanation, especially because the realistic events tell an even more horrible story than the fantastical explanation. If Stamp Paid is indeed correct and Beloved is really the girl from the shed, she would represent another aspect of hidden history. She would have been illegally imported from Africa after the practice was outlawed in 1807 and kept in a shed to be sexually abused her whole life. It is almost as if the reader *wants* to believe that Beloved is a ghost come back to life because it is easier to accept than the realistic version of events. Compared to the atrocities of slavery, a ghost story might be easier and more comforting to believe. If Beloved is a ghost, she does not have a past or memories. She represents Sethe's trauma but does not have any of her own yet. The interpretation that Beloved is an imported enslaved woman from Africa makes the reader think about what her past could have been like: kidnapped, abused, and traumatised. It makes the reader take on Beloved's traumas, too.

Beloved as a Counter Narrative: How the Novel Challenges Western Empirical Thinking and Western Historiography

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses magical realism to expose the ways in which Western empiricism and Western historiography have dominated the discourse on slavery and shown it from a very one-sided perspective. Morrison calls for a more informed and inclusive way of looking at the history of slavery in the United States. Timothy Spaulding states that

Morrison's narrative eschews realism, objectivity and linearity and calls attention to the inadequacy of traditional historiography, particularly in its treatment of American slavery.¹³³

¹³² Cutter, "The Story Must Go on and on," 63.

¹³³ Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 6-7.

She does this by ‘ask[ing] the reader to engage with a retelling of history that is built on an easy intimacy with the supernatural.’¹³⁴ Morrison blurs the lines between the fantastic and the real and between fiction and history. These concepts are often thought to be mutually exclusive, but Morrison shows the interplay between them and asks her reader to re-evaluate their judgment of Western empiricism and Western historiography by presenting them with a fantastical version of the story that cannot align itself with Western empiricism. Ghosts, after all, cannot be explained in an empirical manner.

Toni Morrison, within the novel, provides further critiques of Western empiricism and historiography by showing how history and truth can be manipulated. She presents fiction and history as non-mutually-exclusive concepts. Realism is not preferred or dominant over the fantastic in *Beloved*. Through her use of magical realist elements, Morrison primes the reader into a position where they can accept an alternate way of looking at history, one that challenges the dominant historiography. She provides a voice for unheard historical minorities and brings more attention to non-Western historical practices.

One way in which Toni Morrison shows the inequality of Western and African historiography through magical realist elements is by pitting the teaching methods of two characters against each other, namely the schoolteacher and Baby Suggs. Schoolteacher represents Western empiricism the novel shows through his methods of teaching how Western modes of thought have come to dominate the narrative of marginalised groups. The control of the school teacher's methods and their effect on history come up in the narrative when he teaches his nephews about the enslaved people at Sweet Home. He teaches them, for example, that the

¹³⁴ James Canton, ed., *The Literature Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained* (New York, NY: DK Publishing, 2016), epub, 881.4/1014.

enslaved people have animal characteristics,¹³⁵ and conducts studies of phrenology:

'Schoolteacher'd wrap that string all over my head, 'cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth.'¹³⁶ Morrison expands on the effect of the schoolteacher's studies. Characters describe how '[w]hitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle.'¹³⁷

Schoolteacher's studies have reinforced the inequality between the enslaved people and the whites. He puts them into two categories that cannot co-exist. All enslaved people are less than human, animalistic, and 'whitepeople' are portrayed as the dominant norm. The power of this narrative is explicitly felt by the enslaved people in the novel. It is mentioned when Paul D states that there is '[n]othing more dangerous than a white schoolteacher.'¹³⁸

In comparison, Baby Suggs' teaching methods are focused on community, on oral storytelling and myth. These methods are more in line with African traditions of historiography. She mirrors the ways neo-slave narratives were first passed on: orally and within families and communities. She is the magic, while schoolteacher is the realism. Linda Krumholz explains that:

[t]he spiritual and subjective basis of ritual also has pedagogical implications. In ritual, the cultural specificity of knowledge and the multiple possibilities of interpretation, as well as the implied spiritual sanction, make ritual education different, at least conceptually, from the objective, scientific model of knowledge that is prevalent in American educational institutions.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 193.

¹³⁶ Morrison, 191.

¹³⁷ Morrison, 191.

¹³⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, 166.

¹³⁹ Linda Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *African American Review* 26, no. 3 (1992): pp. 395-408, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041912>, 398.

Instead of the scientific method, Baby Suggs preaches 'the guidance of a free heart and imagination.'¹⁴⁰ Krumholz uses the scene of the ritual in the clearing behind 124 Bluestone Road as an example:

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.¹⁴¹

Krumholz believes that the teachings of Baby Suggs erase some of the boundaries Western empiricism has established between perceived dichotomies.¹⁴² Baby Suggs' teaching methods '[represent] an epistemological and discursive philosophy that shapes Morrison's work, in which morality is not preset in black and white categories of good and evil.'¹⁴³ Baby Suggs' methods blur boundaries, again prompting the reader into accepting a mixture of magic and realism, of history and fiction. It gives the reader an incentive to look at history in a new light, one that better accounts for the history of African American enslaved people, told from their perspective instead of from their oppressors. Instead of only presenting the Western point of view, or 'reason' and 'fact', Morrison shows that the Western ideals are less rational and factual than they are perceived to be. She shows the flaws of Western, 'rational' thinking while simultaneously positing 'magic' as an equally believable alternative. At the same time, Morrison makes room for counter narratives of history that are more in line with African roots.

Morrison places further importance on the reader in confronting the history in *Beloved* by using magical realist elements that blur the timeline and bring the collective history of slavery and the present together. Morrison confronts the legacy of slavery and its continued effect on the

¹⁴⁰ Krumholz, 398.

¹⁴¹ Krumholz, 398.

¹⁴² Krumholz, 398.

¹⁴³ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," 398.

present through 'rememory' and by developing 'a concept of "narrative authority" that reinvests the contemporary writer with political agency by radicalizing the act of storytelling.'¹⁴⁴ Caroline Rody, in an in-depth analysis of history in *Beloved*, explains that the novel has an entire 'theory of memory and repression in a distinctive, neologistic vocabulary' through the concept of 'disremembering' and 'rememory'.¹⁴⁵ Its frequent occurrence in the novel 'underscores the text's preoccupation with the problematics of the mind in time.'¹⁴⁶ Spaulding calls it a '[signifier] of an oppositional historiography that combine[s] elements of historical realism and the fantastic.'¹⁴⁷ Memory is an active, almost magical sounding process in which a "rememory" can leave a mark on a person or landscape and influence someone else's "rememory" years later. Sethe says:

If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place-the picture of it-stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.¹⁴⁸

Timothy Spaulding places rememory in the same category as time travel and anachronism when it comes to the ways novels use these concepts to produce 'an authoritative and overtly political re-formation of the past.'¹⁴⁹ It is authoritative because Morrison uses the concept of rememory to connect herself and her writing process to the experiences of enslaved people in the past. It is a magical realist element that is once again used to re-imagine the past and to confront the dominant Western idea of historiography. Through Sethe's rememory, Morrison uses the '[r]epressed fragments of the (fictionalized) personal and historical past' to retrieve and

¹⁴⁴ Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 17-8.

¹⁴⁵ Caroline Rody, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamor for a Kiss,'" *American Literary History* 7, no. 1 (1995): pp. 92-119, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/7.1.92>, 101.

¹⁴⁶ Rody, 101.

¹⁴⁷ Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 66.

¹⁴⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, 36.

¹⁴⁹ Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 19.

reconstruct it.¹⁵⁰ It allows a writer to explore the gaps in history, allowing 'the fictional text, with its dialogic quality and its emphasis on imagination' to 'succeed where traditional historiography and historical fiction fail.'¹⁵¹ The magical realist ways in which Sethe describes the continued effect of past memory on present people also allows Morrison to create a connection of narrative authority over the voices of the past. According to Spaulding,

writers such as [...] Toni Morrison emphasize the cultural, political, and ideological connections between themselves and the subjects of their texts. They infuse their texts with fantastic or non-mimetic devices to create a paradoxical narrative form. In essence, postmodern slave narratives deploy elements of the fantastic not as a way of undermining their narrative authority but as a means of establishing it.¹⁵²

She establishes a link between her as an author and Sethe as a character. It opens up the floor for a revision of history, one that is more cultural and communal instead of the Western way history has been created.

¹⁵⁰ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," 396.

¹⁵¹ Krumholz, 7.

¹⁵² Spaulding, *Reforming the Past*, 18.

Trauma Theory and *Beloved*: Analysing Cryptonymy, Transgenerational Trauma Between Mother and Child, and Denver as a Replacement Child.

As previously mentioned, Toni Morrison intended to write in-between the lines of official history when writing *Beloved*. She responds to silences in the narrative of American slavery and substitutes with her writing the parts that were left out of original slave narratives because they were too traumatic to recall or too gruesome to read about. In an interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison says that writing *Beloved* was overwhelming to her because of the responsibility she felt for Sethe and 'all of these people; those unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried'.¹⁵³ Morrison feels their presence like a haunting and it creates a desire to 'properly, artistically, [bury] them'.¹⁵⁴ The novel in itself becomes a response to the haunting silence in national history and the tension between remembering and trying to forget. The novel breaks open the crypt in order to confront history and artistically bury the unburied and unheard. Morrison shows within the novel how community is necessary to heal from trauma but her novel also functions as a communal experience, a transformational object that can help the Black community heal.

***Beloved* and Cryptonymy**

As Morrison's attempt to artistically bury the dead, *Beloved* exhumes and addresses the stories of the unnamed and unburied voices that have not been laid to rest. By writing the novel, Morrison involves the reader in this process of exhuming history, opening the crypt, and

¹⁵³ Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, *Southern Review*, 1985, pp. 567-593, quoted in Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *American Literature* 64, no. 3 (September 1992): pp. 567-597, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2927752>, 569.

¹⁵⁴ Naylor and Morrison, 569.

remembering the history it has kept suppressed. Morrison leaves her readers a seemingly oxymoronic request: 'This is not a story to pass on.'¹⁵⁵ It is a story to both forget and remember. Roger Luckhurst describes the process as 'disremembering': 'remembering to forget' as a way of mourning.¹⁵⁶ Readers must now bear their role in disremembering slavery and 'work through, interiorize, and then pass over' the haunting of slavery in order to heal.¹⁵⁷

The novel makes a lot of references to suppressed memories, crypts, and cryptonymy. Paul D for example, buried his past 'in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut.'¹⁵⁸ Sethe similarly has buried her memories of the plantation and says that she has 'worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe.'¹⁵⁹ Her crypt is her home, 124 Bluestone Road, in which she shelters herself and her daughter Denver away from the rest of the community. There is, however, someone else living in the crypt of 124 Bluestone Road: it is haunted by the ghost of her murdered daughter, who herself can be considered a crypt as well. Beloved is, as Rushdy states, 'the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten; she symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried, properly'.¹⁶⁰ In the interpretation that Beloved is indeed a ghost, she would not have any memories of her own. Instead, she takes on the memories of other characters; prompting them to tell her stories about the past they have been trying to keep hidden. Linda Krumholz explains that Beloved 'compel[s] the characters in her "family" to face all the pain and shame of their memories.'¹⁶¹ It hurts the

¹⁵⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 274-5.

¹⁵⁶ Roger Luckhurst, "'Impossible Mourning' in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michèle Roberts's *Daughters of the House*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 37, no. 4 (July 9, 2010): pp. 243-260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.1996.9937891>, 250.

¹⁵⁷ Luckhurst, 250

¹⁵⁸ Morrison, 72-73.

¹⁵⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 6.

¹⁶⁰ Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History," 571.

¹⁶¹ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," 397.

characters to confront their traumas but ultimately, *Beloved*, as a 'physical manifestation of suppressed memories',¹⁶² helps them heal.

This chapter will now continue by showing what kind of suppressed memories and transgenerational trauma that could be buried in the crypts in *Beloved*. The chapter will focus on the transgenerational trauma of *Beloved*'s main characters.

Beloved and Transgenerational Trauma Between Mother and Child

Ultimately, *Beloved* is a story about motherly love, especially the way motherly love has been disrupted through slavery. The women in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver, Beloved, and even secondary characters such as Ella and Nan, struggle to form healthy mother-daughter bonds because these relationships could not exist without the women having ownership of themselves.

Sethe's act of infanticide was out of love and her inability to 'love just a little bit'.¹⁶³ This philosophy comes from Paul D, who we can assume speaks for most of the enslaved people in the book when he remarks that Sethe's love is dangerous.

For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; [...] so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Krumholz, 400.

¹⁶³ Morrison, *Beloved*, 45.

¹⁶⁴ Morrison, 45.

This is the approach other women in *Beloved* take. For example, Ella, one of the women in the Ohio neighbourhood Sethe lives, refuses to nurse the baby she delivered after being raped by her master. She cannot claim a child that was born out of trauma and belongs to her master. Baby Suggs' mother love has also been affected by slavery. Two of her girls were sold without her knowing anything about it. Her third child she was told she could keep but the child was traded for lumber. Her fourth child was the result of rape. 'That child she could not love and the rest she would not.'¹⁶⁵ These stories give an insight into the ways enslaved mothers became desensitised to their children. They taught themselves not to get attached to people that could be taken away. Baby Suggs was only allowed to watch one of her children grow up: Halle. The others, she believes, are haunting other people's houses.

Sethe has been affected by her relationship with her mother and her daughters. She, in contrast to Baby Suggs and Elle, loves big. She tries to be a good mother figure despite not having had one of her own as a child. Because she was brought up in slavery, her idea of motherhood has always been tied to ideas of possession. For example, she tells *Beloved* that:

She [Sethe's mother] must of nursed me two or three weeks--that's the way the others did. Then [...] I sucked from another woman whose job it was [...] One thing she did do. She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am.'¹⁶⁶

The mark, a sign of slavery, was the only identifying thing Sethe knew about her mother: her identity was determined by slavery. Sethe's mother is hanged shortly afterwards. Sethe tries to get a look at the brand under her breast to make sure it is indeed her mother but she is pulled

¹⁶⁵ Morrison, 23.

¹⁶⁶ Morrison, *Beloved*, 60-61.

away. Despite the trauma of not really having a mother only to see her die shortly after leaves a mark of its own on Sethe.

Despite, or perhaps because of the trauma she experienced as a child, Sethe tries to love her children as much as she can. Still, her mother love is tainted by ownership. She states that she 'loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love'.¹⁶⁷ She is unable to fully love her children because they are not solely hers. When she flees to Ohio, she is finally able to become a mother. She wants to regain her own identity as a woman and a mother, but mainly it seems as if she wants to bring milk to her baby on the other side of the river. The murder of her daughter is one last act of love in which Sethe finally realises the difference between love and possession: she kills the daughter she loves to prevent her from becoming property.

Sethe ultimately repeats the trauma she suffered as a child. Her mother abandoned her and by her own infanticide and failed suicide, Sethe abandons her child. This trauma makes her feel even more motherly towards Beloved. She sees Beloved's magical appearance as a chance to redeem herself. Petar Ramadanovic states that Sethe identifies with the wound - or, recalling Freud's definition, the trauma - that Beloved represents.¹⁶⁸ She tries to repent for her crime by becoming a nurturing mother to Beloved but she can never atone for the infanticide. Beloved keeps taking more and more demanding, suggesting that there is no way for Sethe to heal her and Beloved's trauma on her own. There is no way for her to heal that wound.

¹⁶⁷ Morrison, 162.

¹⁶⁸ Petar Ramadanovic, "'You Your Best Thing, Sethe': Trauma's Narcissism," *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1-2 (2008): pp. 178-190, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/29533866>, 182.

The transgenerational trauma continues further down the mother line when Beloved becomes pregnant. The reader is left to wonder what sort of mother Beloved would become because the novel does not provide any answer to that question. Beloved disappears from the novel before any information can be gathered.

Sethe's other daughter, Denver, however, is the one that manages to break the chain of transgenerational trauma. She is affected by the trauma of her ancestors on both sides of the family. She is stuck in the crypt of 124 Bluestone Road because Sethe's infanticide has isolated them from the rest of the community. Denver has to live with the ghost of slavery in her house even though she has never experienced it herself. She is afraid of leaving the crypt, but towards the end of the novel she feels it necessary to do so. She sees how Sethe is crumbling under the pressure of Beloved's increasing demands and the mental toll of being confronted with her memories. Denver needs to confront this trauma as well, to save herself and her mother. Ramadanovic considers Denver talking to her school friend Nelson Lord as the turning point of the novel:

Denver's school friend Nelson Lord, says to her, "Take care of yourself, Denver" (252). She hears the salute as confirmation that she has a self to take care of, which helps her gather courage for the deed her mother was not able to accomplish.¹⁶⁹

Denver finally gathers the courage to break out of the crypt. She enlists the help of the community of Black women so that they can banish the phantom of Beloved from the house and from their lives. The collective trauma of slavery, something most of the women in their community can relate to, needs to be confronted communally as well.

¹⁶⁹ Ramadanovic, 182.

All the while, *Beloved*, as a ghost of the past, makes the reader confront the past 'as a living and vindictive presence.'¹⁷⁰ The ghost of *Beloved* is a magical stand-in for gaps in history, specifically the '[s]ixty million and more' that Morrison mentions at the start of the book.¹⁷¹ It is impossible to represent all these voices, but through the character of *Beloved* the reader is allowed to confront those parts of history that are too traumatic and too large to confront. *Beloved* the character is confronting the characters in a similar way as the novel *Beloved* is confronting its readers. It is necessary to address this history and heal from it, even though, as Morrison writes: 'anything dead coming back to life hurts'.¹⁷²

Beloved: Crypts, Transgenerational Trauma, and The Author

Morrison writes that 'memory weighs heavily in what [she writes], in how [she begins] and what [she finds] significant', it is 'the subsoil of [her] work.'¹⁷³ *Beloved*'s connection to personal history is further explored in the way *Beloved*'s character has been used as a vehicle to discuss trauma, all through the use of magical realist elements.

Toni Morrison describes how slave-narratives of the past used popular literary genres to talk about 'the more sordid details of their experience.'¹⁷⁴ She says that 'popular taste discouraged the writers' from giving in-depth descriptions of their suffering.¹⁷⁵ Morrison adopts

¹⁷⁰ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," 400.

¹⁷¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*.

¹⁷² Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 35.

¹⁷³ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 92.

¹⁷⁴ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 90.

¹⁷⁵ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 90.

this tradition by using gothic conventions such as the 'haunted-house tradition', the 'invasion of pasts upon presents' and 'articulat[ing] profound social horrors'.¹⁷⁶

The gothic conventions Morrison uses are facilitated by her use of magical realism. It allows her to, for example, turn Beloved into what Abraham and Torok call a 'phantom', a transgenerational trauma involving the 'memory trace of an ancestral presence' that 'becomes manifest in the unconscious of a descendant'.¹⁷⁷ Cynthia Sugars explains that 'the phantom moves from mind to mind, haunts the subject, and begins to 'speak' in the subject's place'.¹⁷⁸ This shows a connection to Sethe's concept of rememory, a memory that can move from person to person over time. In *Beloved*, Sethe's trauma 'becomes manifest' in a very literal way. The magical resurrection of Beloved becomes a way for Sethe to confront her past trauma directly. The act of accepting that she needs help from the community and acknowledging a connection to the other women in her neighbourhood finally drives out the ghost of Beloved and the ghost of the past, enabling Sethe to start on a journey towards healing.

Abraham and Torok's theory of intergenerational trauma and crypts can be further expanded upon when it comes to Beloved and magical realism. The idea of a crypt in trauma theory was first coined by Nicolas Abraham, who describes the crypt as a place 'in which people bury unspeakable events or unbearable, if not disavowed, losses or injuries during violent histories'.¹⁷⁹ The crypt creates areas of what Schwab calls 'unthought knowledge', traumatic experiences that are 'registered but not fully lived in a conscious and remembered way'.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Carol Margaret Davison, "African American Gothic," in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), epub, 118/2766.

¹⁷⁷ Cynthia Sugars, "Cryptonymy," in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. Hughes, Punter, and Smith, epub, 630/2766.

¹⁷⁸ Sugars, 630/2766.

¹⁷⁹ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 1.

¹⁸⁰ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 8.

Examples of crypts in the novel include for example the ‘tobacco tin buried in [Paul D’s] chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut ... for if [Sethe] got a whiff of the contents it would shame him.’¹⁸¹ Another example would be the Suggs household, in which Sethe keeps Denver and herself contained from the outside world, because she is still trapped in the past.

Beloved can, in this way, be considered a crypt for the history of slavery, which is expressed in a disjointed, fragmented recounting of trauma. ‘Slavery broke the world in half,’ Toni Morrison comments, ‘it broke it in every way.’¹⁸² Morrison responds to these breaks in history by writing *Beloved* in between the fragments of his history. As previously mentioned, the ghostly appearances of Beloved are used to represent the sixty million or more unnamed, forgotten enslaved people that died over the course of the Middle Passage. Beloved is a fragment of that history, the unspoken crypt of slavery in American society and history.

Beloved's characterisation is a good example of the linguistic theory of crypts by Jacques Derrida. He, as previously mentioned, introduced a linguistic analysis into the theory of crypts and believed that the effects of the crypt can leave their marks on language. Martha Cutter notes Beloved’s ‘child-like vocabulary ... bodily fragmentation and mental instability.’¹⁸³ Cutter's observation can be further expanded upon in a close reading of Beloved’s train-of-thought monologue in part two of the novel. ‘She's mine, Beloved. She's mine’ is how Beloved starts her monologue.¹⁸⁴ The sentences run along without punctuation or leading narrative:

¹⁸¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage Classics, 2022), 72-3.

¹⁸² Abigail Ritz, “Slavery Broke the World,” ImPossibilities, November 4, 2018, <https://morrison.sunygeneseoenglish.org/2018/11/04/slavery-broke-the-world/>.

¹⁸³ Cutter, “The Story Must Go on and on,” 65.

¹⁸⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, 209.

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 pile¹⁸⁵

Here, it becomes clear that *Beloved* is more than Sethe's haunting alone. She recounts the experiences of the estimated sixty million Africans that died at sea during the trans-Atlantic slave trade: her speech is disorientating and fragmented. It symbolises the displacement of being removed from your native lands. The experiences she describes are too horrible to narrate conventionally: she was not given enough water or food; she did not even have enough room to tremble, let alone enough room to remove the dead man who was on top of her. The trauma presents itself in her speech in a manner very similar to what Derrida describes.

Morrison herself noted that her writing was affected by the process of uncovering the crypt of slavery. For instance, when writing the scene in which Sethe kills her baby, she recalls how she would need to take long walks between writing sessions and how she would return from them to constantly rewrite the sentences she wrote before each walk. She notes how it was difficult to find language 'in which the violence would not "engorge" her or her readers, or compete with the language itself.'¹⁸⁶ She struggled to write in a way that would not produce either obscenity or pornography.¹⁸⁷

The confrontation of the past is not confined to the novel. Through writing about the past and about slavery, Morrison forces the reader to confront the same legacy as Sethe. Morrison lifts the veil of unspeakable things, opening the crypt that has existed in American history. Krumholz writes that '*Beloved* is the reader's ghost, forcing us to face the historical past as a

¹⁸⁵ Morrison, 211.

¹⁸⁶ Nellie Y. McKay, "Introduction," in *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 3-20, 10.

¹⁸⁷ McKay, 10

living and vindictive presence.’¹⁸⁸ She serves as a representation of the past and, simultaneously, ‘the object of transference and cathexis that draws out the past.’¹⁸⁹ Through the use of a phantom such as *Beloved*, Morrison calls attention to the active presence the past still has on people today, forcing the reader to confront his ghost in the same way Sethe has done, by stating the importance of community and connection with the past.

Toni Morrison believes that her writing came from the connection to her ancestors and to the past. She describes her way of storytelling as a rememory, in a way. For example, she quotes Zora Neale Hurston, who said: ‘Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.’¹⁹⁰ The memories and imagination combine in a process of ‘selection and ordering and meaning’ and ‘awe and reverence and mystery and magic’ to create a work that is more representative of the ‘milieu out of which [she writes]’ and in which my ancestors actually lived.’¹⁹¹ She describes writing as ‘a kind of literary archeology’ in the way that she ‘reconstructs the world that these remains [of the past left behind] imply.’¹⁹² Morrison’s stories rely on these sites of rememory as much as they do on historical records, again combining the authoritative connection to the past and the ‘accepted’ forms of historiography.

¹⁸⁸ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," 400.

¹⁸⁹ Krumholz, 400.

¹⁹⁰ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 91.

¹⁹¹ Morrison, 92.

¹⁹² Morrison, 92.

Beloved: Analysing Denver as a Replacement Child

‘As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered.’ – Toni Morrison¹⁹³

Another aspect of trauma theory that this chapter will discuss is the potential of seeing Denver as a ‘replacement child’. Gabriele Schwab uses the concept of the replacement child to refer to the idea that when parents lose a child, they may unconsciously feel the need to have another to replace the child they have lost in order to fill the emotional void their loss has created and to re-establish a sense of normalcy in their life.¹⁹⁴ The replacement child unknowingly feels the presence of a dead sibling in their life, even though the existence of their dead sibling has been kept secret from them. I have not yet seen anyone connect the character of Denver to this category of trauma narratives. Most studies of Denver’s relation to trauma focus on her coming to terms with her mother’s history of slavery or they analyse her growing into her role as a teacher, historian, and protector. These studies mainly deal with the relationship between Sethe and Denver, while Denver’s relationship to Beloved is relatively understudied. I believe that seeing Denver in this light might give us more insight into Toni Morrison’s reasoning and motivation for writing this book, as Denver can be seen as a character who can function as an audience-insert. Denver represents survivor's guilt. She must come to terms with the death of her sister and the Black audience today must come to terms with the death of their ancestors who died during slavery. Schwab, using the example of the Holocaust explains that replacement children are not only present within families. After violent histories, survivors and their descendants may 'grow up with the sense that their generation must replace the entire generation

¹⁹³ Morrison, *Beloved*, 41.

¹⁹⁴ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 120.

that was meant to be exterminated.¹⁹⁵ Denver is such a child: a first descendant of an enslaved family. Readers of *Beloved* that feel the haunting of slavery in their life and feel survivor's guilt as descendants of enslaved people will be able to recognise the sense to replace the people that have been lost.

In analyses of trauma in *Beloved*, a lot of focus is usually placed on Sethe and Beloved. However, in the case of studying the effects of transgenerational trauma, an analysis of Denver may offer valuable insights into the affect of repressed trauma on future generations. To repeat, Abraham and Torok state that ghosts and events that are not mourned and instead locked away in a crypt can come back to haunt later generations. Sethe has already affected her daughter Denver's life by keeping her isolated and ignorant of her mother's past. This, however, does not offer her healing and instead supplants her trauma on her Denver, despite Denver not knowing the details of what the trauma entails. Her entire childhood has been affected by the family's trauma.

Denver could be what is considered a 'replacement child'. Gabriele Schwab explains that the phenomena of replacement children are

a widespread response to the traumatic loss of a child, especially prominent during or after violent histories such as the Holocaust or other genocidal wars. Children born after such wars may feel more than the burden of having to replace the child or children whom the parents lost during the war: they grow up with the sense that their generation must replace the entire generation that was meant to be exterminated.¹⁹⁶

Denver becomes the substitute for the child her mother lost, Beloved, and more broadly, she represents the generations after slavery was abolished, who have to carry the trauma of their

¹⁹⁵ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 120.

¹⁹⁶ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 120

enslaved ancestors. Schwab explains that replacement children constantly need to fight against the idealised version of what their dead sibling could have become: [t]he replacement child confront the bitter irony that the ideal child is a dead child.¹⁹⁷ Replacement children also long for their dead sibling to return, so that they might be able to take on some of the transgenerational trauma that has been passed onto them by the parent.¹⁹⁸ Additionally, the replacement child is affected to what Derrida calls ‘supplementarity’: it becomes an object in the parent’s fantasy and they will become ‘a supplement to the *real* originary child.’¹⁹⁹ The dead sibling continues to haunt the replacement child.

Denver and Beloved are intimately connected. Denver, for example, grew up drinking the blood of Beloved along with Sethe’s breast milk. She accepts Sethe’s efforts to isolate them from the outside world and even aids her mother in the effort by refusing to talk and secluding herself even further. Krumholz notes that, while Sethe has kept Denver from knowing about her past, she has also ‘[kept] her from moving into the future.’²⁰⁰ Denver is trapped in the traumatic past of her parents, which is common with replacement children because they will always be trapped in time. Derrida states that the replacement child

is assigned by the mark of emptiness’ which is not a mere spatial absence but the absence of time itself, that is, the time of death. The replacement child is supposed to replace what came before its time – to undo time and death.²⁰¹

Denver is stuck in time and cannot come into her own being, always haunted by the expectations of who Beloved could have been and by her absence. The need to then ‘replace what came before’ echoes what Marianne Hirsch said about transgenerational trauma and descendants’ need

¹⁹⁷ Schwab, 121.

¹⁹⁸ Schwab, 121-2.

¹⁹⁹ Schwab, 122.

²⁰⁰ Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery," 404.

²⁰¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), quoted in Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 123.

to remember and fix the trauma they have inherited, despite not being able to fully understand what it is.²⁰² Denver does not know what her mother experienced because it has been kept secret from her in a family crypt. Her inability to deal with her mother's past has then caused the haunting Schwab talked about to become literal.

At first, Denver is excited about Beloved. She feels a connection to the sister she never had and is excited about feeding Beloved her stories. Beloved becomes stronger; feeding on the traumatic stories of the past she is able to extract from the residents of 124 Bluestone road, and Denver becomes even closer to Beloved. Denver even starts covering for Beloved. While Beloved is still pretending to be ill, Paul D sees her pick up a rocking chair. When Sethe confronts Denver about it, Denver says she 'didn't see no such thing.'²⁰³ Denver becomes increasingly possessive over Beloved, which hints at the trauma she has secretly been enduring. Now that Beloved is finally here, Denver can stop living up to her dead sibling's ideal and will have another person there who is dealing with the transgenerational trauma of Sethe's past. The two daughters will be able to work through it together and Denver's task of repairing her mother's trauma will be lightened.

When Sethe finally believes that Beloved is her baby daughter, the dynamics in the house change. Suddenly, Denver is the one on the outside, desperately trying to stick to both Beloved and Sethe while her mother becomes more and more invested in Beloved. Sethe starts telling Beloved stories about her past, things she has kept hidden and has never told Denver. Here it becomes clear that Denver is indeed fighting with an ideal sibling, as Sethe starts spending more

²⁰² Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), in Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 13-14.

²⁰³ Morrison, *Beloved*, 90.

time with Beloved. Additionally, characters frequently note the striking similarity between Sethe and Beloved's appearances, another connection that Denver does not have with her mother.

Denver starts sympathising with her mother again after she learns the full story of why Sethe killed Beloved. She comes to understand how Sethe's act of killing Beloved was ultimately an act of love. It was the only way to ensure that her children did not grow up in slavery like she did. Sethe and all other characters in the novel have had their subjectivity removed from them because of slavery, an experience Denver is familiar with because her existence has also never been hers alone; she always had to share her subjectivity with the image of what her sister could have been. By confronting the past and striving to change it, as Denver is doing by studying to become a teacher, the characters in *Beloved* are re-claiming their subjectivity and are healing from the past.

While Denver's role as a replacement child *within* the book is already interesting, the ways she can be seen as a reader-insert outside of the novel is also worth noting. As Gabriele Schwab noted, the replacement child can stand for more than just their sibling. They can feel as if 'their generation must replace the entire generation that was meant to be exterminated',²⁰⁴ If Beloved represents the 'sixty million and more' that died in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, then Denver represents those that survived and the next generations. Denver's character is associated with borders and crossing them. She was '[b]orn on the river that divides "free" and slave land in the midst of Sethe's flight from slavery' and therefore has a 'dual inheritance of freedom and slavery'.²⁰⁵ In the novel, Denver similarly crosses generations by becoming a teacher. Her

²⁰⁴ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 120

²⁰⁵ Krumholz, "Ghosts of Slavery." 403-404

becoming a teacher contrasts the traumatic experiences Sethe had with the white schoolteacher and allows Denver to change the story of slavery and the Black experience going into the future. Readers who identify with Denver as a replacement child of generations of enslaved people can find power in Denver's active involvement in healing the past's wrongs.

Conclusion: *Beloved*

I have shown how Morrison's *Beloved* uses magical realism. The results have affirmed the hypothesis posed at the start of this thesis. *Beloved* does indeed use magical realism to provide a counter narrative to Western empirical thought and history. Toni Morrison shows how Western history and science has been written by those in power, in this case the schoolteacher. Morrison contrasts this with a more African-inspired version of teaching done by Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs teaches community and love, and provides a counter to the teachings of the West.

This chapter also shows how magical realism occurs in the novel and how it and how it can be used to confront trauma. The magical elements (the ghosts) literally haunt the enslaved people throughout their lives. Especially the women in the novel carry a lot of transgenerational trauma that they confront together with the community. Thus, Toni Morrison shows healing from trauma needs a community and with her novel, she can give readers the same experience. Her novel confronts the reader with aspects of the past that have been left out of the dominant narrative. She makes her novel into a transformative object that works through these absences and lets the reader work through them as well.

CHAPTER 4: COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD'S*
A HISTORIC EXPLORATION OF SLAVERY'S LEGACY AND THE UNDERGROUND
AS A CRYPT

Introduction

In 2016, Colson Whitehead published his novel *The Underground Railroad* to mixed reviews. On the one hand, the book received multiple academic accolades, such as the National Book Award for fiction and the Pulitzer Prize. Because the media attention for the novel's publication generated a lot of interest, there was an increased demand for the book. Whitehead's publisher, Doubleday, 'secretly started shipping 200,000 copies in anticipation of the announcement.'²⁰⁶ While the book was generally quite well liked, there were reviews that criticised several aspects of Whitehead's writing, in particular surrounding his characterisation, the novel's setting, and Whitehead's lacking ability to immerse the reader into the story. Take for example this lay-reader's review:

Whitehead's narrative did little for me in terms of emotional connection. Few of the characters felt developed beyond archetypes and the extra chapters tucked into the narrative did little to expand them into people.²⁰⁷

Several readers left reviews bemoaning that '[t]his book is not historical fiction but fantasy. The underground RR described in this book is NOT the historical underground railroad that freed slaves'²⁰⁸ or felt that '[i]f the book was not meant to be a historical novel, it should not have

²⁰⁶ Sarah Begley, "Oprah Picks Colson Whitehead's Underground Railroad for Book Club," *TIME*, August 2, 2016, <https://time.com/4435098/oprah-colson-whitehead-underground-railroad/>.

²⁰⁷ Jessica J., "The Underground Railroad," accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30555488/reviews?reviewFilters={%22workId%22:%22kca://work/amzn1.gr.work.v1.w3i1MZHRKRjFbrU4wJf2TA%22,%22after%22:%22OTEwMCwxNDcxNTc3ODUyMDAw%22%22}>.

²⁰⁸ Ronald Papcun, "The Underground Railroad," accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.amazon.com/product-reviews/059331476X/ref=acr_dp_hist_1?ie=UTF8&filterByStar=one_star&reviewerType=all_reviews%20-%20reviews-filter-bar.

borrowed so heavily from a historical occurrence.²⁰⁹ In comparison, professional critics almost unanimously praise the novel. Michiko Kakutani from *The New York Times* praises Whitehead for his ‘potent, almost hallucinatory novel’ and compares *The Underground Railroad* to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.²¹⁰ Julian Lucas from *The New York Review of Books* calls the novel a ‘dazzling antebellum anti-myth in which the fugitive’s search for freedom – now so marketable and familiar – becomes a kind of Trojan horse.’²¹¹ Finally, Ron Charles from *The Washington Post* remarks that the novel ‘resonates with deep emotional timbre’ and ‘disrupts our settled sense of the past and stretches the ligaments of history right into our own era.’²¹² The conflicting responses to this book are to be somewhat expected considering the difficult subject the novel deals with. Nonetheless, they indicate that there is something worth investigating in this book.

The Underground Railroad is a novel about an enslaved character's escape to freedom. It might sound like a typical neo-slave narrative. However, Whitehead includes fantastical elements in his novel. For example, he turns the metaphor of the railroad into a literal train that runs underneath America and through time. The fantastical elements allow Whitehead to explore the topic of slavery, freedom, and oppression more broadly than if he had confined himself to realism. It allows him to explore the oppression of Black people throughout the history of America more extensively, enabling him to make connections between events in different eras of America's history. Whitehead rejects the idea that slavery is a moment in the past that is now

²⁰⁹ Roberts S. Bernstein, “The Underground Railroad,” accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.amazon.com/product-reviews/059331476X/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_viewopt_sr?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews&pageNumber=1&filterByStar=two_star.

²¹⁰ Michiko Kakutani, “The Underground Railroad,” accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/books/review-the-underground-railroad-colson-whitehead.html?_r=0.

²¹¹ Julian Lucas, “The Underground Railroad,” accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/09/29/colson-whitehead-new-black-worlds/>.

²¹² Ron Charles, “The Underground Railroad,” accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-underground-railroad-by-colson-whitehead-an-essential-american-novel/2016/08/01/4bcab684-55ad-11e6-b7de-dfe509430c39_story.html.

solved. Slavery and its legacy can be traced across America and across time, and its effects can still be felt today.

There are many aspects of this book that deserve investigation, but this chapter will only focus on a couple. This chapter will look at magical realist elements in *The Underground Railroad* and show how they portray an anachronistic version of America's history. This chapter will then analyse why and how Whitehead portrays history in this way, specifically Whitehead's criticism of the way historical accounts compartmentalises slavery and its consequences. Finally, I will be analysing Whitehead's novel with regard to cryptonymy, showing how the book uses the Underground Railroad as a crypt that hides decades of abuse.

The Underground Railroad: Summary and the Novel's Connection to Original Slave

Narratives

The Underground Railroad follows Cora, an enslaved teenage girl, on her journey towards freedom, which spans across several American states and several historical time periods. The book begins in Georgia, where Cora works on a cotton plantation. She is an outcast amongst the enslaved people, even though she is seen as a 'lucky charm' because her mother is the only enslaved person to ever have escaped the plantation. Cora resents her mother for leaving, because it has forced her to live in the 'Hob' with all the other outcast, enslaved people. The book then goes on to describe the atrocities the enslaved people have to endure on the Randall plantation, including sexual violence, physical abuse, and an overall lack of afforded humanity. It is after Cora saves a young, enslaved boy from being killed by a beating that she accepts another enslaved person's, Caesar's, invitation to escape together via the Underground Railroad.

The introductory chapters, place Whitehead's novel firmly in line with autobiographical slave narratives by using several elements that would have been found in these stories, such as: an 'I was born' section, a description of the enslaved person's personal history, graphic depictions of violence, a recount of other enslaved people's failed attempts at escape, and a moment of enlightenment that starts the road to escape.²¹³ Whitehead's invocation of classic slave-narratives via these intertextual elements injects realism and authenticity into the story. He takes inspiration from famous slave narratives such as the accounts of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs.²¹⁴ He then subverts expectations by adding magical realism and third-person narration to the familiar stories of antebellum slave narratives. Third-person accounts of history, as previously mentioned by Ashraf Rushdy, is one of the main forms of neo-slave narratives.

From this point on, the novel diverges from realistic portrayals of slavery. The conductor of the railroad tells Caesar and Cora that he cannot tell them where they will be going: "Away from here, that's all I can tell you [...] You won't know what waits above until you pull in."²¹⁵ And he is right; no-one knows what is waiting for them at the next station because the railroad carts seem to travel through time. Each station brings Cora to a different point in history, spread from the the end of the Civil War in 1865 all the way up to the 1930s.²¹⁶ With every new location, Cora 'emerg[es] magically into a new world.'²¹⁷ Every state is a new 'state of possibility' of what America might have been like. The anachronistic setting of the novel allows Whitehead

²¹³ Paula Martín Salván, "Narrative Structure and the Unnarrated in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies* 41 (March 10, 2020): pp. 11-33, <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.41.2020.11-33>, 12-13.

²¹⁴ James Mellis, "Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *Religions* 10, no. 404 (June 26, 2019): pp. 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10070403>, 4.

²¹⁵ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 81

²¹⁶ Madhu Dubey, "Museumizing Slavery: Living History in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *American Literary History* 32, no. 1 (December 27, 2019): pp. 111-139, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajz056>, 112.

²¹⁷ Paula Martín Salván, "Narrative Structure and the Unnarrated in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies*, no. 41 (2020): pp. 11-33, <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.41.2020.11-33>, 21.

to connect all these states of possibility together. He shows a eugenics experiment, referring to the fact that, throughout the 20th century, women were forcibly sterilised. These were overwhelmingly working-class women of colour. Whitehead mentions a experimental medical study in the book which could be a reference to the Tuskagee syphilis experiment of the 1970s, where Black men were not given the same medication as white men to study the spread of syphilis. In North-Carolina, Whitehead constructs a state that will remind the reader of the Jim Crow-era lynch mobs of the 19th and 20th century. Whitehead connects all these events through his magical railroad and shows how slavery has harmed the Black community throughout history.

Anachronism and Magical History in *The Underground Railroad*

Colson Whitehead's novel operates in an anachronistic version of history, one that combines and distorts settings from America's past. All of these counterfactual settings are connected by a literal underground railroad that runs through the country and seemingly allows Cora and Caesar to travel through time (although this is never confirmed by the characters). Whitehead's idea for this novel is based on a 'childhood notion' that the historical underground railroad was a real railroad.²¹⁸ He states that, through developing this concept, he imagined what could happen 'if every state our hero went through - as he or she ran North - was a different state of American possibility?'²¹⁹ The states Whitehead's characters visit seem uncanny, but, as the author states, he merely 'plays with time'.²²⁰ This is what makes the novel so effective in its use of history. Michael Docherty makes the great case that Colson Whitehead's novel cannot be considered alternate history because of the lack of inventions or exaggerations in its portrayals of history aside from his literal Underground Railroad. Docherty believes that Whitehead's novel

²¹⁸ David Bianculli and Colson Whitehead, *NPR*, November 18, 3026, <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/18/502558001/colson-whiteheads-underground-railroad-is-a-literal-train-to-freedom>.

²¹⁹ Bianculli and Whitehead.

²²⁰ Bianculli and Whitehead.

‘articulates its relationship to the historical fiction genre in terms of departure and disruption rather than straightforward participation.’²²¹ Instead of alternative historiography, Docherty calls Whitehead’s method ‘magical history’, in which Whitehead uses ahistorical elements that are ‘not in conflict with [the novel’s] wealth of [...] historical detail but rather are *how* that wealth of detail is reconstituted and catalyzed to tell a bigger story than that of Cora herself’.²²² Matthew Dischinger’s analysis of the novel seems largely in agreement, though he calls Whitehead’s method ‘historical satire’. Dischinger says that ‘the novel’s speculative premise works in conjunction with satire to create a narrative space in which fantasy can work in the service of understanding, rather than obscuring, peripheralized histories.’²²³ Both Docherty and Dischinger believe that the anachronism in *The Underground Railroad* serves as a way to critically engage with history that would not have been possible without it. In Dischinger’s case, the satirical elements serve as a critique against dominant historical narratives. In Docherty’s, magical history provides Whitehead a way to connect various historical events together and ‘imbricate his narrative in a deeper and broader sense of the sweep of American racial history’.²²⁴ Both Dischinger and Docherty seem to agree that Whitehead’s re-ordering of history goes beyond mere historical fiction and instead carries with it political messages and a call for his readers to critically engage with history.

²²¹ Michael Docherty, “To ‘Refract Time’: The Magical History of Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*,” in *21st Century US Historical Fiction*, ed. Ruth Maxey (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 33-52, 39.

²²² Docherty, “To ‘Refract Time,” 45.

²²³ Matthew Dischinger, “States of Possibility in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*,” *The Global South* 11, no. 1 (2017): pp. 82-99, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/globalsouth.11.1.05>, 83.

²²⁴ Docherty, 46.

Magical Realism and the Myth of the Historical Underground Railroad

The choice of the novel's Underground Railroad as a magical realist framework is fitting, considering the historical version of the Underground Railroad is almost mythologised in American history. The historical underground, as Sonia Weiner explains, 'was a minor movement even in its heyday.'²²⁵ Later, it was converted "'into romantic adventure stories' featuring white heroes and 'helpless black vagabonds'".²²⁶ This reworking is, according to David Blight, a deliberate 'romantic fix that conceals complex racial realities and reckonings.'²²⁷ It is in itself a rearrangement between the real/historical and the imagined/fictional. Kathryn Schulz describes the situation as 'not quite wrong, but simplified; not quite a myth, but mythologized'.²²⁸ The Underground Railroad is already at an intersection of fact and fiction, which allows Whitehead to create these intersections at other points of his novel, too.

Whitehead's blend of fact and fiction criticises the way in which Western history is usually formatted, especially in its cultural institutions. Madhu Dubey notes that the Underground Railroad in the novel shows America's history as a 'Living History tour', in which the past is 'sequestered in regionally distinct enclaves'.²²⁹ However, contrary to these tours, Whitehead's novel disrupts the idea that historical moments can be separated from one another. For this, the novel uses its magical realist railroad and its anachronism. The railroad connects

²²⁵ Sonia Weiner, "'The Direction of the Bizarre': Reimagining History in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," in *American Literature in the Era of Trumpism: Alternative Realities*, ed. Dolores Resano (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 159-182, 161.

²²⁶ David W. Blight, ed., *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2006), in Weiner, 161.

²²⁷ Blight in Weiner, 161.

²²⁸ Kathryn Schulz, "The Perilous Lure of the Underground Railroad," *The New Yorker*, 22 Aug. 2016, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/22/the-perilous-lure-of-the-underground-railroad/, as quoted in Salvan, "Narrative Structure," 14.

²²⁹ Dubey, "Museumizing Slavery," 124.

historical moments to each other, exposing the 'convergence of slavery with events from later historical periods.'²³⁰ Whitehead presents these historical events in such a way that readers are forced to see a direct link between slavery and, for example, the syphilis experiment in the 1970s. Whitehead shows that, while they happened in different times, slavery has continued to affect the Black community and still does to this day. History cannot be sequestered into neat periods with a beginning and an end when people keep moving between these periods. The descendants of enslaved people connect these periods together.

Magical Realism and Living History

Colson Whitehead criticises Western approaches to history more thoroughly in the chapter *South Carolina*. In this chapter, Cora lives in relative freedom under a fake name, Bessie, as a nanny. She gets recommended a new position by the lady of the house: a new position in the Museum of Natural Wonders came up, and the lady thought she would be perfect for it. When Cora walks through the hallways that are off-limits to the public, she spots sights such as a man performing taxidermy on a badger and another worker studying rocks. Then she meets Mr. Field, who tells her that she will be part of a Living History exhibit. This is another historical reference. The museum in the novel is potentially inspired by the historical 'ethnographic villages and concession stands of world fairs' in the 1870's, which 'peddl[ed] the plantation romance of slavery', where white audiences could go to look at Black people in mock villages which emphasised their 'savage' nature.²³¹ The museum in the novel does not give its audience an authentic look into the lives of enslaved people because that would be too confrontational to its white public. Instead, the museum provides them with a more comforting alternative in which

²³⁰ Weiner, "The Direction of the Bizarre", 160.

²³¹ Dubey, "Museumizing Slavery," 4.

enslaved people could do small, menial tasks. These are the stories white audiences want to be told. Whitehead refuses to comply to these wishes and instead hold up a mirror to his audience. He shows them how these comforting representations of slavery such as the Living History Museum ignore the reality to pander to people's desire for comfort.

Cora notes that the living history museum uses wax statues to display scenes with white people. Thus, Cora will be objectified and displayed among animals, wax figures, and rocks. She is not treated as a person but is considered an object to be studied. The white crowds that come to visit her do not treat her civilly. They bang on the glass, yell rude suggestions at the girls, and point at her disrespectfully. Even in South Carolina, the most progressive place Cora has been thus far, she is still not equal to white people.

There are three scenes Cora will be displayed in: Scenes of Darkest Africa, Life on the Slave Ship, and Typical Day on the Plantation, all neatly divided exhibits and separated from the public by a glass wall. Cora knows from personal experience that the Typical Day scene, in which she spins cotton on a spinning wheel and feeds chickens, is anything but typical or authentic. When she brings this up to Mr. Fields, he concedes that 'spinning wheels were not often used outdoors [...]' but countered that while authenticity was their watchword, the dimensions of the room forced certain concessions.²³² He cannot fit 'an entire field of cotton' into the display. The scene of the Life on a Slave Ship is equally inaccurate. Cora is portrayed as an apprentice sailor instead of cargo. The Scene of Darkest Africa, in comparison, looks rough and unpleasant to sell the idea that African people needed saving. It is implied that this is not what Cora's criticism was about. Most likely, her criticism would be more along the lines of depicting the brutality that slavery was actually like. Mr. Fields' exhibit is a *romanticisation* of slavery for

²³² Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 131.

profit and a representation of the misinformation in history books when it comes to the atrocities of slavery. Through these scenes, Whitehead critiques the dominant Western narrative of slavery as it has been perpetuated.

Cora defies the idea that enslaved people needed their white masters during her employment at the museum. Weiner notes that "she begins as a slave on the "Plantation" display; she proceeds to "Life on the Slave Ship," and ends as a free woman in "Scenes from Darkest Africa."²³³ She prefers this sequence, going from slavery to Africa, over the other way around. By doing this, Cora also turns the typical historical narrative on its head by not ending her story as a free woman in America. 'It was like going back in time, an unwinding of America', Cora says.²³⁴

In addition, she reclaims agency over her story. She hates the way the exhibit has turned her 'back to a state of display.'²³⁵ Instead of remaining as a passive part of the exhibit, she decides to teach them a lesson, namely that 'the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too.'²³⁶ She wants to find the weak links in the audience, the weak links in the 'mighty iron that subjugated millions'²³⁷ She becomes an active participant, staring down her audience one member at a time and making them aware that they are watching a simulacrum. Madhu Dubey explains it thusly: Cora is 'interrupting the naturalist illusion of transparent representation by recasting herself as a performer rather than a mute display artefact.'²³⁸ Once again, Whitehead re-enforces the idea that the dominant history needs a critical rethinking. The ways history is

²³³ Weiner, *The Underground Railroad*, 174.

²³⁴ Whitehead, 149.

²³⁵ Whitehead, 150.

²³⁶ Whitehead, 151.

²³⁷ Whitehead, 150.

²³⁸ Dubey, "Museumizing Slavery," 115.

presented is not representative of reality because it does not sufficiently acknowledge the connections between different ‘episodes’ of history and does not give marginalised communities the opportunity to take agency over the story of their ancestors or community. Whitehead’s magical realist setting creates the narrative space to rethink this history by making the connections clearer and allowing his protagonist character to retell her story in a counter narrative that challenges dominant ideas in Western history.

Colson Whitehead questions the possibility of authenticity and transparent representation of slavery and its trauma within a capitalist society where those representations of slavery are marketable and profitable. In the Living History museum, Whitehead already criticises the way enslaved people’s experiences are being exploited, but his criticism also goes outside of the text and against the novel itself. Whitehead raises questions about the ethical implications of representing the traumatic experiences of slavery for profit, and the responsibility of artists and writers in presenting a respectful representation of such events. Whitehead’s use of magical realism to depict the trauma of slavery can be seen as a form of distancing from the harsh realities of history, while also grounding the story in historical fact. *The Underground Railroad* exists as a product of capitalism that, in a way, profits off of slavery. However, Whitehead uses methods that intentionally make the novel less marketable, critiques the practice of romanticisation of slavery for profit, and uses magical realism to turn this novel into a transformational object that can be used to heal from transgenerational trauma.

Intentional Distancing: Commercialising Traumatic Experiences

Colson Whitehead might intentionally be distancing readers from his characters and thereby creating a respectful distance between enslaved people’s experiences and current readers

of the novel. It highlights the idea that there is no perfect way to represent slavery because it is not understandable for most people in the present. There is no possible way to convey what slavery would have been like to someone who has not experienced it themselves. As Gabriele Schwab explained, a certain distance is sometimes required to be able to process traumatic legacies and violent histories. One way in which this can be done is through magical realism, but in *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead may have also intentionally created distance between his characters' experiences and those of his readers. One of the main criticisms of *The Underground Railroad* among lay readers is that the characters difficult to relate to and distant, as the comments in this chapter's introduction indicate. Cora's narration is very matter-of-fact. In certain ways, she seems almost desensitised to the violence around her, as if she has locked her true emotions inside her. It is very different from the sensationalism that readers might expect from a story about an enslaved girl's flight to freedom.

Considering Whitehead's criticism of authenticity and capitalist motives in portrayals of slavery, he might intentionally be going against the sensationalist conventions that he knows sell well. Instead of a romanticised story of slavery that will sell a lot of copies because it makes audiences comfortable, Whitehead denies them his readers this comfort. Instead of the story ending with Cora's freedom, Whitehead chooses an open ending. He ends the novel with Cora in a wagon on her way to St. Louis, still on the run and still uncertain of her future. The audience has no idea what alternate universe St. Louis might belong to. History books state that St Louis was a “gateway.” The city straddl[ing] shifting boundaries between slavery and freedom.²³⁹ The city of St. Louis was a place where hundreds of enslaved people bought or sued for their freedom, so much so that Dale Edwyna Smith says the city had 'a powerful magnetic pull to

²³⁹ Dale Edwyna Smith, *African American Lives in St. Louis, 1763–1865 Slavery, Freedom and the West* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017), epub, 18.1/456.

freedom' that 'made and remade "American" identities and with them the roles of blacks in the region.'²⁴⁰ The open ending of the novel reinforces the idea that the story of slavery is not one that is ever finished. Like the book, it continues onwards into the future.

Whitehead also creates extra distance between the audience and his work by acknowledging the multiplicity of stories of enslaved people. In the very last sentence of the book, Cora regards an old man who is on the wagon with her and questions 'where he escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he travelled before he put it behind him.'²⁴¹ It calls attention to the fact that Cora's story is one of many, and an unlikely one at that. Salván argues that this way, the novel 'bears witness to the exceptionality of successful escape and survival.'²⁴² Throughout the book, Whitehead has titled his chapters after other enslaved characters. Of these, Cora is the only one still alive by the end of the novel. Rather than normalising it as something recurrent, it places Cora's story in the wider perspective of many failed attempts.²⁴³ It might be more comforting to not question that most neo-slave narratives end in freedom and to pretend that successful escape was common. However, Whitehead refuses his readers this narrative by making it clear that Cora's story is rare, surrounding her story with ones of unsuccessful escapes that ended in death.

Furthermore, Whitehead emphasises the untold histories of real-life enslaved people and uses them to emphasise that Cora's story is an outlier. Whitehead does this, for example, by beginning several sections of the novel with a slave advertisement. Docherty states that the

²⁴⁰ Smith, 8.6/456.

²⁴¹ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 366.

²⁴² Salván, "Narrative Structure," 26.

²⁴³ Salván, 26.

inclusion of these real documents connects Whitehead's fiction to historical truth.²⁴⁴ Docherty states that the subtle ways Whitehead rearranges history also affects these slave advertisements: he changed the wording of one to make it better fit the surrounding chapters and have a bigger psychological impact.²⁴⁵ Additionally, Whitehead mimicked the writing of genuine slave advertisements to create one for his fictional protagonist Cora. His reason for this was that 'sometimes you can't compete with the actual historical document' and to accurately mimic the dehumanising language these slave advertisements used.²⁴⁶ The effect of the addition of these documents is that the boundary between fiction and fact is blurred further. The slave ad for Cora becomes another one of the many in history. Behind all of these slave advertisements is a story that the reader can only see from the perspective of the white master who wants to get their property back. Behind every slave ad is the untold story of a fugitive individual that the reader will not get to read.

Crypts and Transgenerational Trauma in *The Underground Railroad*

Like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Colson Whitehead's novel also functions as a transformational object by confronting the haunting of the past on the present. Whitehead shows this haunting in two major ways: by showing how Cora is affected by transgenerational trauma, and by transforming the myth of the historical Underground Railroad into crypt. Like Morrison's, Whitehead's novel shows how Cora breaks through these crypts and works through the transgenerational phantom that has been haunting her family. By doing so, the novel can help

²⁴⁴ Docherty, "To 'Refract Time'," 50.

²⁴⁵ Docherty, 51.

²⁴⁶ Terry Gross, "Colson Whitehead's 'Underground Railroad' Is a Literal Train to Freedom." *Fresh Air*, August 8, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/08/489168232/colson-whiteheads-underground-railroad-is-a-literaltrain-to-freedom>, quoted in Docherty, 41.

other victims of racial injustice heal, although Whitehead shows that the legacy of slavery will continue to haunt for a very long time.

Whitehead's retelling of history opens the crypt at the centre of American society and exposes the shameful facts of American history that people have been trying to erase from the national consciousness. The novel hints at the fact that slavery exists as a buried secret in American society. Lumbly, one of the underground's station agents, who helps Caesar and Cora when they make their first journey, remarks that '[i]f you want to see what this nation is all about [...] you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America.'²⁴⁷ Cora follows these instructions and sees 'only darkness, mile after mile.'²⁴⁸ This could be a reference to the people with darker skin tones who built the foundations of America, or it could be a reference to the dark secret hidden in these foundations, buried underground in a crypt. Another reference to the silence surrounding slavery is made when Cora comments on the Declaration of Independence and says that she 'wasn't sure the document described anything real at all. America was a ghost in the darkness, like her.'²⁴⁹ Whitehead directly addresses the faults of this mentality, of trying to hide the worst parts of slavery from the historical narrative, and shows how this 'ghost in the darkness' can come back to haunt later generations if it is not addressed and worked through.

One of the most direct ways the novel shows the negative influence a trauma can have on later generations is through showing the transgenerational trauma transmitted down Cora's maternal line. The novel established the importance of Cora's ancestors. It starts with the story of Ajarry, Cora's grandmother, and explains how she was taken away from her village in Africa

²⁴⁷ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 83.

²⁴⁸ Whitehead, 84.

²⁴⁹ Whitehead, 216.

and displaced on an American plantation. Her story is one of loss: loss of family members, loss of dignity, and loss of freedom. She carries all these experiences with her and develops a ‘new blankness behind her eyes, which made her look simpleminded.’²⁵⁰ From this, it would seem Ajarry has locked her experiences within her. She does not grieve her trauma, thus unconsciously passing them onto her daughter Mabel. Mabel herself also goes through trauma, being a woman on a plantation. For example, Moses, an enslaved man rapes her and threatens to hurt Cora to make Mabel behave: “how old is your Cora now? Cora was eight. Mabel didn’t fight him after that.”²⁵¹ It breaks her. When Mabel decides to escape the plantation, she leaves Cora with a final apology that Cora was not able to hear. Cora does not forgive her mother for running away without her, and carries that rage alongside her ancestor’s trauma. Cora mentions, for example, that she cannot remember a lot from her mother. ‘What she remembered most was her sadness.’²⁵² Her mother’s desertion makes Cora an outsider on the plantation. She becomes one of the Hob people, the ones that have been broken by slavery or have ‘lost their wits’.²⁵³ It results in her acting the way her grandmother and mother would have acted. For example, Cora fights for the right to keep her own vegetable patch when other enslaved people try to claim her land. Additionally, Cora’s impersonation of her grandmother is mentioned when it comes to escaping the plantation: ‘[t]he first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said no. That was her grandmother talking.’²⁵⁴ When she says ‘yes’ later, she is channelling her mother instead, who is famous for being the only one to successfully escape from the plantation. From these sentences, it becomes clear just how much of her family members Cora carries with her.

²⁵⁰ Whitehead, 8.

²⁵¹ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 350.

²⁵² Whitehead, 64.

²⁵³ Whitehead, 19.

²⁵⁴ Whitehead, 3.

Cora must integrate the traumatic memories of her grandmother and mother with her own sense of self, but the presence of this transgenerational trauma Cora carries with her manifests itself throughout the novel in the form of various crypts in which Cora retreats. One of these crypts is the Underground Railroad itself. However, one of the most noticeable crypts is Cora's hiding spot in an attic in North Carolina, where mobs of white people will murder one Black person every week in the park that is visible from Cora's hiding spot. She watches the square from a tiny spy hole in the wood of the attic, in a manner that is very reminiscent of Harriet Jacobs in her book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Here, Cora reflects on what slavery is to her:

Freedom was a thing that shifted as you looked at it, the way a forest is dense with trees up close but from outside, from the empty meadow, you see its true limits. Being free had nothing to do with chains or how much space you had. On the plantation, she was not free, but she moved unrestricted on its acres, tasting the air and tracing the summer stars. The place was big in its smallness. Here, she was free of her master but slunk around a warren so tiny she couldn't stand.²⁵⁵

Here, Patrycja Antoszek makes an interesting connection between Cora's actions and Abraham and Torok's study. Antoszek notes that Abraham and Torok's 'melancholic incorporation' involves an 'almost literal "swallowing" of the lost object in a refusal to mourn.'²⁵⁶ Antoszek notes that 'Cora reverses the process by finally losing the contents of her stomach and bowels in the small space of her crypt-like nook.'²⁵⁷ The reversal brings her back to the source of her trauma as she dreams about being on a slave-ship:

²⁵⁵ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 215.

²⁵⁶ Patrycja Antoszek, "The Neo-Gothic Imaginary and the Rhetoric of Loss in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *Polish Journal for American Studies*, no. 13 (Autumn 2019) (October 15, 2019): pp. 271-279, <https://doi.org/10.7311/pjas.13/2/2019.08>, 276.

²⁵⁷ Antoszek, 276.

in the night she had dreamed she was at sea and chained belowdecks. Next to her was another captive, and another, hundreds of them crying in terror.²⁵⁸

Cora, by dreaming about the slave ship, is confronting the transgenerational trauma that she has inherited. She is confronting Ajarry's trauma and finally embracing this history to work through it. She starts mourning the people she has lost throughout her journey. Antoszek explains that it is this recognition of this loss and her acknowledgment of the people she has lost that give Cora agency over herself. *The Underground Railroad* urges people to confront the haunting of slavery in American society and gives people a way to heal from the transgenerational trauma that has been passed down to them, in addition to the trauma they still experience. For, as Whitehead makes clear, slavery is not an event of the past. Its consequences stretch throughout the whole of American history and into the present.

The Underground Railroad presents itself as another crypt. Sonia Weiner describes how Whitehead uses the theme of 'the underground' in African-American popular culture, comparing it to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), where the underground is a place to retreat and gather strength. Weiner cites author Will Hunt, who stresses the empowering nature of the underground and notes that:

We go underground to die, but also to be reborn, to emerge from the womb of the earth; we dread the underground, and yet it is our first refuge in times of danger;" and not least, he adds, the underground is not only "the realm of repressed memory" but also crucially of "luminous revelation" (Hunt 2019, 29). Hunt additionally designates the underground as a site where "the seams of ineffability in the world" become apparent, that is, a site of wonder beyond words (Hunt 2019, 266).²⁵⁹

Joseph Whittaker goes into more detail about the theme of the underground in African American literature. He explains that the underground's reputation in African American literature is a

²⁵⁸ Whitehead, 217.

²⁵⁹ Weiner, "'The Direction of the Bizarre', 162.

combination of African, European, and North-American influences. He gives examples of African religious beliefs and customs, where the underground is associated with the ‘wide-spread African belief in the living-dead’.²⁶⁰ John Mbiti explains that African tribes believed that ‘the spirits dwell in the underground, netherworld, or the subterranean regions’.²⁶¹ Death is less final than in European societies. Mbiti states that ‘[w]hen memory of the living-dead fades away from relatives and ethnic members ... then their process of dying is complete’ and they enter a ‘state of *collective immortality*.’ (emphasis in original)²⁶² The underground also stands for ‘symbolic death and resurrection’ and ‘youths undergoing initiation and puberty rites’. Whittaker continues by stating that European texts of the underground mainly function as ‘models to emulate or to counter... because contemporary metaphors of the underground have to contend with the influence of science and history, and older fictional models have lost their traditional spiritual centre.’²⁶³ The combination of European and African contexts result in African-American underground metaphors that are in a ‘discourse between the dominant (white) social world above ground and the shifting zones of identity below ground.’²⁶⁴ The theme of the underground is usually connected to the narrative of fugitive to freedom.

The Underground Railroad adheres to the tradition of using the theme of the underground as a place of rebirth and mourning. For example, in one passage towards the end of the novel Cora is escaping from the slave catcher who has chased her down into the underground. She reminisces about all the people who have made the Underground Railroad possible and says:

²⁶⁰ Joseph Whittaker, "Metaphors of the Underground in Contemporary African American Literature," (1998), 2..

²⁶¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), quoted in Whittaker, 2.

²⁶² Mbiti, *African Religions*, quoted in Whittaker, "Metaphors of the Underground," 10.

²⁶³ Whittaker, 6.

²⁶⁴ Whittaker, 7.

Who are you after you finish something this magnificent—in constructing it you have also journeyed through it, to the other side. On one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light.²⁶⁵

The scene recalls African myths about teenagers finding themselves after initiation, remembering the dead, and being symbolically resurrected. Cora escapes her pursuer by murdering him and can thus continue her journey to freedom, matching the African-American motif of the underground being associated with a slavery to freedom story. She leaves the crypt of slavery and enters a new world of freedom. However, as per African beliefs, the novel suggests that the dead still influence the present. The novel shows that the legacy of slavery is still very much alive in American society, in a living-dead state. According to Mbiti, the living-dead will fully pass away when their memory dies, but in the case of slavery, they will always be remembered. As Whitehead's narrator writes: '[h]ere's one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can't. Its scars will never fade.'²⁶⁶ However, as Cora proves in the novel, it is still possible to mourn the people you have lost and come out of that dark place as a stronger person.

Conclusion: *The Underground Railroad*

Through his use of the magical Underground Railroad, Whitehead shows the importance of remembering slavery *and* the continued effects it has had on history by directly connecting the events, making them impossible to be separated from one another. His use of magical realism and anachronism critiques the ways the dominant narrative of history has categorised events in history into segments, as can be seen in the museum parts of the novel. Whitehead provides his readers with a counter narrative that criticises official history and provides an alternative that is written from the margins, enabling the Black community to take agency over their history. In

²⁶⁵ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 363.

²⁶⁶ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 340.

doing so, Whitehead makes his novel into a transformational object that addresses the crypt of slavery and its legacy, giving his readers a way to work through the transgenerational trauma that they have inherited. Whitehead opens the crypt that American society has tried to hide away in myth and makes it the focal point of his novel. The characters in *The Underground Railroad* hide away under the surface and emerge stronger than before, adhering to the theme of the underground as a semi-magical place in African-American literature.

It is clear that unearthing this buried history is necessary to come out stronger at the end and it is time to acknowledge how the trauma of slavery still affects the present like a living-dead phantom, as Derrida, Abraham and Torok have explained. After all, injustice against the Black community still continues, even to this day. Whitehead may not have written about things such as police brutality in his novel, but it is not at all unimaginable that Cora could have exited a station in the twenty-first century. The railroad tracks can be traced into the present and will run along into the future.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with the question: why do Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead use magical realism in their neo-slave narratives *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad* respectively?

I hypothesised that the reason behind the use of magical realism in these neo-slave narratives, was twofold. I believed magical realism provided the authors (Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead) with the tools to question the dominance of Western modes of thinking. I also hypothesised that these two authors used magical realism to address the legacy of slavery. They show how the trauma of slavery still affects the present. Finally, I believed that magical realism could help those affected by the violent history of slavery by giving them a method to work through this trauma.

First, I have shown how magic realism has developed into a postcolonial genre that serves to highlight the different modes of thinking in various cultures. It has become a genre where hybrid cultures can find balance. I have also shown how magic realism is connected to neo-slave narratives and trauma studies; it gives authors of neo-slave narratives the tools to critique the dominance of Western schools of thought and Western historiography. Moreover, magic realism gives authors a way to respectfully address the trauma of marginalised communities. These novels then turn into transformational objects that can help communities heal from collective transgenerational trauma.

Beloved shows the damage that has been done by Western modes of thought. Morrison shows, for example, that Western teachings have helped construct the narrative that African-

Americans are inferior. She also shows how the African-American experience has been limited in Western historiography: the rituals of Baby Suggs and the acceptance of ghosts and other such beliefs have been undermined by Western modes of thought. *Beloved* provides a counter narrative to this history. Furthermore, Morrison uses a ghost character, or, more precisely, a character that *could* be a ghost, to display the haunting of slavery in society literally. Additionally, she shows how the consequences of slavery are still felt today by using methods such as rememory and transgenerational trauma. Morrison shows how slavery has affected enslaved mothers specifically but also shows that male characters suffer from the trauma of slavery. The only way characters in *Beloved* start healing from their traumatic past is through storytelling and communal practices, which *Beloved* as a novel facilitates. The novel in itself, becomes an object that can be used to connect people, make them aware of the past of slavery, and creates a community that can heal together through reading, remembering, and talking about the novel.

The Underground Railroad similarly confronts Western portrayals of American history and confronts the amnesia surrounding slavery by showing how it affects contemporary Americans. Whitehead critiques the ways American history sequesters periods of history and pretends as if these incidents cannot be traced back to one shared origin. His magical Underground Railroad shows how these incidents are all connected, and the Museum of Living History underlines his point. Moreover, Whitehead's confronts the trauma of slavery by having his characters enter the crypt underneath America. He uses his magical Underground Railroad to show how it can be a place to gather the strength to confront trauma.

Thus, the analyses in this thesis affirm the hypothesis posited at the start. The authors of these neo-slave narratives use magical realism to critique and show the gaps Western modes of thought

and historiography. They also both use magical realism to show how communities that have been affected by slavery of the legacy thereof how they can work through the trauma and confront the crypts in national history.

This study shows how these two neo-slave narratives in particular use magic realism but more research needs to be done to discover if there is a larger trend in magical realist neo-slave narratives. There are more unknown or more recent neo-slave narratives that have magical realist elements that have not yet been analysed. These include, for example, Jabari Asim's *Yonder: A Novel* (2022).

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