

# Beating Back the Past: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as Historiographic Metafiction

M<sup>a</sup> Lourdes López Ropero  
*Universidad de Santiago de Compostela*

As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* suggest, the terms 'postcolonial,' 'postmodern,' and 'poststructuralist' are "inconvenient labels which cover a wide range of overlapping literary and cultural practices" (163). In this paper I intend to argue that whereas the postcolonial and the postmodern cannot be conflated unproblematically and should thus be considered independent phenomena, they however prove to have similar concerns in terms of form, themes and strategies. Thus, thematic concerns regarding history and marginality, issues such as what has been called 'magic realism,' and discursive strategies like irony are all shared by both the postcolonial and the postmodern. My emphasis throughout this paper will be on the postcolonial and postmodern critique of historical reconstructions, reading Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) as what Linda Hutcheon has called *historiographic metafiction*.

Hayden White, along with other contemporary philosophers of history such as Foucault or La Capra, has stressed the fictive character of historical reconstructions and has challenged history's claim to a place among the sciences. In *Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe: Metahistory* (1973), a pioneer work of New Historicism, White sees history as a mode of discourse which is culturally motivated and ideologically conditioned. The past real is only available to us through its always already interpreted, textualized remains—documents, newspaper clippings, archival evidence, oral testimonies—which have turned empirical historical events into historical fact by selection and narrative positioning. Such notion of history as a discursive practice destabilizes history's fixity, its givenness, to the extent that history can no longer sustain its nineteenth century illusion of being a transparent representation of the truth. Furthermore, in this view, the distinction between history and literature blurs, for they are both discursive systems that use narrative to construct and interpret the world. This line of thought pervades Linda Hutcheon's work *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1995), where she displays a "pluralistic view of historiography as consisting of different but equally meaningful constructions of past reality" (96). Hutcheon points at historiography's refocusing on previously neglected or silenced objects of study such as women, homosexuals or racial minorities. An example of this revisionist effort to restore historical data is the work of feminist historian Gerda Lerner, whose *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (1973) pieces together the unrecorded lives of many African-American women from documentary sources. The story of Margaret Garner is one of the many in Lerner's documentary of black women in white America. Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave from Kentucky in the pre-civil

war years, killed her youngest child and threatened to kill her other three rather than them reduced again to slavery. She wasn't judged for infanticide, but for the crime of raping and therefore robbing her owner of his property, and was eventually sent back i slavery.

Even if it is true that feminist historiography owes a lot to the work of researchers su as Lerner, it is also true that we can learn as much from the contributions of fictional counts. Thus, Toni Morrison's text *Beloved* reinscribes the story of Margaret Garner. fact, the thrust of Morrison's fiction is the same as that of feminist historiography. Morris sees her enterprise as "a kind of literary archeology: on the basis of some information and little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and reconstruct the world that these remains imply" ("The Site of Memory" 112). As a histor archeologizing the past, her narratives not only add African-American pieces to the mos of history, but try to inscribe what slave narratives themselves repressed. Aiming an au ence that could alleviate their condition, authors of slave narratives such as Harriet Jacc or Frederick Douglass succumbed to the literary conventions of the day in order to avc disturbing details, using well-known formulas such as "but let us drop a veil over the proceedings too terrible to relate" ("The Site of Memory" 110). Although slave narrativ were representations of a subversive historical consciousness, authors repressed the inn life of their characters and the bleakest realities of slavery in order to avoid censorsl while preaching their abolitionist gospel. In turn, Morrison's job as a writer is "to rip t veil . . . to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives" ("The Site. Memory" 110; 119). Toni Morrison, like many other postcolonial writers and critics, c mands that the author should be committed to the task of ripping the veil and reinscribi what has been silenced in the history of black people. The text of *Beloved*, therefore, re scribes the story of the fugitive slave Margaret Garner, Sethe in the novel. Like the mag and the 'real,' fiction and historical fact blend in *Beloved*, which can be read as a hist riographic metafiction. According to Linda Hutcheon, some of the defining characteristi of this postmodern genre are its focus on "the past of the formerly excluded ex-centric" (*Poetics of Postmodernism* 95)—the 'subaltern' in Spivak's terms—and its contention th not only history has a truth claim, since "both history and fiction are discourses and bc derive their major truth claim from that identity" (93). But perhaps the most obvious c tique that historiographic metafiction makes of traditional history is the celebration countermemory as a means to construct the past. Countermemory questions the linearity traditional historical narratives by blurring pastpresentfuture distinctions. As we will see *Beloved*, countermemory offers a whimsical rendering of history, as the characters' co sciousness dictates. Furthermore, as George Lipsitz rightly points out, countermemo "starts with the local, the immediate and the personal . . . and then builds outward toward total story" (213). Likewise, Morrison makes Sethe's story into history, both the unwritt historical narrative of African-American Margaret Garner, and a personalized chronicle slavery from the pre-civil war years through the Reconstruction. An examination of a fe crucial moments in the novel will illustrate the points I have been making so far.

The opening paragraph of *Beloved* situates the reader in a very specific place at time—124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, 1874. This information is conveyed through tl

seemingly stable narrative voice of a detached third person narrator who tells the reader about Sethe and Denver's life with the infuriated ghost of Beloved, Sethe's murdered daughter. Yet these stable elements that the novel first differentiates—space, time, and voice—will soon be dispersed throughout the narrative, which features a gallery of characters trying to reconstruct their past “wrapped in a timeless present” (184). Memory is indeed the driving force of the narrative, understood in spatial rather than in temporal terms. Early in the novel, Sethe disavows time saying:

It is hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. But it is not. Places, places are still there. . . . I mean, 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. (35)

This spacial conceptualization of memory replaces chronological lines, dealing instead with webs of interconnections. Therefore, the characters in *Beloved* will not provide us with ordered facts about their lives in slavery and post-bellum America, but will force us to reconstruct them out of randomly remembered images, and seemingly incomprehensible incidents. For instance, the narrator explains how Sethe was seized with the idea of killing her daughter through the metaphor of hummingbirds hitting her head:

[Because] the truth was simple . . . she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming . . . she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. . . . She just flew. . . . Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on. (163)

The reconstruction of the past works at two levels, for at the same time that we readers are compelled to build up the narrative from given fragments, we also witness the characters' own efforts to gather their shards of memory, “to start the day's serious work of beating back the past” (73). In the manner of historiographic metafiction, the narrative of *Beloved* is intensely self-conscious about the way in which Sethe, Baby Suggs, Denver, Stamp Paid or Paul D toil to construct and come to terms with their past. We witness a past in the making, as Sethe's comparison of remembering to the daily activity of “working dough” suggests (73). Early in the novel, for example, Sethe reproaches her “devious” and “terrible” memory (6), for all she is able to remember about Sweet Home, the plantation where she lived before running away to Ohio, is its beautiful sycamore trees, rather than the black boys hanging from them after a lynching: “try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children everytime and she could not forgive her memory for that” (6). Other times, Sethe is overwhelmed by a “rebellious” and “greedy” brain (70) that makes her face scenes from her past she would like to forget, such as the image of the white school-teacher's children stealing her milk while Halle—her husband—helplessly watches it all, hidden behind the butter churn. And she protests “no, thank you. I don't want to know or have to remember that. I have other things to do: worry, for example about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved . . . not to speak of love” (70). On another occasion, Beloved confronts Denver with a past that her mother had warned her to “keep at bay,” asking her questions about Amy, the white girl who had helped Sethe give birth in a boat in the Ohio river on the night of her scape, and who had healed the whipping scars that had turned

Sethe's back into a chokeberry tree. Both girls put their heads together to reconstruct that night's events: "Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew . . ." (78). It means of their counter-memory and beyond chronological lines, Sethe, Denver and Beloved become in the above examples the historians of the repressed history of the subaltern—of lynchings, rapes and whippings.

The way past events like the above are recounted emphasizes the idea of the discursive character of historical reconstructions. In fact, the world of *Beloved* is one of provisional and indeterminacy. This is so much so, that even when Morrison may have intended to legitimize Sethe's infanticide, and thus to reconcile mother and daughter with each other and with their past, celebrating memory all the way, our illusions of closure or happy endings are shattered by the novel's mystifying two-page coda. Even though the narrative has ostensibly established the importance of memory and the characters' achievements in that respect, the coda's lyric narrator laments that *Beloved*'s story has eventually been forgotten "like a bad dream": "after they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. . . . Remembering seems unwise" (275). The narrative thus finally deconstructs itself, stepping back to the novel's puzzling epigraph "I will call them my people, / which were not my people; / and her beloved, / which was not beloved." This lack of closure is yet coherent with Morrison's conception of the novel as having something in it "that enlightens something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But need[s] not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe" ("Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" 341). In the novel's final twist, the act of forgetting reminds us of the arbitrariness of history. This links *Beloved* to a metafiction like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, where Saleem Sinai, India's historian in the novel, says that he is nothing but "the humblest of jugglers-with-facts" (389).

*Beloved*, then, deconstructs traditional historiography and eventually deconstructs itself. It also crosses generic boundaries by blending fiction and historical fact, personal and collective history, or the magic and the real. Furthermore, the novel subverts the convention of slave autobiographical narratives in several ways. Whereas slave narratives were teleological, depicting the slave's progress from slavery to emancipation, memory is, as we have seen, the main structuring principle in *Beloved*; although action is set in the mid-1870s when the failure of Reconstruction was before all to see, the characters' memories take us constantly back to events happening in the pre-Civil War years—such as the days of slavery at Sweet Home, Sethe's infanticide, or Paul D's rambling as a fugitive slave—and hints at what is also offered about the uncertain future of blacks in post-bellum America. *Beloved* also fills crucial gaps in slave narratives. The novel dives deep into the slave's subjectivity, putting forward disturbing events that have had a strong psychological impact on the character; we thus learn about Sethe's sexual harassments, and we are given a breathtaking description of how Sethe sliced her baby's throat (251). The emphasis shifts away from the institution of slavery onto the individual. This shift of emphasis is revealed in the way Morrison avoids or deals obliquely with known historical events—within the novel's time span—such as Lincoln's assassination (1865), President Grant's administration (1869-77), or the Fifteenth

Amendment (1870). And more importantly, in the way Morrison manipulates the Margaret Garner incident. Whereas Margaret Garner was sentenced for escaping—and thus depriving her owner of his property—rather than for infanticide and was never freed, in Morrison's rendering the slave woman is charged with infanticide and eventually prevented from hanging and released. The novel de-emphasizes the economic implications of Sethe's escape, focusing on the human cost of her ordeal. Morrison "rips the veil" to shed light on what has been silenced in the history of black people, as well as in the isolated testimonies of black people themselves.

I would like to emphasize, however, that the text's awareness of the constructiveness of historical narratives and the deconstructive quality of the coda do not suffice to deny the cultural work the novel has been doing. Morrison herself underlines the discursive character of her own texts by comparing her literary enterprise to some kind of archaeology wherein a world is reconstructed from remains left behind. In arguing this, she is regarding literature as another arbitrary discursive system that uses narrative to construct and interpret the world. Seen in this way, her characters are like Saleem Sinai, humble jugglers-with-facts. Still, at the same time, she strongly states that the work of art "must be political," or else, "it is tainted" ("Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" 344-5). It is precisely here that the fundamental difference between the postmodern and the postcolonial enterprises lies. As Linda Hutcheon rightly points out, while postcolonial discourses have a strong political agenda, postmodernism is politically ambivalent in the sense that "its critique coexists with an . . . equally powerful complicity with the cultural dominants within which it inescapably exists" ("Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism" 150). While I want to argue here that there are features that link *Beloved* to the postmodern—critique of existing orthodoxies, reinscription of the subaltern experience, self-reflectiveness, provisionality of signification, lack of closure—I also want to underline that the novel transcends the postmodern limits of deconstruction into the realms of social and political action. Hutcheon explains that "those radical postmodern challenges are in many ways the luxury of the dominant order which can afford to challenge that which it securely possesses" ("Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism" 151). Criticizing the excesses of poststructuralism, Christopher Norris has argued that "we have reached a point where theory has turned against itself, generating a form of extreme epistemological scepticism" (4). The radical postmodern challenges would jeopardize the postcolonial enterprise of those works which, like *Beloved*, attempt to be narratives of liberation and cultural representation. Despite the obvious overlapping between them, the postcolonial and the postmodern differ in ways that are constitutive, and should accordingly be considered independent critical projects with distinct agendas.

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