

They Were Stories to Pass On

Remembering the Traumatic Past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*.



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Introduction

“Sixty-six Million and more” could read the epigraph to a fictitious novel about the combined remembering of the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust and American slavery. The number of lives lost in these terrible events is difficult to estimate; the influence they continue to have is not.

Both African Americans and Jewish Americans have been outsiders in US society and victims to discrimination and racism. For blacks this lasted from their arrival in the New World around the beginning of the seventeenth century until far into the second half of the twentieth century, when the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 paved the way for their acceptance as American citizens. The first Jews arrived in the New World in the 1650s and found their place among other settlers. Their influx into the country continued until immigration acts put a halt to it in the 1920s. Discrimination against Jews in the US originated from the heyday of immigration at the close of the nineteenth century and persevered until the outbreak and subsequent devastation of the Second World War. According to historian Gary Gerstle, even though it did not benefit Jews and blacks in the US to the same extent, the Cold War context, the economic climate and the sense of guilt brought about by the horrors of the Holocaust made it possible for both ethnic minorities to ascend into the middle class. In addition, the changing sentiments that were generated by the Nazis racially justified acts reduced anti-Semitism and black racism and consequently made possible their acceptance by fellow Americans (251).

The Second World War and the post-war period served as a determiner in the shift in public opinion regarding racism and discrimination for both African Americans and Jewish Americans. For the latter, however, it would also be known as something completely different. For many Jews who had fled Europe due to violence and poverty the Holocaust made them find their social, economic and political situation in the new country to be

improved, but at the same time lose everything and everyone they knew in the old country. To African Americans this combination of gaining and losing was presented by the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Due to the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865, blacks found themselves to be free of forced labor and bodily possession, but in the centuries of slavery had lost everything they had ever known: their homeland in Africa, their families, their children and their humanity. In the wake of these victories both black and Jewish survivors had to learn how to deal with their new position and life without slavery and the Holocaust, respectively; however, with the memory of its terrible costs.

This is not the only aspect blacks and Jews in the US have in common. Throughout the twentieth century, but especially since the end of the Second World War, similarities between the two ethnic groups sparked literary, historical and cultural discussions about their relationship. In his research on the black-Jewish interethnic partnership Eric J. Sundquist writes that due to their common otherness and exposure to discrimination on grounds of race and religion, “Jews and blacks once found that their day-to-day communal experiences were as intimately connected as their histories were distinct” (2). Emily Miller Budick states that while they did not interact on a regular basis—except for particular instances, like their common activism in the Communist Party and labor movements during the 1930s and 1940s and in the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s—blacks and Jews did keep each other in mind in defining their own ethnic identity (1). Sundquist writes about this that now that the twentieth century as well as their relationship has come to an end, we can attempt to study the bonds between the two groups, and in particular “the importance of blacks for Jews and Jews for blacks in conceiving of themselves as Americans, when both remained outsiders to the rights and privileges of full citizenship” (1-2).

Central to the discussion about black-Jewish relations is the comparison between American slavery and the Jewish Holocaust. Although these events are very distinct and

historically singular, their common pasts of subordination and racism have formed the basis for both Jews and blacks in defining their historical importance. In the process, the discussions regarding these two events almost seem to resemble a contest of significance. About this discussion Sundquist writes that “the very magnitude of the Holocaust and its unique ideological intention—the elimination of an entire “race” from the face of the earth—have ... made comparisons to slavery and lynching at best problematic, at worst liable to jealousy and vituperation” (7).

An example of such discussions is the issue of terminology regarding the use of the word *holocaust*. About the use of the term Sundquist writes: “Although it is ubiquitous today, use of the term “Holocaust” to [exclusively] designate the genocide of the European Jews only became widespread ... after it was adopted as the appropriate translation of the Hebrew *shoah*” (209). Prior to the word *shoah* being considered a possible alternative to *holocaust*, it was typically translated as “great disaster” or “catastrophe.” In this light it might be argued that Jews were not unique victims to acts that might qualify as such. As a result, American slavery might qualify as an event that can be termed *holocaust*. Because of the indiscriminate use of the term *holocaust*, many Jews opt for the term *shoah* to describe the Jewish Holocaust of the 1930s and 1940s. However, despite the controversy surrounding the term, I opt for distinguishing between the capitalized *Holocaust* to describe the Jewish Holocaust in Europe and the lowercased *holocaust* (with the possible addition of the adjective *black*) as a substitute for American slavery.

Slavery and the Holocaust are among the most atrocious crimes against humanity. Due to their ubiquity and devastation they still greatly influence later generations and this will probably never cease to be. An example of this is the emergence of post-Holocaust literature. Janet Handler Burstein writes that decades after the Jewish destruction, American Jewish writers returned to the past of their European counterparts after it was displaced by important

and more immediate events following the end of the war: like the death of President Roosevelt, Mussolini's execution and Hitler's suicide (3-4). Additionally, Jews in the US were too busy assimilating and creating a new Jewish American culture to linger in the past. Blacks were also at this time trying to improve their situation and its success might have sparked the emergence of the return of remembering in African American literature. Emily Miller Budick writes about this that their cultural strength might have initiated their renewed interest in portraying their ancestors at the moment of their severe weakness (201).

Like in the first examples of memory—narratives of and interviews with former slaves and Holocaust-survivors—remembering the past, for blacks and Jews alike, has been a substantial element of trying to come to terms with it. As time passed and its survivors died slavery survived or, as Walter Benn Michaels has said, “although no white people or black people now living ever experienced it, slavery can be and must be either remembered or forgotten. ... [W]hat once happened is still happening [because] ... slavery needn't be part of your memory in order to be remembered by you” (4). He clarifies by saying that a common racial identity—and therefore racial memory—makes for these experiences to be passed on to African Americans today. The same is true for the Holocaust. It survives because of the Jewish American ethnic experience of either forgetting or remembering it (Burstein 3).

Through these haunting memories all blacks and Jews are survivors and thus they remember their pasts in communal thought, speech or writing. Although they are different from the memories of actual survivors, contemporary memories do guarantee that the past will not be forgotten. Two such examples are Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* and Michael Chabon's 2000 novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (from hereon shortened to *Kavalier & Clay*). *Beloved* tells the story of the life of Sethe—a Kentucky colored woman who escaped from slavery in 1855, a decade before abolition—and her haunting past embodied by the resurrection of her murdered daughter. Having been killed by

her mother to keep her safe from a life of slavery, the child is buried under a gravestone reading merely “Beloved”. Not only does slavery haunt Sethe in the form of ever-present memories from her old home, she is also quite literally haunted by the ghost of her dead child; eighteen years after having escaped slavery she is still not free of her past. *Kavalier & Clay* tells of the cousins Sammy Clay and Joseph “Joe” Kavalier, their family bond and friendship that results in the creation of a comic book series, *The Escapist*, at the end of the 1930s in New York City. The comic’s titular hero becomes for them a means of dealing with reality. For Sammy this means accepting his homosexuality. For Joe, an immigrant from pre-war Prague, it means dealing with the inevitability of the war and the loss of his family. The myth of the Jewish Golem, which plays a key role in the novel, symbolizes both the memory of the Holocaust and Joe’s deliverance.

Many scholars have written about the themes in *Beloved*, including the connotation of remembering and the possibility of this being a post-Holocaust novel¹, but none have compared it with Chabon’s novel. Neither has there been research on how their respective treatment of the themes of slavery and the Jewish genocide are similar or different. The choice to juxtapose *Beloved* and *Kavalier & Clay* might at first sight appear to be implausible, but exactly this is what makes it so interesting. *Beloved* telling the story of a ghost-child come back to haunt her family and *Kavalier & Clay* narrating the lives and adventures of young comic book writers, do not immediately expect to have memory of the past as key elements. This unexpectedness makes for surprising comparisons. The writers and their characters’ differences in culture, history and ethnicity also make for unforeseen conclusion about

¹ Relating to the black-Jewish relationship, scholars have argued that African American writers have created their own post-*black* Holocaust literature. Like slavery can also be termed a holocaust, the remembrance thereof can be termed post-Holocaust. Some examples of research that deals with both black-Jewish relations and the possibility of Morrison’s *Beloved* being a post-Holocaust novel are Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), Emily Miller Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), Stanley Crouch, “Aunt Medea”, *Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews 1979-89* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), p. 205

remembrance of the past. In researching how memory takes place for blacks and Jews, comparing them will not only provide us with better understanding of said novels, but this will also teach us about the relationship between Jews and blacks and slavery and the Holocaust as featured in the novels.

In this thesis I will first of all focus on the characters' respective pasts in slavery and the Holocaust—especially the parent-child relations and their ability to physical escape their pasts, but simultaneously not succeeding in mentally escaping it—and how these influence them. In order to make claims about their remembrance it is important to know the people behind the memories, and how they entered this process. Memory is the focus of the second part of my thesis, where I will discuss how both novels are similar in their use of continued haunting and remembering through supernatural embodiments of the past. In *Beloved* the title character is a resurrection of the past that haunts her family and in *Kavalier & Clay* the myth of the Golem haunts Joe. Finally, I will discuss how the novels fit into the literary tradition of black-Jewish relations and their remembering of slavery and the Holocaust and in doing so I provide insights into the intertextual relationship of the two books. Although Morrison's *Beloved* and Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay* deal with very distinct historical events, I will argue that they can be successfully and fruitfully compared on their dealing with and remembrance of the past.

The People behind the Memories

It was not a story to pass on.

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Much like other products of the human mind, memory functions on many levels. A person can at the same time remember on an individual level, as part of a family, together with a region or country, or as one with the entire human race. It so happens that, due to the complexity of human memory, events as omnipresent as American slavery and the Jewish Holocaust can be misinterpreted. The bigger the memory, the greater it is in danger of being generalized, which might denigrate its meaning or impact. Misinterpretation and generalization of memory were used as a means for some groups and individuals to undeservedly claim the insignificance and nonexistence of these events; a belief that is regrettably still preached today. The dangers surrounding communal memory together with the independence of personal memory make for the latter to be an excellent perspective from which to research remembering in *Beloved* and *Kavalier & Clay*.

Because remembering is in the first place a very personal experience, when conducting literary research one might first want to look at how this is done by the author. However, in order to really fathom the means by which the author remembers something it is crucial to capture how memory is given shape through the characters in the book, since they sprang from the author's imagination and are formed through the mind of their maker; hence, gaining insight into the character's memory will illuminate the author's memory as well. Ideas of the author are automatically captured in the characters. To really understand the people behind the author's memory, it is important to learn how their life experiences influenced them. Every person experiences events differently and this is not only affected by their nature or

their nurture, but by the workings of their individual minds. So in order to understand how the characters of a novel enter the remembering process—and especially remembering something as comprehensive as slavery and the Holocaust—it is very important to shine a light on the experiences that shaped them as individuals, most importantly their relationships with their parents.

In the case of Morrison's *Beloved* the character with the most interesting backstory is Sethe and, although her situation was similar to that of almost every African American during the last half of the nineteenth century—and in some respects maybe even better—this does not make her situation less influential to her eventual memory of her time in slavery. Sethe spent her life of enslavement on the Garner plantation and this place is described by her mother-in-law Baby Suggs as being unusual. “The Garners, it seemed ... ran a special kind of slavery, treating [slaves] like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted known. And he didn't stud his boys. Never brought them to her cabin with directions to ‘lay down with her’” (165). During the antebellum period of American slavery said practises were very rare and many blacks lived under circumstances that were much harsher than those faced by Sethe and her family. However, her life as a slave worsened with the passing of her master. “Nobody counted on Garner dying. Nobody thought he could. How ‘bout that? Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces. Now ain't that slavery or what is it?” (259) is how Paul D, Sethe's lover and friend from Sweet Home, reminisces this life changing event. For the slaves on Sweet Home the arrival of schoolteacher was the trigger to run away, but not before they all experienced the terror of his new regime.

About the earliest experiences of her life, including her mother, Sethe does not know much. Her mother died when she was too young to really have bonded; something her mother was desperately trying to prevent, for that matter. When Sethe is asked about her “ma'am” by

Beloved—whom she at this time does not recognize to be her daughter—she can for the first time in her life recall something she was once told about her: “She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never” (74). This is the one example of parenthood that she was exposed to and that would influence her own motherhood as well. Her mother could not bear to keep her children that were conceived by white men and the only child she did keep she could not bear to love.

The threat and fear of losing children to the domestic slave trade was very common in nineteenth-century America and this is what influenced black parent-child relations during the period. It also reached Baby Suggs. “I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased,” (6) she remembers. Historian Michael Tadman estimates that one in three slave families were affected by separation and that it resulted in twenty percent of all children above the age of fourteen being sold away from their parents (211-12). Ira Berlin states that this caused parents to resign to the possibility of themselves never seeing their children again once they were old enough to sell. He stresses that fear was not limited to the ones being sold, but that the ones that were left behind were just as devastated by it. This fear translated into parents not daring to love their own children. In *Beloved* this is beautifully captured when Morrison writes, “For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love” (54). This love for her children, influenced by the lack of a loving mother of her own, is the core of Sethe’s existence and therefore also affects the way in which she remembers her past. How “privileged” a slave she might have been, she is not going to let her children go through anything remotely close to a life without freedom and this is what drove Sethe to commit her terrible act of killing her daughter.

In *Kavalier & Clay* parent-child relations also form the main characters and therefore influence their memory of the past. Both Joe and Sammy, at one point or another, have to go through essential life experiences without one or both parents. For Sammy, a young Jewish American living in New York City, growing up without his father would be the number one influence on his life. His father was his idol, inspiration, partner and the ultimate antithesis of his existence. Whereas Sammy is thin, fragile and physically handicapped due to his suffering with polio, his father is a circus strongman and everything Sammy would envision himself to be. The obsession he has with his father is never reciprocated and these feelings and experiences are what shape him as a person. His father is more obsessed with being on the road than being with his own son. This results in Sammy always pushing himself and wanting to be appreciated both as a person and an artist. The unreturned love for his father also makes him doubt his own abilities to love another person. This is most apparent in his relationship with his adoptive son, Tommy, of whom he feels “delighted to call his son” (472).

One of the most distinct Sammy-like characteristic of his comic-hero creations is their male sidekicks. It can be argued that Sammy’s obsession with the sidekicks originates from his obsession with his father: his real-life would-be partner. Another feature of Sammy that sprung from early life experiences is his homosexuality and the identity struggle that it results in. At the age of thirteen, when his father comes to see him for the first and last time since he left his mother and him, his father takes Sammy to a Jewish bathhouse. While they are sitting there naked in the heat he has the first encounter with his homosexual feelings. “There was a man there with them. ... It was as if a tunnel of clear air had opened between them. Sammy looked back at his father, his stomach awash in an acid of embarrassment, confusion, and arousal. Somehow the hirsute magnificence of him was too much” (106). Whether his aroused feelings are caused by the unknown man or his father is not as significant as the fact that it happened with his father present. The fascination with his father is from this moment on

elucidated, at least to the reader, as being greatly influenced by his sexuality, much like his fascination with the sidekicks is influenced by it. Sammy's father issues have influenced the person he would eventually become and therefore also influenced his remembering.

Due to his distance from his European Jewish roots, Sammy's remembering of the Jewish Holocaust is almost superficial and very different from that of his cousin Joe's, who is closely linked to the Jews of Europe. Sammy grew up in the US without direct contact with the Jews in Europe, their culture and history. Despite and because of his ethnic "otherness," he tries to fit into American society and culture as much as he can; hence, his fascination with the profoundly American art form of comic book writing. Although, it may appear to not be of importance to how remembering features in Chabon's novel, Sammy's lack of conscious memory shows the opposite of the Jewish American experience of remembrance; namely, forgetting. In providing one of his main characters with the ability to forget, Chabon succeeds in strengthening the meaning of remembering and consequently, remembering in *Kavalier & Clay* not only features in actual memories, but also in forgetting the past.

The relationship between the novel's other protagonist and his family is very different from those of Sethe and Sammy. Unlike them, Joe, a Jewish refugee from pre-war Prague who fled to New York City, was not ignored or abandoned by his parents and lived happily with them until the impending war in Europe forced their separation. Much like Sethe did when killing her child, Joe's parents acted out of love when sending him to America in the hope of saving him and their family. With this situation being much less extreme and definitely safer for the child involved, Sethe's alternative, regrettably, was more common than anyone could ever wish for. Emily M. Budick writes about this, "Morrison's novel may, indeed, in more ways than one, owe something to the experience of the Holocaust, in which mothers killed their children to save them and/or their families" (201). For Joe, his parents' act of saving him results in his obsession with returning the "favor" and helping them escape

the impending war in Europe. From the moment he leaves his home all his thoughts and actions revolve around this desire. Consequently, throughout the novel Joe does not permit himself to sway from this goal and in the process it becomes an obsession, both in his comic-book creations and his real life. He has to go through all this while missing his parents, their guidance and support in the moment he needs it the most. The inability to fulfil this self-imposed purpose is what would shape his remembering of the war in Europe and the Holocaust that took place in its name. The comic books that he and Sammy created, and the *Escapist* in particular, would be a means for them to come to terms with their situations, but simultaneously it would mark the reality of not being able to improve it.

The pre-memory experience of *Kavalier & Clay*'s protagonists differs substantially. Joe was raised in pre-war Prague and has experienced life in Europe and the imminent threat of the war. The bonds he has with the people he has left behind—not only his family, but also his compatriots, friends, and his teacher and escape artist, Bernhard Kornblum—link him closely to the events and therefore they have a greater impact on him. Sammy, being born in America, lacks this close connection with the Jews of Europe. However, through his ties with Joe and Mrs. Kavalier, who is his mother's sister, he is prevented from being completely oblivious to their fate. This difference between the cousins shapes their individual memories and it results in Joe experiencing memories secondhand; namely, through the firsthand accounts of the Kavalier family, and Sammy experiencing it thirdhand, through the memories of his cousin and best friend Joe.

Freedom for the characters in *Beloved* and *Kavalier & Clay* brought about the transition from experiencing the pre-memory situation to actually remembering it. Freedom was what they strived for, like the real victims of slavery and the Holocaust. Two examples of such real life memory that deal with the experiences in the past as well as the meaning of freedom are the accounts of North Carolina former slave Robert Glenn and Jewish Italian writer and

Holocaust survivor Primo Levi. “I took my freedom by degrees and remained obedient and respectful, but still wondering and thinking of what the future held for me. After I retired at night I made plan after plan and built aircastles as to what I would do” (336), tells Glenn about his experience of freedom. For him freedom was a positive continuation of the past but with newfound human abilities and possibilities. In contrast, Levi describes the experience of freedom as joyous, but shameful and full of guilt. He writes, “Coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished. Not by our will, cowardice, or fault, yet nevertheless we had lived for months and years at animal level” (75). These particular expressions show two possible degrees of freedom memory and indicate that becoming free can bring about different feelings in people, much like it does in Morrison and Chabon’s novels.

In both *Beloved* and *Kavalier & Clay* freedom is very important in shaping the characters and their subsequent memories. The characters’ dealings with freedom are very similar due to their emphasis on escape. For Baby Suggs, the first one to obtain it, freedom is a blessing. She was able to escape slavery after almost seventy years when her son bought her freedom instead of his own. Symbolized by her discovering her beating heart “that started ... the minute she crossed the Ohio River” (173), her freedom influenced her to help her fellow blacks. Her heart filled to the brim with newfound feelings of gratitude and determination she starts to preach “the word” and teach people how to love and remember. This all changed with Sethe’s fateful act, or as Morrison describes it, “The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count. They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last” (212).

Sethe escapes slavery through her running away with her children. For her, being free means “to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission

for desire” (191). Thus in her twenty-eight days of unslaved life she chose to love her children on her own terms and even to death. Ironically, through her act of killing her “crawling-already?” (110) baby, Sethe succeeds in saving her other children from a life in slavery. As a result, Denver, Sethe’s remaining daughter, who has known nothing but freedom cares about nothing but the present. In this way Sethe’s freedom influenced not only her own memory, but also the memory of her child and Baby Suggs.

Like Sethe, Joe literally escapes Prague and the impending war in Europe. In doing this he is helped by another form of escape, namely autoliberation. Having acquired this skill in his home country, Joe is freed through his Jewish roots. Like Primo Levi, his freedom brings about feelings of guilt, which spark his desire to liberate his family; consequently, these experiences and feelings influence his remembering.

As a runaway slave woman, a handicapped secretly-homosexual Jewish American and a lonely refugee from pre-war Prague, Sethe, Sammy and Joe enter the process of remembering their pasts. Although they are all different—just as each person’s memory is different—they are linked through their imperfect relationships with their parents. However, for these characters freedom is relative. For Sethe and Joe, their successful escape from slavery and the impending Holocaust, respectively, provide them with physical freedom; however, they are not mentally free. Even years after the end of the wars that put an end to the atrocious events and liberated blacks and Jews, they are still haunted by their terrible pasts.

Haunting Pasts: Beloved and the Golem

[W]e, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. ... We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so ... have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are ... the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.

Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

American slavery and the Jewish Holocaust are very distinct events. Consequently, it might be believed that their remembrance is also very different. This is not the case, however, as literary critic Eric J. Sundquist has pointed out. He says about this the following: "In setting slavery alongside the Holocaust, it is not so much the events themselves that can be profitably compared but rather their interpretations and memory" (447). Slavery and the Holocaust belong to the most terrible happenings of the last two hundred years. Their legacy is still very much sensible today and will probably never cease to be. Both memories are centred around recognition and never forgetting and this is also the case in *Beloved* and *Kavalier & Clay*.

It is important to recognize the two levels on which remembering takes place in the novels. Firstly, it differs *between* the novels. In this respect, difference in experience does not necessarily mean a difference in memory. The way in which the respective memories feature and the influence they have on the characters can be successfully compared, just as Sundquist points out. Secondly, it differs *within* the novel as well. In this case the same experiences can bring about other interpretations and therefore alter the characters' memories.

Despite the fact that their novels deal with different experiences, Morrison and Chabon both put great emphasis on the haunting abilities of remembering. *Beloved* is, like Valerie Smith has so fittingly described it, “the story of the past embodied” (350). Haunting in this sense has quite a literal meaning due to the presence of the haunting ghost—and following resurrection—of its title character. Having been killed when she was barely crawling, she initially takes the form of a baby, which according to Baby Suggs they should be thankful for. About the reason behind her fatal act Sethe says the following to Denver:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. ... What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. ... And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. ... Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. ... and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again ... That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what (43-44).

This violent act of saving her children from the experiences of slavery greatly affected the spirit of the murdered child; or to borrow Smith's words, *Beloved* became the embodiment of the past and therefore also the remembering of slavery, because it “needn't be part of your memory in order to be remembered by you” (Michaels 4).

Previous to *Beloved*'s murder Sethe did not have time to remember; she was too busy celebrating her freedom and the love for her children in the short month since her escape. The murder made her to violently enter the remembering process and from this moment on her memory became inextricably linked with *Beloved*. The return of the lost child eighteen years after her death—which coincides with Sethe urinating in the yard that symbolizes her giving birth again to the child she lost to slavery—marks the impact that slavery has on her. This

proves that even after years of physical freedom, the experiences of the past prevent her from being mentally free.

In the years between Beloved's murder and return Sethe could not bear to think about her past. Keeping the past at bay and keeping Denver from the past are the main focus of her life. Every day marks for her the struggle of dealing with the unspeakable "thought picture" that would never cease to be. The return of Beloved changes this. She is profoundly interested in stories of the past. Storytelling is a way to feed and satisfy her and in the process Sethe discovers that she actually wants to tell about her past and that she likes it, which is surprising since every mention of it used to hurt. In this way, Beloved indicates Sethe's acceptance of the past, but simultaneously "Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (295). Consequently, Beloved is not so much an escape *from* slavery as it is an escape *to* slavery. However, Sethe would experience it again. If reliving her past was all it took, if it would bring back her baby so they could live the life they had never had, she would suffer through it. It so happens that the child that was lost to slavery—who became its embodiment and initially brought about her salvation—in the end almost killed Sethe. She managed to escape it once, but would not be able to do it again. Not if it meant Beloved would leave again. Would it not have been for Denver's change of heart, her past of slavery would have reclaimed her mother. Where her previous job had been to protect her sister from her mother, now it changed to protecting her mother from Beloved. The child to whom only the present had mattered is the one that ultimately saves her mother from her past. In freeing herself and her mother from Beloved's haunting presence, she brought about the mental escape from their past and paved the way for a normal remembrance.

Sethe's lack of persistence against Beloved and slavery's haunting influence might have been caused by what historian Peter Kolchin describes as the psychological defenselessness of the victims of both American slavery and the Jewish Holocaust (135). Due to their power as

total institutions, individual acts and powers could not help its victims escape them. Or could they? Baby Suggs escaped, Sethe and her children escaped and so did the characters in *Kavalier & Clay*.

To all those who toil in the bonds of slavery and ... the shackles of oppression, he offers the hope of liberation and the promise of freedom! Armed with superb physical and mental training, a crack team of assistants, and ancient wisdom, he roams the globe, performing amazing feats and coming to the aid of those who languish in tyranny's chains! He is ... the Escapist!" (*Kavalier & Clay* 121).

This is how Sammy describes their comic book hero to Joe. Whereas for Sammy the process of creating their comics about the Escapist's adventures would be a means of escaping his poor background, his physical handicaps and the heavy chains of secrecy surrounding his homosexuality, for Joe the Escapist would mark his haunting memories from Europe and the inability of letting go of them. Despite his most successful comic revolving around escaping, Joe himself is only able to physically escape the war and his past in Europe. His obsession with trying to escape his family is what binds him to the past. His hero becomes, both in the comics and in real life, a means of dealing with the reality of not being able to, but desperately wanting to escape the past. This marks, like in *Beloved*, the haunting powers of remembering.

As time passes Joe surrenders to the fact that the fictional war in the Escapist's adventures is the only war he can actually win; still he remains optimistic about saving his family. However, the death of his brother Thomas causes him to give in to his inability to free them. This does not mean that the haunting stops; on the contrary. The death of Thomas causes him to be absorbed by his past. From this moment on he lives only with his memories and to revenge his brother. Whereas previously the Escapist had been his means of keeping the past

at bay, now nothing can save him from his memories. Like Sethe, his closeness to his memories drives him to isolation, to fight in the war and would almost kill him.

Like in *Beloved*, the child of the present saves Joe from his grief and guilt that is his memory. He had never allowed himself to be free of the guilt resulting from not being able to save his family, not when they were alive and not when they were lost. The love that he feels for his son Tommy changes this. It makes him realize he has something to live for and someone he can protect. This realization marks one of the influences behind his salvation. The other one is the process of writing a comic book novel about the Golem. Whereas the Escapist is symbolic to his physical freedom, the Golem is for Joe symbolic to mental freedom and the possibility to escape his past.

Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history—his home—the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. He had escaped, in his life, from ropes, chains, boxes, bags, and crates, from handcuffs and shackles, from countries and regimes, from the arms of a woman who loved him, from crashed airplanes and an opiate addiction and from an entire frozen continent intent on causing death. The escape from reality was, he felt—especially right after the war—a worthy challenge (575).

Precisely in this way—in returning to his past by writing about it in the present—he starts to remember and come to terms with it. Prior to this, “the pain of his loss—though he would never have spoken of it in these terms—was always with him,” (567) now, “the shaping of the golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. ... It was the voicing of a vain wish ... to escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free of the entangling chain of reality” (582). In the process it helped to heal him and escape his haunting past.

The significance of the Golem in freeing Joe from the past and providing him with a healthier memory is strengthened by the appearance of the real-life Golem of Prague. Having escaped Czechoslovakia with its body and being prevented from discovery by it, the Golem made his physical escape possible. The return of it, as a comic book character and as a real entity, makes possible his mental escape from the past, but at the same time reminds him of the importance of remembering. The experience has come full circle and what remains is memory. The Golem has turned to dust, the result of the entering of a soul. When beholding this Joe wonders “at what point the soul of the golem had reentered its body, or if possibly there could be more than one lost soul embodied in all that dust, weighing it down so heavily” (612). This marks the possibility of the souls of the lost Jews having entered the Golems remains, for Joe and his fellow Jewish Americans to deal with. Thus it becomes, like *Beloved* and the drowned victims, an omniscient entity.

Morrison writes that “people who die bad don’t stay in the ground” (221). This is exactly true for *Beloved* and the Golem. Being victims of slavery and the Holocaust—or the “drowned” as Levi calls them—they are the true witnesses of their horrors. They are the past embodied come back to haunt the survivors and in the process they shape and symbolize the characters’ memories. Through incorporating these supernatural beings in their novels, the authors successfully portray how their characters remember the atrocious experiences of their pasts.

Morrison and Chabon's part in Multidirectional Memory

I convinced myself that it was time for me to live like a grown-up writer: off royalties and writing only. I don't know what comic book that notion came from, but I grabbed it.

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* - Foreword

The ethnic experiences of African Americans and Jewish Americans are closely linked and so are their literatures. Since the end of American slavery and the Jewish Holocaust, literature about these traumatic pasts has been subjected to either forgetting or remembering the terrible events. The latter is thus an important aspect of both black and Jewish literary traditions and consequently also of *Beloved* and *Kavalier & Clay*. This does not mean, however, that it has always been so.

The most interesting period of black-Jewish relations is arguably the post-war period of the 1940s and 1950s. The aftermath of the Second World War and the changing views regarding minorities influenced both blacks and Jews in America. Guilt originating from the horrors of the Holocaust and the ambiguity of American segregation created opportunities for both groups to improve their social, economic and political situations. Similar goals brought blacks and Jews together in the fight for civil rights, equal opportunity and the end of racism. Janet Handler Burstein argues that the lack of remembrance literature in this period was caused by the assimilation process. American Jews were "apparently unconcerned with their severance from European Jewish culture and, indeed, from European Jews". She asks herself: "were they just too busy to mourn?" (4).

In his book discussing the multidirectionality of memory Michael Rothberg supports this in describing the importance of the Cold War context in influencing black and Jewish

literature. He emphasizes the particularity of the Cold War situation and its effects on discussions about racism and the Holocaust in America. Fear of censorship and persecution, together with a partiality for leftist thought, influenced the majority of blacks and Jews to support anti-Communist and anti-internationalist convictions. Rothberg addresses how this, and the assimilation process that Burstein talks about, caused Jewish American organizations to be reluctant in drawing attention to the Holocaust and its destruction of the Jews in Europe. According to him, the American Left “became the dominant purveyor of what we would now call Holocaust memory” (117-18).

An example of African American literature from the post-war period that shows this leftist tendency and proves the multidirectionality of memory is W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1952 text “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto.” In this short essay Du Bois writes about his visits to Poland and especially the influence of the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto on his changing views about the “color line.” In doing so he provides us with an example of how memory can be altered through comparison and competition. Du Bois:

The result of these three visits, and particularly of my view of the Warsaw ghetto, was not so much clearer understanding of the Jewish problem in the world as it was a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem. In the first place, the problem of slavery, emancipation, and caste in the United States was no longer in my mind a separate and unique thing as I had so long conceived it. It was not even solely a matter of color and physical and racial characteristics, which was particularly a hard thing for me to learn, since for a lifetime the color line had been a real and efficient cause of misery. ... [T]he race problem in which I was interested cut across lines of color and physique and belief and status and was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men (14-15).

This passage shows that from the moment he was exposed to the experiences and destruction of the Holocaust his own memory about slavery and segregation took on a different form, or as Rothberg calls it, Du Bois's memory "[cut] across ethnic boundaries" (132).

Whereas Du Bois's text is an example of 1950s memory of slavery initiated by the Jewish Holocaust, Burstein argues that since the 1980s Jewish American writers started to actively close the gap between them and their Jewish counterparts in Europe and their past in the Holocaust (5). The works of these post-Holocaust writers became centred on returning to the past that was previously and for so long been ignored. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be seen as a reaction to this invigoration of post-Holocaust memory.

Many scholars have examined Morrison's use of the preface "Sixty Million and more" and her epigraph from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans that is interpreted as justifying the Jewish displacement. About the preface Morrison has said that it "is the best educated guess at the number of black Africans who ... died either as captives in Africa or on slave ships" (Clemons 75). Despite this the number is also ten times the number of Jews who were lost to the Holocaust and in this light *Beloved* might appear to be a multidirectional memory. Critic Stanley Crouch says about *Beloved* that it "seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery in the big-time martyr ratings contest" and that it is a blackface Holocaust novel (105). Paul Gilroy, however, defends Morrison's use of the preface in emphasizing that mutual response creates mutual benefit. He also addresses the existence of attempts—like Du Bois's text—to import the Holocaust into the remembrance of slavery (164-165). Despite their lack of agreement, these views prove that Morrison's novel cannot be considered outside the context of black-Jewish relations in post-Holocaust literature.

Kavalier & Clay, written more than a decade after *Beloved*, can also be seen as an element in the black-Jewish conversation regarding memory. Fitting into the literary tradition of renewed interest for the horrors of the Holocaust, Chabon's novel is filled with concern for

the Jews of Europe. Chabon appears to want to make up for the half century of ignorance in providing one of his characters with an obsession with the fate of the Jewish victims. As a result, the novel fits perfectly into Jewish fiction since the 1980s and can be seen as a post-post-Holocaust novel and a reaction to both Jewish and African American memory; much like *Beloved* can be seen as a reaction to Jewish memory.

Like Walter Benn Michaels has stressed, ethnic fiction is influenced by a refuge to autonomous ethnic memories and the process of acquiring and rejecting elements of competing memories (5). Through their own dealings with the past and the context of black-Jewish memories, *Beloved* and *Kavalier & Clay* succeed in resurrecting remembrance. Consequently, despite them not being direct and intended reactions on each other, they fit into the black-Jewish literary tradition of mutual and multidirectional memory.

Conclusion

At first sight Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michael Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay* may appear to not have anything in common. *Beloved*, published in 1987, is written by an African American female writer and tells the story of the ghost of a child come back to haunt her family, whereas *Kavalier & Clay*, on the other hand, is written by a Jewish American male author in 2000 and chronicles the lives of two young and successful comic book writers. However, there is one thing that binds them: their memory of American slavery and the Jewish Holocaust, respectively.

In the novels, remembering the past is similar on several levels. In the first place the characters of both *Beloved* and *Kavalier & Clay* entered the remembering process as people formed by their experiences. In both novels the relations between the characters and their parents are of great significance. They not only shine a light on their past lives, but also provide insights into the origins of their memories. For *Beloved*'s Sethe growing up without a loving mother caused her own motherhood to be centred on love. Freedom for her is equal to being able to love her children as she pleases and the threat of losing this is what influenced her committing the terrible act of killing her daughter, which, in turn, threw her violently into the remembering process.

For Sammy and Joe, the characters of *Kavalier & Clay*, the relationships with their parents are also influential on their memory. The love for his absent father is what influenced his homosexuality and consequently his obsession with providing his comic book heroes with sidekicks. An important difference between Sammy and his cousin Joe is that the former was born in America and therefore lacks the emotional bond with the Jews of Europe, which causes him to not be as touched by remembering them as Joe, who was born in Prague and lived there happily with his parents until the pre-war situation forced their separation. The

absence of his parents is what fuels his obsession of trying to liberate them from their impending fate. *Kavalier & Clay*'s most successful creation, the Escapist, consequently comes to represent the possibility of physical freedom. This form of freedom is for them, as well as for Sethe, very important in that it allows them to remember. However, freedom is relative in both novels, since their characters seem to not be mentally free of their pasts.

Another similarity between the novels is that remembering takes the form of supernatural embodiments of the past. Through their existence the characters are continually exposed to the haunting power of memory. In *Beloved* this is symbolized by its title character who, after being violently killed by her own mother, becomes an all-knowing victim of slavery come back to haunt the survivors. As a result Sethe, despite having achieved her physical escape, is not yet mentally free until Denver, the child of the present, saves her mother from the past. Haunting memories also prevent Joe from mental escape. It absorbs him until his son Tommy and the Golem—the latter both as the real Golem of Prague and as a comic book character—provide his salvation. The Golem symbolizes his healthy memory in returning to him filled with the souls of the Jews who were lost in the Holocaust.

Finally, *Beloved* and *Kavalier & Clay* fit into the literary tradition of black-Jewish relations and the remembering of slavery and the Holocaust. The Cold War context of the post-war period in the United States influenced the lack of Holocaust remembrance in this period, as is stated by Emily Miller Budick, Janet Handler Burstein and Michael Rothberg. From the 1980s, however, Jewish Americans returned to the past of their European counterparts and Morrison and Chabon can be seen as part of this process.

All this proves that despite their obvious differences Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michael Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay* can be successfully compared on their remembrance of slavery and the Holocaust. The fact that the stories do not immediately expect to be revolving around memory of the past, together with their distinctions, is what makes them so interesting to

compare. Researching their different pasts and memories, but especially their similar way of remembering, teaches us beyond a better understanding of the two stories; in addition it provides us with insights into black-Jewish relations and the relationship between slavery and the Holocaust as featured in these novels.

Whether it was six or sixty million that lost their lives during these monstrous events, both slavery and the Holocaust had immense impact on later generations. Even though the events might actually be over, their memory will never cease to be. Although Toni Morrison concludes her novel by writing that “it was not a story to pass on” (323), through the memory of their authors, *Beloved* and Michael Chabon’s *Kavalier & Clay* did become stories to pass on.

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