

The Ghosts of Slavery

How an aesthetics of haunting is used to commemorate slavery in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, *Cane*, *The Piano Lesson* and *Beloved*.

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Index

1. Introduction	3
2. <i>The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales</i>	8
3. <i>Cane</i>	16
4. <i>The Piano Lesson</i>	25
5. <i>Beloved</i>	34
6. Conclusion	43
Works Cited	47

1. Introduction

For many years, ghosts and haunting have been a part of literary fiction. “The return of the dead is the sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of [symbolisation]; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt” (Žižek in Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 2). In the case of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, for example, the ghost of Hamlet’s father comes to ask Hamlet to avenge his death for him. Often, a ghost comes back to ask for a favour or to reveal a secret. This research, however, will look at the way in which haunting is used to commemorate American slavery. Here, haunting is not necessarily used to reveal a secret, for the characters in the works all know of the horrors of slavery, but rather as a means to tell stories that were previously not listened to or as way to work through trauma. Often, ghosts were used as a way to explore the self and one’s own psyche, however in stories about cultural hauntings, such as the stories about slavery dealt with in this research, they represent a larger, political history. By looking at Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (1899), Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* (1987) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), this research wishes to establish the ways in which these works use haunting as a way to commemorate a past in slavery. All four works were written by African American writers after the abolition of slavery and they all suggest that slavery continues to disturb the present of both characters and readers. The works all employ different non-realist elements to address the continuing presence of slavery in the present.

This research will use Jo Labanyi’s explanation of the aesthetics of haunting as a way to narrate traumatic events from the past as an analytical lens. Labanyi’s research focuses on the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, but the theory she uses in her work can be used to explore literature about slavery as well. According to Labanyi, “the haunting motif [is a] dramatizing [of] the afterlife of the past in the present” (Labanyi 101). The four works

attended to in this research take place after the abolition of slavery. However, the present of the characters in all of these narratives continues to be fractured due to slavery.

According to Labanyi, a realist narrative about traumatic events would not do justice to the pain of its victims. “The texts that avoid realism and focus on the past as a haunting, rather than as a reality immediately accessible to us, retain a sense of the difficulty of understanding what it was like to live that past, as well as making us reflect on how the past interpellates the present” (Labanyi 112). One of the most important features of the haunting aesthetic is the idea that the past continues into the present through the pain that it has caused its victims. If one were to give a realist account of the horrors of slavery, readers would solely emphasise with its victims, rather than become aware of the continuing presence of slavery. Seeing as the readers have not lived through these horrific events, they can never fully understand the feelings of those who have experienced it first-hand and their descendants. By employing the haunting aesthetic, writers can give a better account of the complexities of trauma. When a story involves haunting, that what does the haunting haunts not only the characters in the novel, it also gives the readers an eerie and uncanny feeling. “Paranormal devices [...] are designed to convey certain truths about slavery that are inaccessible through the discipline of history, but they are also [...] calculated to make their readers as well as characters feel ill at ease in the present” (Dubey 791). Even though slavery has been abolished for both the readers and the characters in the stories discussed in this research, their traumatic history continues to haunt them through non-realist elements.

Labanyi’s theory, however, also seems to suggest that there is an adequate cure for trauma. “Haunting requires the present to correct the past at the same time that it establishes an affiliative link with it” (Labanyi 113). All the stories do indeed give the reader the idea that there is a connection between the characters’ present and their past in slavery, for they all live in societies that continue to be fractured by inequality. Trauma theorists have often suggested

that “[the] cure for trauma is the successful [narration] of the violent events, such that the person who suffered it is able to situate himself or herself in relation to it as an agent and not as a thing stripped of personhood” (van Alphen in Labanyi 106). By telling stories about slavery and narrating the traumatic events, the characters in the works establish the link between past and present, for their stories are still of importance to them and those surrounding them in the present. However, Labanyi makes clear that saying that the narration of their traumas would completely cure the victims of slavery of their traumas would not do justice to the atrocities they have been through and their aftermath. The society these characters live in nowadays is still fractured and even though the characters in the stories are able to cope with their traumas more sufficiently after their narration, the horrors they lived through still continue to dictate their daily lives.

However, it is still a fact that the former slaves and their descendants in the four works dealt with in this research often do not talk about their past and that this inability to talk leads to supernatural hauntings. “Trauma entails a blocking of memory and thus an inability to construct a coherent narrative. Unable to master the past through conscious recall, the trauma victim becomes the prison of involuntary [re-enactments] of the traumatic event, which start to manifest themselves, in fissured form, at a later date” (Labanyi 106). The fact that stories about slavery are often not told in the first place, thus causes these events to start haunting their victims. Where in certain cases, this holds true for those who cannot speak about their traumas, Labanyi warns us that “we should not assume too quickly that those who do not articulate their stories are suffering from a traumatic blockage of narrative but that the problem may lie with the failure of others to listen” (Labanyi 111). This too seems to be the case with narratives about slavery, for these histories were not often told in their entirety, especially not immediately after abolition. Hauntings require those who are disturbed by them to listen to the previously unheard voices of slavery.

Moreover, Labanyi focuses on the idea that traumas need to be dealt with at a later time, rather than when a traumatic event occurs or very shortly thereafter. All four works in this research reflect back on slavery from postbellum times. Labanyi also states that “[reflecting on trauma] requires a younger generation to come on the scene which, unencumbered by the previous generation’s internalization of terror, is willing and able to engage with the difficult stories of past violence” (Labanyi 98). When looking at the four works used in this research however, this matter seems to be a bit more complex. Both *Beloved* and *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* are written mainly from the perspective of former slaves who reflect back upon their time in slavery. However, both also distance themselves from slavery through younger generations and, in the case of *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, the perspective of a white man. The works used in this research, however, do not comply with the idea that the younger generations are not encumbered by their ancestors’ traumas, as can be seen in for example the analysis of *The Piano Lesson*. This once again establishes the fact that the traumatic events of slavery continue to haunt the present and hurts even those who have never been enslaved themselves.

Rather than focussing on the novels that have been written ever since Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* was published in 1987, this research focuses on the continuous use of the haunting aesthetic from 1899 on. Often, critics have focussed on *Beloved* and other works that have used *Beloved* as an inspiration when speaking about the haunting aesthetic. *Beloved* is thus well known for its use of the haunting aesthetic and many novels after have been written with the novel in mind. However, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, *Cane* and *The Piano Lesson* all employ a similar aesthetic, be it with the use of other supernatural elements than the one used in *Beloved*. In *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* and *Cane*, for example, one will not find any ghosts. These works, respectively written in 1899, 1923 and 1987 have not been modelled after *Beloved*, as many other novels written after its publication

have been, however they still employ the same aesthetic. Seeing as this has not been previously researched as thoroughly, it seemed an interesting challenge to chart the continuity that can be found with regards to haunting in these four works.

2. How *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* uses the supernatural to convey the haunting qualities of slavery to a mixed audience

First of all, I would like to turn my attention to Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*. *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* is a collection of short stories published in 1899. Reviews at the time focussed mainly on the way in which Chesnutt has managed to capture African American dialect and folklore. Later critics, however, have also focussed on the political criticism that is weaved through the stories. The collection was Chesnutt's first literary success and the stories in it explore political issues through the use of a haunting aesthetic. The stories are written from the perspective of a white man called John, who moved to the South for his wife Annie's health. However, the work is a frame narrative, and within the story of John and Annie, one finds Julius, a former slave. Most of the book is made up of stories that Julius tells about his past life in slavery, in which non-realist elements such as conjuring and transfiguration play a big part. Chesnutt had a mixed audience and through his use of the frame narrative, the folklore and the Southern dialect, he seems to be mediating between these audiences while making clear that there still is inequality between blacks and whites.

In Charles Chesnutt's collection, stories about slavery are told as a way to make audible the histories of those who were not formerly listened to. "Its intricate frame narration – a story within a story featuring a white narrative frame around a black conjure tale in dialect – allows the former-slave narrator Julius to undercut the dominant discourses of his time" (Kim 412). In Chesnutt's time, stories about slavery were not usually told in their entirety, for even though slavery was already abolished, there was still a lot of racial prejudice. This racial prejudice is made visible in the stories through the voice of Julius's white employer, John. His narration of the events forms a white frame around the primarily black stories. According to Hyejin Kim (2014), who explores Chesnutt's gothic strategies with regards to racial relations

in her research, John is constantly undermining Julius's stories in his narration by "[claiming] to have discovered [his] hidden agenda of personal gain" and that he is thus trying "[rationalise] his own racial prejudice" (Kim 415) and that of other white men like him. This could be partially true, for John does indeed tell the readers about the personal gain that Julius gets out of telling these stories. However, John does not seem to go against Julius's attempts at getting something out of the storytelling, but rather lets Julius carry on.

Moreover, John does seem to notice that Julius's past in slavery continues to haunt him to this day. He mentions that Julius "presented to [them] the curious psychological spectacle of a mind enslaved long after the shackles had been struck off from the limbs of its possessor" (Chesnutt 57). John seems under the impression that Julius does not fully understand that he is now free and therefore once again establishes his racial prejudice, for he thinks Julius will never be able to enjoy his freedom as a white man does. Julius, however, is arguably still working through his trauma, for "[the] cure for trauma is the successful [narration] of the violent event" (van Alphen in Labanyi 106). Thus speaking about the atrocities of slavery in the way Julius does may help him to cope with his traumas. John, however, does not seem to understand this nor does he realise that there is an underlying political message in Julius's stories. He merely listens to them because they are "ingenious fairy [tales]" (Chesnutt 40) that cheer up his wife.

Julius's stories all concentrate on his past in slavery, however he does not give a realist account of his experiences, but rather adds supernatural elements to his narrative. As can already be gathered from its title, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* involves supernatural elements such as conjuring, voodoo and the so-called "goopher" (Chesnutt 11). According to Labanyi, "[the] refusal of realist narrative [...] can be seen as a recognition of the fact that no narrative of atrocities can do justice to the pain of those who experience such atrocities at [first-hand]" (Labanyi 111). One can be sure that the stories that Julius tells are

not completely truthful. However, Julius uses the supernatural elements in these stories to symbolise the horrors of slavery. “[Julius’s] tales are filled with suffering slaves and introduce their magical transformations as a tool of physical and psychological escape from a horrific reality of slavery” (Kim 418). Seeing as the atrocities of slavery cannot be conveyed in a realist narrative and would not be heard when recalled realistically, Chesnutt opts for the use of non-realist elements in his stories. The supernatural elements in the stories find their origin in African American folktales, which makes them exotic to his white audience, but possibly makes them interesting for a black audience as well.

In the story of Po’ Sandy, for example, the repressive system of slavery is represented by the chainsaw that cuts Sandy up. At the start of “Po’ Sandy”, the reader learns about Sandy and his wife Tenie. Sandy’s master, “Mars Marrabo” (Chesnutt 13), continuously lends him to his friends and relatives and Sandy is getting fed up with being separated from Tenie. Tenie, who is a conjure woman, then decides to turn him into a tree, so their master will no longer be able to lend him out to do work for others. When Tenie is sent away to care for the master’s daughter-in-law, Mars Marrabo decides he wants to make a new kitchen, for which he needs lumber. Seeing as then there “wa’n’t nobody ner nuffin fer ter watch de tree” (Chesnutt 16), Mars Marrabo cuts down the tree that Sandy was transformed into and proceeds to bring him to the sawmill and make his new kitchen out of it. However, seeing as this kitchen was made out of the wood from Sandy’s tree, the kitchen is now haunted. Julius states that “[the niggers] could hear sump’n moanin’ en groanin’ ‘bout de kitchen in de night-time” (Chesnutt 17), implying that Sandy’s ghost is still around.

The reason for Julius to tell this story in the first place is the fact that John wants to use the lumber of the old schoolhouse on his grounds in order to build a new kitchen. This schoolhouse, however, is made out of lumber from the kitchen of Mars Marrabo’s house and thus contains lumber made out of Sandy’s tree. Julius’s story convinces John and his wife not

to proceed, which shows that the legacy of slavery continues to haunt those affected by it in the present. When Julius, John and Annie get to the sawmill where John wishes to cut the lumber for his new kitchen, Julius states that “dat saw, a-cuttin’ en grindin’ thoo dat stick er timber, en moanin’, en groanin’, en sweekin’, kyars my ‘memb’ance back ter old times, en ‘min’s me er po’ Sandy” and he tells his company that the sounds make his blood “cuddle” (Chesnutt 13). The saw can be seen as a representation of slavery, seeing as “[the] repeated, mechanical action of the saw [...] reduces Sandy to an inarticulate cry because slavery legally defines a person as inanimate property, as chattel” (Kim 421). It is thus not just Sandy as an individual who haunts Julius’s memories, but the traumas of slavery in a broader sense.

Part of the repressive system that Chesnutt comments on in this story, is the fracturing of families due to slavery. By turning into a tree, Sandy hoped to avoid being lent out to friends and relatives of Mars Marrabo. It is therefore also telling that when his wife, Tenie is sent out to care for a sick relative of their master, Sandy’s tree is cut down and used to build a kitchen. The story shows that the way in which families were separated during slavery could lead to enormous grief and haunting. John’s wife Annie immediately understands Julius’s story, seeing as she exclaims: “What a system it was, [...] under which such things were possible” (Chesnutt 18). John, however, does not grasp the underlying message, as he responds by asking Annie if “[she is] seriously considering the possibility of a man’s being turned into a tree” (Chesnutt 18).

Moreover, Julius’s story also causes his white employers to be impacted by the afterlife of slavery, for after Julius’s story, John’s wife Annie does not “want [her] new kitchen built out of the lumber in that old schoolhouse” (Chesnutt 18). Julius tells them that “folks sez dat de old school’ouse er any yuther house w’at got any er day lumber in it w’at wuz sawed out’n de tree w’at Sandy wuz turnt inter, is gwine ter be ha’nted tel de las’ piece er

plank is rotted en crumble' inter dus'" (Chesnutt 18), thus suggesting that even though slavery is abolished, its horrors still haunt those who were involved in it, blacks and whites alike.

Another example of the supernatural can be found in "The Conjuror's Revenge". Rather than into an inanimate object, the slave in this story, Primus, is turned into an animal, which shows the fact that slaves and cattle were considered to be similar. This image of Primus as a mule still haunts Julius in the present for he is "alluz afeared I mought be imposin' on some human creetur; eve'y time I cuts a mule wid a hick'ry, 'pears ter me mos' lackly I's cuttin' some er my own relations, er somebody e'se w'at can't he'p deyse'ves" (Chesnutt 28). The story shows that, even though they were treated similarly during slavery, animals and slaves are not in fact the same. When Primus returns to his master Mars Jim McGee's farm as a mule, he continues to behave like a human being, for he chews tobacco and drinks wine. Furthermore, Primus also becomes jealous of a fellow slave who puts his arm around his sweetheart and decides to kick him. Now that Primus really is turned into cattle, he continues to disobey his master as he often used to do when he still was a slave. However, he can now go even further, for at first no one suspects that it is a mule who is chewing the tobacco and drinking the wine. Thus, the spell that Primus is under also empowers him.

In this case too the supernatural elements in Julius's stories change the behaviour of the dominant whites. After telling the story about Primus, Julius mentions that he "knows a man w'at 's got a good hoss he wants ter sell" (Chesnutt 33). John tells him that he will have a look at this horse and decides to buy it, even though he initially wanted to buy a mule. However later John tries to undermine Julius's story by telling the readers that he thinks Julius may have done a deal with the seller of the horse, for after the purchase of the horse, Julius appears in a "new suit of store clothes" (Chesnutt 34). He then states that he wishes to be a bit more careful with Julius's stories, but does not reproach him for selling him a crippled horse.

It is often said that one cannot speak about the horrors of slavery, for it is too traumatic, however Julius talks about it in a great deal, be it in a non-realist way. According to Labanyi's theory of haunting, "we should not assume too quickly that those who do not articulate their stories are suffering from a traumatic blockage of narrative but that the problem may lie with the failure of others to listen" (Labanyi 111). In the case of Chesnutt's stories, this may in fact have been the case, seeing as whites were not willing to listen to slaves recalling the horrors of slavery. This can also be seen from the way in which John and his wife react to the cries of Tobe the bullfrog in "Tobe's Tribulations". Annie states that to her, his cries sound "like the lament of a lost soul" whereas John cannot "distinguish one individual croak from another" (Chesnutt 83). John and other white masters like him are thus not willing to listen to stories about the horrors of slavery, nor will they see that slavery still haunts the relations between black and white in the present and they will certainly not take responsibility for this, even though they are in fact to blame for the disruptions.

Thus John does not understand Julius's stories about slavery, however his wife Annie does. Most of the time, it seems like Annie understands the cruelties of slavery and its haunting qualities better than her husband does. When she exclaims "[what] a system it was [...] under which such things were possible", John asks her if she is "seriously considering the possibility of a man's being turned into a tree" (Chesnutt 18). Obviously, this is not what Annie is referring to. Rather, she is referring to the institution of slavery which caused the separation of black families. Throughout the novel, it seems that both black and white women understand the system of slavery and its legacy better than the white men. Most of the conjurers in Julius's stories too are women. Conjure women such as Aunt Peggy in "Tobe's Tribulations" are often former slaves and they seem to understand that "dey ain't no easy way [out of slavery]" (Chesnutt 85) for they know that slavery will continue to haunt them after they have been freed from it. Women play a big part in these stories, as they do in all the

works in this research, and in Chesnutt's world, they seem to have a better understanding of the haunting qualities of slavery. Women too were seen as a minority at the time and it may be for that reason that Annie, even though she is white, understands the moral of Julius's stories while John does not.

The non-realist elements in Julius's stories also make the trauma of slavery a little less accessible to the audience and therefore bring across the horrors in a more effective way.

"The texts that avoid realism and focus on the past as a haunting, rather than as a reality immediately accessible to us, retain a sense of the difficulty of understanding what it was like to live that past, as well as making us reflect on how the past interpellates in the present" (Labanyi 112). In the case of Chesnutt, the fact that Julius feels the need to use supernatural elements in his story is already a critical reflection on the present. If he were to recall the horrors of slavery in a realist way, there is quite a big chance that his white audience would not like to listen to them, for they would be confronted with the cruel deeds of their own race.

However, John still fails to understand what Julius really means to say in his stories. As mentioned before, John constantly attempts to undermine Julius's stories by calling them "ingenious fairy [tales]" (Chesnutt 40) and accusing him of telling the stories purely for economical gain. What John closes his eyes to, is that he and his ancestors are responsible for Julius's trauma and the continuing presence of slavery in the present. When Julius gets himself a new suit, for example, John states that "[he] had not recently paid Julius any money and [that] he had no property to mortgage" (Chesnutt 34). Seeing as John is Julius's employer, we can assume that he still does not give Julius a fair wage, for otherwise he would be able to afford a suit, thus continuing to differentiate between blacks and whites. Therefore John, and other white men like him continue to be responsible for the legacy of slavery. The fact that John closes his eyes to the political message in Julius's stories can thus be seen as an attempt to rationalise his prejudiced behaviour.

What Chesnutt thus seems to be doing in his work, is mediating between a black and a white audience. On the one hand, there is John, the white narrator who frames the story for the white audience in such a way that they do not feel threatened by the contents of Julius's stories, for he continues to remind the audience of Julius's attempts to gain economic profit from telling his stories. On the other hand, there is Julius who speaks in an African American dialect and uses African American folklore to make his readers aware of the horrors of slavery that continue to haunt him and others with him. As the back cover of the book states, "Chesnutt's early works explored political issues somewhat indirectly, with the intention of changing the attitudes of Caucasians slowly and carefully" (Chesnutt, outside back cover). By using supernatural elements that to a white audience seem exotic, Chesnutt can speak about the horrors of slavery without insulting the white audience, on the other hand, the main narrator of the story is in fact a black slave who speaks in dialect and the supernatural elements in the story mostly give power to the blacks and undermine that of the whites. Chesnutt is thus seemingly attempting to bridge the gap between his two audiences. This idea is strengthened by the fact that even though John attempts to undermine Julius's stories by speaking of Julius's personal gain, he does see how Julius's present continues to be disturbed by his past in slavery. However, he does not accept his responsibility for this continued disruption. He mentions that Julius speaks of a "cruel deed [of former slave owners] with a furtive disapproval which [suggests] to [John] a doubt in [Julius's] own mind as to whether he had a right to think or to feel" (Chesnutt 57). John understands that Julius is still haunted by slavery, but, unlike his wife, he does not understand that he himself is haunted too, for he and other whites like him are responsible for the presence of slavery in the present. Thus John accepts that slavery continues to disturb the present as long as he does not have to take responsibility for his racial prejudice.

3. Dark Purple Ripened Plums: How Jean Toomer's *Cane* makes use of the Gothic to convey the disruption of the present.

Jean Toomer's *Cane* was written in 1923 and consists of a series of vignettes about the experiences of African-Americans in the United States. The work is part of the Harlem Renaissance, a period from 1918 till the mid-1930s in which African-American art flourished in Harlem, New York. Racism, however, continued to affect the African-American community in the United States and especially in the South. The vignettes take on different forms, such as poems and short stories. The work is structured into three parts, however, this research will focus mostly on the first part, which deals with racial relations in the postbellum South.

Cane does not use supernatural elements like *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* does, but rather makes use of Gothic conventions in order to signify haunting. Whereas "Euro-Americans [employ] the Gothic Other as a racialized figure for a myriad of social and metaphysical anxieties[,] African American writers typically make use of the Gothic to convey the terrors of American social history" (Lamothe 58). In this early work, Toomer establishes himself as a political writer who uses the Gothic as a tool to speak of slavery and the way in which it continues to haunt the present, as can be seen in for example the relations between the races. According to Lamothe, these "African American Gothicisms evoke experiences of absence, fragmentation and loss [that are] characteristic of "the black experience"" (Lamothe 58). Toomer makes use of the Gothic in a similar way. As can be seen in the first vignette in the novel, "Karintha", which seems to symbolise with gothic elements the breaking up of black families during slavery. The story mentions that "a child fell out of [Karintha's] womb" (Toomer 2), but later the reader is confronted with the image of a burning pile of sawdust:

Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before one completely burns. Meanwhile, the smoke curls up and hangs in the odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley... Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in water. (Toomer 2)

This Gothic imagery leads the reader to think that Karintha's child has died and that she has put him on the burning sawdust pile. The loss of her child keeps haunting her and those around her, just as the breaking up of families during slavery continues to haunt those who experienced it.

It is through his Gothic devices that Toomer manages to construct a narrative that reveals the haunting of the present by the past. *Cane* is structured as a circle that represents the "cyclical movement of history" (Scruggs 45) and thus it continually returns to slavery. Toomer does not give a completely realist account of the crimes against blacks, but rather chooses to use Gothic devices. These devices "would expose sins in the southern garden that had been obscured" (Scruggs 45). Through his use of Gothic conventions, Toomer thus manages to focus on the gruesome crimes against blacks that continuously find their way back into the present, for history moves in a cyclical way. Even in the second part of the novel, that takes place in the less oppressive North, we return to slavery in a poem called "Harvest Song". Here, the reader reads about "a reaper whose muscles set at sundown" who is "too chilled, and too fatigued" (Toomer 69), which can be seen as a reference to slavery, but also portrays the working conditions of African Americans post abolition, which was not much better, thus continually returning to the oppression of blacks.

Toomer's approach to history in *Cane* thus seems to fit in well with the haunting aesthetic. By making it clear that history repeats itself and therefore "[communicating] the importance of the past in the present" (Labanyi 113), Toomer's narrative leaves room for the

spirits of slavery to haunt African Americans in the postbellum period as well. As can be seen from the response and criticism that *Cane* got from a broad audience when it was first published, America was not yet ready to face its sins regarding slavery:

The [coloured] people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the [coloured] people who did read *Cane* hate it. They are afraid of it. (Hughes 58)

Unlike Chesnutt, who catered to the expectations of his white audience, Toomer does not portray blacks or whites as specific stereotypes, but rather focuses his attention on the relations between the races and the ways in which these continue to be guided by slavery throughout history. The haunting spirits in *Cane* “do not [...] return from the dead in order to reveal something hidden or forgotten, to right a wrong or to deliver a message that might otherwise have gone unheeded” (Davis, “État Présent”, 374) as spirits usually do, for both those reading the story and the characters in it are already aware of the cruelties that the haunting spirits are referring to, even if they do not want to face them. Thus, the spirits simply exist to establish the link between the past, the present and the future. By distorting a realist, post-abolitionist world in which black and white can both work and live as they please by inserting Gothic imagery such as the burning pile of sawdust in “Karintha”, Toomer shows that the terrors of slavery continue to haunt America in the present.

Moreover, *Cane* does not directly place its focus on slavery in the way the other works in this research do. Rather, Toomer’s novel focuses on the way in which racial differences that stem from slavery are dealt with in the post-abolitionist period and during the Harlem renaissance. When he does speak of slavery, however, he does so with gothic tropes. This can be seen, for example, in “November Cotton Flower”, the first poem in the collection. The poem speaks of the cotton fields that slaves used to work on. The poem notes that “dead birds were found/In wells a hundred feet below the ground” and that “[old] folks were startled”

(Toomer 4), suggesting that something horrible is about to happen. “In Gothic, the terror of what might happen, or might be happening is largely foregrounded over the visceral horror of the event” (Lloyd-Smith 8). Thus Toomer’s turn to Gothic tropes such as barren landscapes and dead animals suggests that horrible events are about to take place, without their ever being addressed directly. “Toomer’s turn to Gothic tropes in *Cane* underscores the fact that as late as the 1920s, there was no vocabulary native to [America] with which to refer to the horrors of slavery, race and racism” (Lamothe 57). Toomer’s indirect approach to slavery can be seen as an example of haunting, seeing as traumas as described by Labanyi “[entail] a blocking of memory and thus an inability to construct a coherent narrative” (Labanyi 106). Toomer could have chosen to write a factual essay or a realist novel to speak of these horrors, but has instead chosen to incorporate the Gothic in order to give the work an eerie atmosphere that makes the readers aware of the horrors surrounding slavery. Toomer creates this atmosphere by employing Gothic conventions such as dark depictions of nature, for example the barren landscape with dead birds in “November Cotton Flower” and by continuously giving his readers and his characters the ominous feeling that something bad is about to happen, for example, through the bad omens in “Blood-Burning Moon” and the superstitions mentioned in “November Cotton Flower”. His decision to employ a gothic and non-realist aesthetic rather than give a realist account of the troubles of slavery gives a better impression of the traumas of slavery and the ways in which they continue to haunt the present.

Even though *Cane* does not deal with slavery in a direct way and its non-realist elements are different from those used by Chesnutt, the novel still clearly illustrates the disruption of society caused by slavery that affects both blacks and whites. In “Blood-Burning Moon”, for example, Bob Stone, a white man, reflects upon slavery and so do two of the black people in the story, Louisa and Tom Burwell. However, unlike John and Annie in Chesnutt’s stories, Stone does not seem to understand how slavery continues to haunt those

who were affected by it. Rather, Stone seems to be bothered by the abolition of slavery, thus showing that the present is still disturbed by the institution. Stone is in a relationship with a black girl, but he is also part of a rich family of former plantation owners. He is continuously attempting to come to terms with the fact that he is in love with a black girl, while also “[borrowing] the language of the past and [conjuring] up the sensibility of an antebellum plantation owner” (Borst 21). His use of language shows that Stone “cannot fully replace or exchange the present with the past [and therefore] his reality defaults into an unstable world” (Borst 21). It could thus be argued that Stone’s present is disturbed by the ongoing presence of slavery in it.

Proof of the fact that slavery still has Stone in its grip can thus mainly be found in his language. He claims that:

No nigger had even been with his girl. He’d like to see one try. Some position for him to be in. Him, Bob Stone, of the old Stone family, in a scrap with a nigger over a nigger girl. In the good old days... Ha! Those were the days. (Toomer 32)

In this internal monologue and in the behaviour towards Tom Burwell that follows it, one can see one of the hallmarks of the Gothic, being “a pushing toward extremes and excess” (Lloyd-Smith 5). One of the most eerie elements of this story is the extent to which Stone is willing to go to show his superiority. He would easily go as far as murdering Burwell if he gets the chance to do so. Stone is trapped in the old conventions, for his family used to keep slaves in the past and still feels as if whites are better than blacks. In Stone’s case, “[his] problem of Gothic inheritance ultimately reveals an incomplete or inadequate passage from master-slave power structures to those of employer and employee” (Borst 21). The gruesome fact that his family owned slaves and still thinks of blacks as inferior continues to persist even though Stone is now in love with a black girl. It even causes him to refer to Louisa as if she were still

a slave and therefore his possession. Toomer writes that “[he] went in as a master should and took her” (Toomer 31) when Louisa is bent over the hearth that was used as the plantation cookery in the days of slavery, which implies that he still sees her as his slave, with whom he can do whatever he likes. The lasting presence of slavery thus disturbs the relationship between Stone and Louisa, for his way of thinking continues to be led by old conventions.

It can also be argued that Bob Stone feels threatened by the fact that slavery has been abolished. According to Borst, “Louisa threatens Stone with the horrors of double-consciousness generated by their sexual relationship, while Burwell becomes an enticing danger” (Borst 21). “In American Gothic [...] fear of what was then called miscenegation [...] emerges” (Lloyd-Smith 8), which can easily be seen in the case of Stone. Seeing as he is still caught up in the old master-slave relationship, his love for Louisa horrifies him as he and his family do not approve of it. On the one hand, his consciousness tells him that he likes Louisa, but on the other hand, he constantly asks himself: “What would they think if they knew? His mother? His sister?” (Toomer 31), thus implying that he is torn between his family and their past as slave owners and his girlfriend Louisa. He feels the need to assure himself that “his family still [owns] the niggers” (Toomer 31), even though he knows that slavery has been abolished. It is because of these old conventions that Stone feels so threatened by Tom Burwell. Coming from a family of slave owners, he has always been taught that blacks are inferior to whites and that they do not deserve their freedom. He can thus not shed the conventions of his family, which eventually lead to his gruesome demise, for it is not the fact that Louisa has been cheating on him that drives him to go and attack Burwell, it is the fact that she cheats on him with a black man that he cannot fathom. One cannot conclude that Stone is haunted by the horrors of slavery, for he has not experienced these horrors, however, the ideas about racial relations that his family’s past has instilled in him continue to disturb the present.

Furthermore, slavery does not only haunt Bob Stone, but also Tom Burwell and Louisa. The way Burwell is punished for his violence against Stone reminds the reader of the fact that the racial inequality that was established during slavery is still in full swing in the postbellum South. The way in which Toomer speaks of the lynch mob in the story “[makes] the traumatic event manageable [without] sanitizing its horror” (Labanyi 107). The yells of the lynch mob “[echo] against the skeleton stone walls and [sound] like a hundred yells” (Toomer 34) and cause the townspeople to flee to their houses. The presence of the lynch mob shows the persistence of racism in the postbellum South that continues affect the black townspeople.

Finally, the fact that Burwell and Louisa are still affected by the horrors of slavery is underlined in the song they sing at the end of each part. The song echoes the gothic characteristics of the rest of the story and reflects on the “full moon” that hangs above the factory door and is considered “an evil thing, an omen” (Toomer 35):

“Red nigger moon. Sinner!

Blood-burning moon. Sinner!

Come out that fact’ry door.” (Toomer 29)

By singing the song, Burwell and Louisa attempt to keep the bad omen away from themselves and the people they know. However, the effects of the moon cannot be neutralised by their singing, for both of Louisa’s lovers are brutally murdered in the end. The song seems to be a reminder of the fact that life in the American South continues to be disturbed by slavery’s legacy. The song can be seen as a lament that is similar to the songs that were sung by slaves on the plantation, thus reflecting back upon the past. It too makes the reader aware of the fact that the past cannot be worked through by its victims as long as the system that caused trauma is still in place. Even though slavery is abolished, consequences of its abolition such as the

emergence of lynch mobs continue to disturb the past and generate new, related traumas that keep the victims from working through their grief.

There is, however, one poem in Toomer's collection that does speak of slavery more directly while using the Gothic to bring the haunting aesthetic into play. "Song of the Son" has an uncanny feel to it that is no doubt strengthened by the fact that it brings the past into the present. According to Sigmund Freud, "when inanimate objects [...] come to life" (Freud 94) this can be seen as an instance of the uncanny. In "Song of the Son", the reader is faced with "a singing tree" that is "[carolling] softly souls of slavery" (Toomer 12). The fact that the tree sings the laments of former slaves, gives the reader the uncanny feeling that this tree could indeed be made of slaves or at least out of their memories. The poem can thus be linked to Chesnut's "Po' Sandy", in which Sandy is transformed into a tree. In stories about slavery, wood thus seems to carry memories too horrible to speak of. The fact that slavery still haunts the present, is symbolised in the type of fruit that this tree bears. The poem reads: "O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums/Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air" (Toomer 12). Toomer thus compares the slaves to plums that have been squeezed and that are bursting. The poem suggests that they have been hurt by the horrors of slavery and the fact that they are purple can be seen as an indication that they have been bruised by the institution of slavery and are still carrying these bruises around with them. This suggests that slavery continues to disturb the present for the eerie songs the tree sings still continue to sound in the present and the tree continues to bear fruit that has been bruised by slavery.

Seeing as Toomer's work does not speak of slavery in a direct way, but rather incorporates the past into the present by talking about racial relations in the postbellum period, its gothic elements seem to be a clear indication of the lasting presence of the spirits of slavery. Rather than speaking of the past directly, Toomer "communicates the importance of the past in the present [and re-establishes] the affiliative link with the past" (Labanyi 113). He

speaks of race relations and the way in which these relations influence blacks and whites alike. The lynch mob in “Blood-Burning Moon”, for example, can be seen as a phenomenon stemming from the abolition of slavery that continues to disrupt the present. The lynching of African Americans occurred frequently between the late 1800s until the 1920s and was done by those who did not agree with the abolition of slavery, thus continuing to disturb the lives of African Americans in the present regardless of the fact that they are no longer enslaved. Toomer makes his readers aware of the fact that the differences between the races led to slavery and that, even though slavery has been abolished, the consequences of slavery can still be found in the present. A reparation of the past in the present is required, however, as long as this past is still generating trauma and disturbing the present, repairing the injustices of the past is impossible.

4. Play That Piano: How the ghosts in *The Piano Lesson* cause the Charles family to narrate their traumatic past

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* was first presented as a staged reading at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in 1987. Later that year, it was performed at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. Wilson was already an acclaimed playwright at the time and had won a Pulitzer Prize for his play *Fences*. In 1990, *The Piano Lesson* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play is part of his *Pittsburgh Cycle*, a cycle consisting of ten plays, nine of which are set in an African American neighbourhood called the Hill District. They aim to sketch the Black experience in the 20th century and all focus on a different decade. *The Piano Lesson* is set in the 1930s.

The Piano Lesson focuses on the traumatic past of the Charles family and does so by incorporating multiple ghosts. The play fits part of a trend in "recent African-American literature [in which the presence of ghosts signals] an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history" (Brogan 150). This trend thus fits in with an aesthetics of haunting that serves as a method to enable those who have lived through traumatic events to tell stories about slavery. In *The Piano Lesson* we meet the Charles family, a fragmented family that has been deeply affected by slavery, even though the surviving members of the family did not work as slaves themselves. The play features several ghosts that all haunt the family in their own, specific manner. The ghost of the son of a white slave owner, Sutter, who terrorises the family, the ghosts of the Charles clan's ancestors and the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Rather than solely haunting the Charles family the "haunting clearly reflects the crises of a larger social group" (Brogan 150), mainly focussing on the different ways in which slavery affected men and women.

The non-realist elements in *The Piano Lesson* are signalled in the very first stage direction, for this stage direction contains a gothic element. The opening directions state that: “The dawn is beginning to announce itself, but there is something in the air that belongs to the night. A stillness that is a portent, a gathering, a coming together of something akin to a storm” (Wilson 1). The mention of a storm can be seen as a way of foreshadowing the events in the rest of the play. It is with this stage direction that the play opens and directly after that, Boy Willie enters the house and the quarrelling between Boy Willie and his sister Berniece starts. It can also be seen as an indication of the fact that the Charles family will be stirred by something unnatural during the play, for the mention of eerie, gothic elements such as a figurative storm that is on its way can be seen as a case of foreshadowing what the rest of the play will hold.

The first occurrence of ghosts in the play is the mention of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, a story that started circulating when Boy Charles, the father of the play’s two main characters, was killed, but still holds a place in the present. Boy Charles decided to steal the piano that caused his family to fracture from Sutter, for he believed it belonged to his family rather than to the Sutters. However, a lynch mob sets his house on fire to punish him. Boy Charles flees the house to catch a train called the Yellow Dog, but the train is stopped by the mob and set on fire, killing Boy Charles and the hobos that he shared his compartment with. These ghosts can be seen as a representation of slavery, for “[implicit] in Boy Willie’s retelling of the myth of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog is an underlying narrative of ongoing [racialisation], resistance and haunting, the common denominator that links the Charles clan across decades” (Singleton 47). According to the story, “the ghosts of the Yellow Dog were [...] responsible for avenging [...] black men who died at the hands of white racial oppression” (Singleton 47). This includes Papa Boy Charles, but also includes all those black men who died, be it directly or indirectly, due to the institution of slavery. Boy Willie states

that whenever Maretha is “in trouble they might be around to help [her]” (Wilson 86), suggesting that these ghosts will forever help black people who are mistreated by whites. When the son of the Charles family’s old slave-master dies, Boy Willie states that “[the] Ghosts of the Yellow Dog got [him]” (Wilson 4), thus implying that the ghosts of Sutter’s former slaves took their revenge upon the son of their old master for all of the crimes that he and his family committed, one of which being the separation of the Charles family.

More so than the family matriarch Berniece, the male members of the Charles family often talk about their past and the traumas they continue to suffer from. Critics have often argued that “[the] cure for trauma is a successful [narration] of the violent event” (van Alphen in Labanyi 106). Therefore, one could suggest that the older men of the Charles family, Doaker and Wining Boy, have worked through their traumas more successfully than Berniece and Boy Willie, for they continuously tell stories about the atrocities that befell their family. Doaker, for example, tells Lymon and Boy Willie the story of the piano, a story for which “you got to go back to slavery time” (Wilson 42). In an attempt to make Boy Willie understand why Berniece does not want to sell the piano, Doaker tells him of the horrors of slavery that caused the piano to be the heirloom that it is in the present. Boy Willie states that “[all] that’s in the past” (Wilson 46), however, it clearly is not, for the story of the piano continues to haunt the family. Doaker and Wining Boy are able to “construct a coherent narrative” (Labanyi 106) with regards to slavery, but the ghosts of slavery are still present in their life, for the piano is placed in Doaker’s house and Sutter’s ghost too finds his way into it. Solely talking about traumatic events thus is not enough to stop the haunting, for the ghosts continue to disturb Doaker’s household regardless of the fact that he talks about the horrors of slavery.

There is a big difference in the way in which Boy Willie and Berniece deal with their traumas, even though their traumas share the same background. Boy Willie, as his uncle

Doaker, wishes to speak about the family's history. When he finds out that Berniece has not told her daughter Maretha about the history of the family's piano, he tells her:

You tell your mama to tell you about that piano. You ask her how them pictures got on there. If she don't tell you I'll tell you (Wilson 22)

Boy Willie thus wishes to speak about his past and thinks Maretha should be aware of the stories about their family. Berniece, however, does not wish to speak about it, due to the grief the piano causes her. "Trauma entails a blocking of memory and thus an inability to construct a coherent narrative. Unable to master the past through conscious recall, the trauma victim becomes the prisoner of involuntary re-enactments of the traumatic event, which start to manifest themselves, in fissured form, at a later date" (Labanyi 106), therefore, Sutter's ghost manages to disturb the present of the Charles family. Berniece no longer plays the piano, for it reminds her of her mother's sorrow. To her, Sutter's ghost represents her mother's trauma as well as her own. Seeing as she is not able to communicate her trauma, something she could do through the use of the piano, Sutter's ghost starts haunting her in her own house.

The conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie is rooted in the fact that they are both haunted by their family's past in slavery in a different way. Their lives are "overshadowed by their parents' memories of traumatic events" (Labanyi 99) and thus their pasts are still a vibrant part of the present that is symbolised by the ghost of Sutter and the ghosts of their ancestors. Berniece continues to deal with her mother's grief over the loss of her husband and therefore she refuses to sell the piano that her mother "polished [...] with her tears for seventeen years" and that she "rubbed on [...] till her hands bled" (Wilson 52). Berniece considers the piano to be an important family heirloom that she used to soothe her mother's grief. Boy Willie, on the other hand, sympathises with his father. He considers his father to be a hero for stealing the piano and wishes to honour his father's memory by selling the piano to

better his own life and his economic prospects. Seeing as their traumas stem from different parts of their parents' history, the haunting of the ghosts influences them both differently.

The fact that Berniece and Boy Willie are haunted by the past in different ways is caused by the fact that the mother and father they model themselves after had different traumatic experiences in the past, thus signalling the “afterlife of the past in the present” (Labanyi 101). Beatrice, being the matriarch of the Charles family, “represents the countless African American women who fled the south during the Great Migration to become domestic workers in wealthy, white homes in the north” (Singleton 51) while their husbands stayed in the south to work on the plantations. They thus had different experiences of slavery. What Berniece and her mother are traumatised by most is the fact that their families have been dispersed because of the death of their husbands. Berniece was able to connect the past with the present by playing music for her mother and thereby narrating her mother's past. However, now that her mother has passed away, the piano reminds her of “a lost mother-daughter bond” (Singleton 51) and thus represents her own grief. Just as her mother continued to be haunted by the loss of her husband, whose death was ultimately caused by the family's past in slavery and the race relations left over by this past, Berniece continues to be haunted by the death of her husband Crawley. Rather than having been enabled to deal with her own grief and construct her own narrative of trauma, Berniece's focus has stayed with her mother's trauma for a long time. The piano, that she used to console her mother, does not seem to help her work through her own trauma.

As in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* and *Cane*, we do once again find a wooden object that is representative of a traumatic past in slavery. The piano, in this case, can be seen as the centre of the play, seeing as it is the reason for the conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece. The piano has a “picture of [Doaker's grandmother and his] daddy when he was nothing buy a little boy” (Wilson 44) carved into it by Doaker's grandfather. Seeing as

their family had been separated “[he] made them up out of his memory” (Wilson). The piano thus contains pictures that Doaker’s grandfather, Boy Willie and Berniece’s great-grandfather, had in his memory. When Berniece plays the piano later on in the story, these memories come to life to exorcise Sutter’s ghost. The wood the piano is made out of thus carries the memories of the fracturing of the family as a consequence of slavery, just like the trees in the other two works carry memories of slavery.

Boy Willie, however, does not see the piano as a family heirloom, but as a way to gain economic freedom and honour his father’s heroic deed of stealing the piano and thus the past haunts him differently. “Boy Willie embarks on an archetypal quest for self-realization by attempting to purchase the very land that his family had been forced to work as slaves, and working it himself for his own profit” (Boam in Singleton 49). The fact that families have been ripped apart has a different effect on the patriarchal line of the family. Men such as Papa Boy Charles and Boy Willie feel emasculated by the institution of slavery, for the separation from their families causes them to be unable to establish their masculinity by taking care of their family. Papa Boy Charles’s “act of thievery is [therefore] an act of black patriarchal reclamation” (Singleton 49) and Boy Willie thinks that through buying the land of a slave owner he will be able to reclaim his own masculinity as well. Boy Willie wishes to “stand right up to the white man and talk about the price of cotton” (Wilson 92) in order to establish himself as a man regardless of the traumas of the past.

Even though Berniece and Boy Willie are haunted by different memories, they are both haunted by the same ghost, that for both of them represents the traumatic experiences that slavery caused their ancestors. “Sutter’s ghost emerges to wed what can only be a temporary union between the family’s egos” (Singleton 46). In order to rid themselves of the ghost’s haunting and to continue their life in the present, both Berniece and Boy Willie need to adopt a different attitude towards the piano and the memories that it contains. Boy Willie,

being the masculine ego in this situation, attempts to fight Sutter's ghost by using his fists. However, it is Berniece who ultimately manages to exorcise the ghost. Berniece starts to play the piano while chanting "I want you to help me" (Wilson 107) and calls upon the spirits of her family that are captured in the piano. Even though the ghosts do not become animate as Sutter's ghost does, Berniece's music does drive out Sutter's ghost. According to Singleton, Berniece gives "veiled expression to the "nameless emotional stuff" of her familial line" (Singleton 54) by playing the piano. Berniece does indeed address her trauma by playing the piano, however calling these traumas "nameless emotional stuff" does not do justice to what Berniece is attempting to overcome. The reader knows from the start of the novel what is troubling Berniece and how much it hurts her to play the piano. Her traumatic past is what is keeping her from playing the piano and even though she speaks of her trauma occasionally, she never fully narrates it and the piano to her is the ultimate representation of her grief and playing it is therefore difficult. She does not directly speak of the traumas that her family has, but manages to express her grief playing the piano, thus enabling her to exorcise Sutter's ghost. Boy Willie then realises that it would be unwise to sell the piano, for it would not help him reclaim his masculinity, but would rather only emasculate him further for he would only "buy into America's system of property and racialization" (Singleton 50). Furthermore, he also realises that if he sells the piano, Berniece would not be able to continue working through her grief.

It is also made clear in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* that only those who suffered through trauma can know what it is like to be haunted by this past and that only those who suffered can ever overcome the trauma. This can be seen when Avery, who is a priest, tries to rid the house of Sutter's ghost. Avery thinks that it is the piano that causes all the troubles and therefore tries to bless it. He reads from the bible and "throws water at the piano at each commandment" (Wilson 105) in an attempt to exorcise the ghosts that inhabit it. However, the

piano is not the cause of the Charles family's troubles and he soon finds out that he "[cannot] do it" (Wilson 106). Incorporating the ghost and Avery's inability to exorcise it "can be seen as a recognition of the fact that no narrative of atrocities can do justice to the pain of those who experience such atrocities at [first-hand]" (Labanyi 111). Even though Avery may have his own traumas caused by slavery, he cannot be the one who overcomes the trauma of the Charles family. Therefore, Berniece and Boy Willie need to address their trauma themselves.

The ghost, however, is gone for now, but the second to last line of the play implies that the haunting memories and ghosts of slavery can never be completely gone and will always have an impact on the Charles family. Wilson ends the play on a note that is just as ominous as the way he started it. Boy Willie tells Berniece that "if [she] and Maretha [do not] keep playing on that piano... ain't no telling... [he] and Sutter both liable to be back" (Wilson 108). Even though Berniece manages to exorcise Sutter's ghost by playing the piano, it is made clear that her work is not yet done. The threat of Sutter's ghost returning to the house to disturb the present once again remains and if Berniece does not continue to play the piano and address her own and her mother's grief, he is likely to come back. Sutter's ghost thus symbolises their traumatic past and forces Berniece and Boy Willie to address their traumatic past.

The question of whether or not the past is corrected by the present, however, remains present. According to Labanyi, "haunting [...] stresses the legacy of the past to the present: a legacy which [...] is one of injustice requiring reparation" (Labanyi 113). It is clear that the Charles family is still affected by slavery as blacks continue to be unequal to white men. As Doaker says, the land Boy Willie wants to buy "ain't worth nothing no more. The smart white man [...] cut the land loose and step back and watch you and the dumb white man argue over it" (Wilson 36). Even though Boy Willie is attempting to repair the injustices done to his family by getting his own land, he is continuing to feed the injustice rather than repairing it by

buying into this system. The message the reader can take away from this, is that there is no way in which those haunted by slavery can repair their injustices as long as the system continues to undermine their attempts, which it still does in the present. As long as the white men remain in power and continue to use their power to oppress African Americans, the victims of slavery will never be able to repair their past and work through their trauma and the past will always remain present in the present.

5. To Forget Her Like A Bad Dream: How *Beloved* Does or Does Not Help The Inhabitants of 124 To Work Through The Traumas Caused by Infanticide

Finally, I wish to turn my attention to *Beloved*. In all the previous works, the reader was faced with a haunting aesthetic that was established through the use of non-realist elements such as conjure women, Gothic tropes or ghosts. In *Beloved* too, it is a ghostly apparition that haunts the former slaves. All four works focus on the presence of slavery in the present and on the attempts of former slaves and slave owners to work through the traumas caused by slavery. Of these four works, *Beloved* seems to be the most successful and the one that sparked the most discussion. The continuity in the four works is obvious from the ways in which they all show the continuing presence of slavery in post-abolitionist society. *Beloved* shares elements with the other four novels, but seems to be the most successful at making the reader aware of the fact that the ghosts of slavery have not yet been buried.

Beloved was published in 1987 and was inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, an African American slave who escaped slavery and in order to protect her children from its horrors committed infanticide. The novel is often considered Toni Morrison's best work and received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988.

Beloved revolves around the inhabitants of a house that is called 124. Sethe, a former slave woman, Denver, her daughter, and Paul D., a former slave who worked for the same master as Sethe and escaped with her. When their former master, Schoolteacher, comes to force Sethe back into slavery, she kills one of her daughters, whose tombstone later reads only the word "Beloved". Sethe's other children, two sons, flee from her and she never sees them again. Sethe, who is pregnant with Denver, flees again and finds herself safe after delivering her baby. However, the house she and Denver live in continues to be haunted by the presence of the dead child. When one day Sethe, Denver and Paul D. come back home, they find a

woman outside of their house, whom they believe to be the dead child: Beloved. They take her in and take care of her. The presence of Beloved, however, causes Sethe to lose her strength and when a white abolitionist, Bodwin, comes to help the family, Sethe mistakes him for her former master and attacks him. The scene echoes the infanticide that killed Beloved in the first place and after repeating itself in this way, Beloved disappears again.

Earlier critics have often mentioned that the fact that Beloved is exorcised at the end of the novel means that Sethe and her family have worked through their traumas. Lately, however, critics have been a little more sceptical about this. According to Forter, the disappearance of Beloved “promises a *future* integration on the far side of trauma’s working through; it suggest what an harmonious coherence might look like *after* the ghosts of the past have been confronted and laid to rest” (Forter 89). In the current discussion, it is thus thought that even though the family’s traumas may not have been worked through yet, there is still a chance that they will be healed in the future. The present study, however, will argue that this may not be the case at all, for slavery continues to haunt those affected by it even in the present. Thus the future for the former slaves in the novel does not seem to be free of traumas, regardless of the fact that Beloved’s ghost has been confronted. There is indeed the promise of a better future at the end of the novel, however slavery will continue to haunt those affected if the system that continues to treat blacks as unequal does not change.

One of *Beloved*’s strong points is that it uses non-realist elements in order to tell a true story. The other novels in this study do a similar thing, for they all reflect on the true horrors of slavery, but the fact that Morrison chose to construct her novel around the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who was suspected to have committed infanticide in order to keep her children out of slavery strengthens the effects of the haunting aesthetic. It is often said that in *Beloved* “[what] is at first unspeakable in its brutality and horror – infanticide – becomes comprehensible in the light of the larger, more atrocious fact of slavery itself”

(Ramos 61). Morrison is praised for *Beloved*'s treatment of infanticide as a consequence of the horrors of slavery. This too was the approach of abolitionists in the trial surrounding Margaret Garner's deeds. They attempted to make the judges see that Garner did not see any other way to keep her children out of the hands of slave owners. However, the fact that the ghost of Beloved returns shows us that it is not in fact this straightforward, for the infanticide continues to haunt those who were involved in it directly and indirectly.

If the novel were to give a realist account of the story of Margaret Garner, it would not do justice to its horrors. "The texts that avoid realism and focus on the past as a haunting, rather than as a reality immediately accessible to us, retain a sense of the difficulty of understanding what it was like to live that past, as well as making us reflect on how the past interpellates the present" (Labanyi 112). The apparition of Beloved adds another layer to the novel that mystifies its readers. One cannot fully understand the appearance of a presumably dead child, for it is simply not possible in reality. Even though the infanticide committed by Margaret Garner was real, one who has not lived through it will never be able to completely understand its horrors, nor will they be able to grasp Garner's motives. Therefore, the ghost serves as a vehicle to convey this inability to truly understand the traumas that those who were enslaved carry with them.

Like Toomer, Morrison too works with the idea of a cyclical history. At the end of the novel, Sethe is forced to return to the scene of the infanticide. When she sees Bodwin, she mistakes him for Schoolteacher, whom she thinks is coming to force her and her children back into a life of slavery. Rather than murdering Beloved, she is now "running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again" (Morrison 309). Instead of turning to her children to murder them in an attempt to save them from slavery, she runs up to the white man. She too refers back to the earlier infanticide when she mentions that now "[the] ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand" (Morrison 309). Overcome

by her memory of the earlier events, Sethe wishes to free herself from them by altering history and murdering the white slave owner rather than her daughter, thus suggesting that history repeats itself, for the scene echoes the earlier infanticide. However, the scene's outcome can be changed. Earlier on in the novel, Sethe has already referred to the cyclical nature of history when she states that "even though it's all over – over and done with – it's going to always be there waiting for you" (Morrison 44). This suggestion causes one to think that the events of slavery will always continue to haunt Sethe, and when Beloved returns, this is exactly what happens.

The novel seems to suggest that the apparition of Beloved allows Sethe, Denver and Paul D. to work through their trauma, for Beloved suggests a distance from the past. It is not entirely clear whether Beloved truly haunted 124 or not and if she did, whether this was as a ghost or as an actual woman. When Sethe is telling Beloved stories about the past, she states that "[perhaps] it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it – in any case it was an unexpected pleasure [to tell her about the past]" (Morrison 69). According to Jelin, "in order to work through political trauma, distance is necessary" (Jelin in Labanyi 98). Sethe's statement suggests that she is able to narrate her stories due to Beloved's distance from the event and therefore, Beloved could be considered a vehicle through which Sethe can work through her trauma. However, seeing as it is not entirely clear who or what Beloved is, one cannot be sure that she is in fact as distant from the events as Sethe thinks. If Beloved is indeed the ghost of the two-year-old girl Sethe murdered, then Beloved would not at all be distant from the events, but she would rather be at the centre of them. Therefore, even though Beloved makes Sethe talk about her past, this may not necessarily help her work through her trauma.

It is often claimed that by exorcising Beloved, Sethe is able to work through her trauma, for she is freed of the ghostly apparition from her past. Henderson, for example, "sees

Sethe's violence against [Bodwin] as part of a successful working through of the trauma of the infanticide, since Sethe, taking Bodwin for Schoolteacher believes that she attacks the slave owner and not her daughter" (Berger 416). Which thus suggests that through reliving the traumatic scene and correcting herself by attacking a white man rather than her own child, Sethe can successfully recover from her trauma. However, Beloved disappears after the events and Sethe is "not a bit all right" (Morrison 314) after she has been forced to relive the traumatic event. Bodwin cannot in fact be considered a substitute for Schoolteacher, for rather than a horrible slave owner, he is an abolitionist who "never turned [the former slaves] down" (Morrison 312). Therefore, "Sethe's attack on him is delusional; immersed in the symptom of trauma, she mistakes him for someone else" (Berger 417). Sethe's attack is thus not a successful working through of the trauma, but rather an affirmation of the presence of her trauma which suggests that she may never be able to work through it.

As in *The Piano Lesson* and *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, storytelling plays a big part in *Beloved*. Even though critics have often argued that "[the] cure for trauma is the successful [narration] of the violent events" (van Alphen in Labanyi 106), storytelling is not enough to rid the inhabitants of 124 of the ghost of Beloved. In fact, storytelling "became a way to feed [Beloved]" (Morrison 69). With every story that Sethe tells her, Beloved grows bigger and stronger, while at the same time, Sethe gets weaker. Her storytelling thus "[acknowledges] the past", as Labanyi states should be done when working through traumas, but it does not allow her "to believe in the possibility of creating a better future" (Labanyi 91), for instead of continuing her life in the present, Beloved forces Sethe to constantly relive stories about her past in slavery.

On the other hand, not narrating the past at all does not seem to be the right way to continue into the future either for the inhabitants of 124. At the beginning of the novel, Denver is living in isolation, Paul D. has a "tobacco tin [with its] lid rusted shut" (Morrison

86) in the place where his heart should be that contains stories about his past and Sethe “ain’t sure she can [tell Paul D.]” (Morrison 85) about her past. All of them struggle with their past and do not manage to believe in a more successful future. When “[unable] to master the past through conscious recall, the trauma victim becomes the prisoner of involuntary [re-enactments] of the traumatic event, which start to manifest themselves, in fissured form, at a later date” (Labanyi 106). Seeing as the inhabitants of 124 do not confront their past, it comes back to haunt them through the apparition of Beloved.

Regardless of the many stories Sethe tells, certain things remain unsaid, which can be seen as a symptom of her trauma. Even though Sethe tells Beloved many stories about the past, the story about the infanticide is never told in its entirety. According to the novel, “[it] was not a story to pass on. [...] This was not a story to pass on” (Morrison 324). Even after history has repeated itself and the entire community has been present to see it, the reader still does not have a full account of what happened on the night that Sethe murdered Beloved. “*Beloved* repeatedly underscores slavery’s silences by replaying them, calling attention to what has not been said and what, in the world of this novel, *cannot* be said” (Reinhardt 117). If the cure for trauma is indeed a successful narration of the traumatic events, it can safely be said that the traumas of slavery and the infanticide it caused in Sethe’s case are not successfully worked through.

As in the other works, a tree in *Beloved* represents the lasting presence of slavery in the present. Sethe states that “[she] got a tree on [her] back” (Morrison 18). Her back is covered in scars from where her master hit her. Amy, the white girl who helped her deliver Denver, refers to the scar as “[a] chokecherry tree” (Morrison 18). The scars will never fade, just as the old schoolhouse in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, the tree in “Song of the Son” in *Cane* and the piano in *The Piano Lesson* will never disappear. This suggests that trees and the lumber that is made out of them continue to carry the memories of

slavery long after abolition. This could be seen as a reference to the fact that slavery continues to haunt its victims and thus establishes “an affiliative link with [the past]” (Labanyi 113). All of these trees and wooden objects stem from a past in slavery and will not ever vanish completely. However, Sethe states that she herself has never seen the tree “and never will” (Morrison 18), suggesting that she will never be able to fully work through the traumas that her past in slavery has caused her, for she is not able to acknowledge them. The tree, therefore, is more for the readers of *Beloved* than it is for the character itself. The characters do not need a reminder of the everlasting presence of slavery; the readers, however, do.

In *Beloved*, as in the other works considered in this research, slavery still continues to affect the present through the differences between the races. This can be seen most clearly when one looks at the character of Bodwin. Bodwin is an abolitionist who has done a lot to help the former slaves. However, the fact that he is an abolitionist does not necessarily mean that he considers himself to be equal to the blacks. Outside of his house stands a small sculpture of a black boy with a “gaping red mouth” across whose pedestal the words “At Yo Service” (Morrison 300) are written, which suggests that he still expects blacks to work for the whites. He too continues to hire black workers to help him around the house. He also states that the years in which he fought to get slavery abolished were “[good years]”, for “[nothing] since was as stimulating as the old days of letters, petitions, meetings, debates, [etcetera]” (Morrison 307). He got a lot of satisfaction out of fighting for what he thought was a good cause and has never since felt as useful. However, he does help out the former slaves a lot and considers that “[abolition] has worked, more or less” (Morrison 300), thus suggesting that he too realises that slavery has not been completely left in the past, for racial relations are still tainted by its legacy.

Seeing as the presence of *Beloved* represents the family’s past in slavery, it seems logical to assume that her exorcism would cause the family to be freed of the haunting

presence of slavery; however this is not necessarily the case. Berger mentions that “such optimistic interpretations of *Beloved* participate in the repressions and denials of trauma that the novel opposes” (Berger 415). The fact that the former slaves “forgot [Beloved] like a bad dream” (Morrison 323) does not mean that they have worked through their traumas and as a result they continue to be haunted by them. After all, Morrison has dedicated the book to the “Sixty Million and more” (Morrison, dedication) who have been affected by slavery and its aftermath. The sixty million refers to those who did not survive the journey to America on a slave ship, but the “and more” suggests that Morrison also talks about all of those who continued to be haunted by slavery after abolition and even in the present. Even though *Beloved* is exorcised, this does not mean that the present is not still haunted by slavery, for the system of inequality that led to slavery is still in place.

If anything, *Beloved* tells us that the traumas that trouble the inhabitants of 124 are complex and not easily overcome. According to Labanyi “[haunting] requires the present to correct the past at the same time that it establishes an affiliative link with it” (Labanyi 113). The question is whether or not this indeed happens in *Beloved*. Due to the cyclical movement of the novel’s chronology, one can conclude that the past in *Beloved* has a link with the present. Similarly, one can also conclude that it is necessary for Sethe, Paul D. and Denver to correct the past in their present, for their past leads them to be isolated and causes *Beloved* to fracture their family. Even though their past still troubles them at the end of the novel the inhabitants of 124 seem to have partly corrected their past.

Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there (Morrison 324).

The footprints that were left by the stream by Beloved continue to appear, however, they are not continuously present, thus suggesting that the inhabitants of 124 and the rest of the former slave community continues to live with the traumas of their past. However, the past is no longer as pressing as it used to be, for occasionally, the footprints disappear. This section also once again establishes that this story is not just the story of Sethe, Paul D. and Denver, but that of every other person who has been affected by slavery and its legacy, for the footprints fit whoever places their feet in them. Beloved's legacy thus shows that the past continues into the present, however it no longer has as much of an impact on the daily life of the former slave community, for the present has partly been repaired. However, as long as racial inequality remains, however, the injustices of the past can never be repaired completely.

6. Conclusion

It can thus be concluded that in all of these works, the present is destabilised by the past of slavery and that this destabilisation is represented with the help of a non-realist aesthetic. In *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, Julius's stories about conjuring and transforming humans into animals and objects are enough to convince his white employer John and his wife Annie, for example, not to build their new kitchen out of lumber taken from the schoolhouse. Even though Julius is long freed from slavery, his employer John mentions that Julius "presented to [him] the curious spectacle of a mind enslaved long after the shackles had been struck off from the limbs of its possessor" (Chesnutt 57), thus suggesting that slavery continues to limit Julius in what he does and does not do or think. In *Cane* we find a present disturbed by distorted racial relations between black and white. For example in "Blood Burning Moon", where the lives of both Bob Stone and Tom Burwell have been disturbed by the legacy of slavery. Stone continuously thinks of "[what they would] think if they knew [about his relationship with a black girl]" (Toomer 31). He is still coming to terms with the fact that he no longer holds power over black people and does not yet consider them equal. Tom Burwell too feels that society is fractured by the legacy of slavery. The "Blood-burning Moon" (Toomer 29) is a bad omen for the coloureds in this society and indeed the fact that Burwell kills Stone in the end, leads to his untimely demise at the hands of a lynch mob. In both *The Piano Lesson* and *Beloved*, haunting seems to take place in the more literal sense of the word. Both have to do with a ghostly apparition that disturbs the characters' lives in their own homes. In *The Piano Lesson* this is the ghost of Sutter, the son of a white slave-owner who used to keep the Charles family's ancestors as slaves. In *Beloved*, the nature of the apparition remains unclear. Most of the time it is believed that Beloved is the ghost of Sethe's daughter, whom she killed to save her from a life in slavery. However, she can also be seen as a representation of other slaves' traumas, for her footprints "will fit [anyone who places his

feet in them]” (Morrison 324). In all four of these works, a non-realist element is brought into the present in order to “[dramatize] the afterlife of the past in the present” (Labanyi 101).

Labanyi calls upon earlier critics to suggest that narration can lead to a successful working through of trauma, however, in these four works this does not necessarily have to be true. In these four works narration is not necessarily “[the] cure for trauma” (van Alphen in Labanyi 106). It is often said that traumas cannot be spoken about and therefore cannot be worked through. To a certain extent this does go for all of the works in this research, however there is more to it. Julius, for example, has no troubles speaking of his past in slavery. Instead, “the trouble may lie with the failure of others to listen” (Labanyi 111). It is made clear in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* that not everyone is willing to listen to Julius’s stories, for John refuses to listen to the gruesome stories about the institution of slavery in the way that his wife Annie listens to them. Furthermore, even though Julius speaks of his past a lot, he has not worked through his traumas completely, as he has “a doubt in his own mind as to whether he [has] a right to think or to feel” (Chesnutt 57). He is thus still haunted by slavery even though he narrates its horrors. In *Cane*, the horrors of slavery are not narrated in the way they are in the other works. However, through the use of sorrow songs in “Blood Burning Moon” and “Song of the Son”, Toomer does give a voice to slavery’s horrors. One does not, however, get the idea that the traumas caused by slavery are cured by this singing. In the *Piano Lesson* too there is room for storytelling in multiple ways. The males in the play continuously tell stories about their families, however the ghost in the story is only exorcised when Berniece plays the piano and chants “I want you to help me” (Wilson 107). Even after having played the piano, Berniece has to keep up narrating her traumas by making music, for otherwise “[Boy Willie] and Sutter [are] both liable to be back” (Wilson 108). Just successfully telling the stories about their past once is thus not enough to cure the family’s traumas. Lastly, in *Beloved* the fact that Sethe and Paul D. do not talk about their past in

slavery is what causes *Beloved* to appear. One would thus assume that by telling their stories, they would no longer be haunted by her. However, *Beloved* grows bigger when Sethe tells her stories about the past, while Sethe gets weaker. Sethe's storytelling "[acknowledges] the past", but it does not allow her "to believe in the possibility of creating a better future" (Labanyi 91) as it does seem to do in the other works. However, haunting is not necessarily about a working through of trauma, but about a continuous disruption of the present. Therefore, storytelling in these works is not necessarily about the characters' attempts to work through trauma, but also about showing the reader that slavery continues to fracture the present.

There is thus an obvious continuity between these four works. Even though the works were written in different periods, they all deal with the continuing legacy of slavery and the way in which it continues to haunt those who were affected by it. They all employ the haunting aesthetic as described by Labanyi and show that the traumas of slavery continue into the present. Moreover, all four works manage to convey what it is like to be haunted by slavery, for their uncanny atmosphere makes the reader feel ill at ease, seeing as they cannot fully comprehend what is going on in the stories. The non-realist aesthetic they employ manages to draw the reader in and teach them about the atrocities of slavery and its continuing legacy in the system that is in place in the present.

The purpose of the haunting trope is not to enable the works' characters to work through their trauma, but for the readers of the works to understand the fact that the present continues to be disturbed by the past. Chesnut's, Toomer's, Wilson's and Morrison's works all contain political messages that are meant to show the reader how slavery continues to fracture the present through disturbed racial relations and continuing inequality between black and white. The readers are supposed to be left ill at ease after reading stories about cultural haunting, for it is supposed to make them realise how badly African Americans continue to be

treated after abolition and how big the part is that the white supremacy plays in enabling this inequality to continue. After *Beloved*, many more works have been written that continue in the same tradition. After all, these stories teach the present-day public of the lives of “sixty million and more” (Morrison, dedication), a lesson that continues to be important in the present.

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