Postmemory versus Rememory:

Remembering the Holocaust and Slavery

in Postmodern American Literature

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Paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
“Master in de Taal-en Letterkunde: Engels”
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2012-2013
Acknowledgements

First of all I want to thank my promoter, Dr. Philippe Codde, for giving me constructive feedback during my writing process and for introducing me to the topic of my thesis. Furthermore, I would like to thank my parents, who stood by me during the writing of this thesis and who gave me the opportunity to go to university. I also want to thank my friends Lisa, Charlotte, Geraldine, Eline and Anke, who have made these last four years at university unforgettable, and whom I could always count on for advise and support. And last, but not least, I want to give special thanks to Dr. Myriam Vervaet, who always believed in me.
## Content table

1. **Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 5

2. **Trauma Theory** ............................................................................................................. 7
   2.1 Historical Overview of Trauma Theory ......................................................................... 7
   2.2 Trauma Theory: A Psychological Approach ............................................................... 8
   2.3 Remembering Trauma ................................................................................................. 10
   2.4 Working through Trauma ............................................................................................ 11
   2.5 Inheriting Trauma: the Later Generations .................................................................. 13

3. **Remembering Slavery and the Holocaust in America** .............................................. 16
   3.1 Remembering the Holocaust in America .................................................................... 17
   3.2 Remembering Slavery in America .............................................................................. 20

4. **Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*** ............................................................................................ 24
   4.1 Historical background ................................................................................................. 24
   4.2 The Representation of Trauma in *Beloved* ................................................................ 24
       4.2.1 Surviving Trauma: Sethe’s Trauma’s and the Concept of “Rememory” ................. 26
   4.3 The figure of Beloved ................................................................................................. 29
       4.3.1 Sethe and Beloved ................................................................................................. 29
       4.3.2 Paul D and Beloved ............................................................................................... 31
       4.3.3 Denver, the Reader and Beloved ........................................................................... 32
   4.4 Speaking Trauma and Speaking History: Storytelling in *Beloved* ......................... 35
       4.4.1 Storytelling as a Means to Heal Trauma ............................................................... 35
       4.4.2 Storytelling and Myth-making .............................................................................. 38
       4.4.3 The Oral Nature of African Culture and History ................................................... 39

5. **Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*** ....................................................... 42
   5.1 More than One Story: Narrators and Embedded Narratives in *Everything is Illuminated* .... 43
   5.2 The First Generation and the Representation of Trauma ............................................ 44
       5.2.1 Lista’s Trauma ....................................................................................................... 44
       5.2.2 The Traumatic Past of Alex’s Grandfather ......................................................... 46
5.3 The Third Generation and Postmemory ................................................................. 48

5.3.1 Imagining the Past ............................................................................................... 48

5.3.2 Multiple Voices and Unreliable Narrators ......................................................... 49

5.3.3 Failure of Language .............................................................................................. 50

5.3.4 Absent Presences ................................................................................................. 51

5.3.5 Mythology and Chances for Reinvention ............................................................. 52

5.4 Everything is Illuminated’s Ethical Standpoint ....................................................... 53

6. Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 57

Works cited .................................................................................................................... 60
1. **Introduction**

Racism is still a very sensitive issue today, especially in America where the color of your skin was once reason enough to be enslaved. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that the roots of racism can be traced back to the atrocities of slavery. However, in American culture it is easy to forget about the slavery-past, given the fact that very little has been done to remember that particular part of American history. The lack of public attention to slavery and its commemoration becomes even more visible when contrasted to the overwhelming number of memorials and museums that have been erected in remembrance of the Holocaust. The last few decennia, many scholars have commented upon this obsessive quality of American culture to cling to the commemoration of the Holocaust, while neglecting another major trauma that still haunts a large part of their population today. Walter Benn Michaels is one of the scholars who voiced his opinion on this issue. In his essay “Plots against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism”, Michaels remarks: “Why should what the Germans did to the Jews be treated as a crucial event in American history, especially when, given the absence of any commemoration of American racism on the Mall, what Americans did to Black people is not?” (Michaels, 2006: 289-90). Michaels puts his finger here on a very painful aspect of American culture: slavery is not something America likes to be reminded of. The Holocaust on the other hand, despite the fact that it took place on European soil, is a part of history that is exploited in almost every possible way and seems to function as a very useful “screen memory” to use Freud’s term, to cover up America’s history of slavery. However, one cannot just forget about the past, especially not about such a traumatic one and especially not when its aftereffects still penetrate everyday life, leaving their marks on generations of black people. Or as Michaels puts it: “It is racial identity that makes the experience of enslavement part of the history of African-Americans today” (Michaels, “Slavery and the New Historicism”, 186). As such, America will have to face the slavery-past and acknowledge its enduring effects on the African American population. Even president Barack Obama referred to the issue of slavery and its aftereffects on the contemporary black population in his speech “A More Perfect Union”, which he gave in 2008, only a few months before he was elected president. He said that “The challenge for the descendants of the victims of slavery and colonization is to embrace the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past” (Obama, 2008). As such Obama stresses the importance of dealing with the past in order to be able to move on, especially for those people in society whose ancestors were victims of such traumas like slavery and the Holocaust. However, despite the lack of visible memorials of slavery in the public sphere, the memory of enslavement has been kept alive in American literature. Over the past few decades, the production of novels dealing with the issue of slavery, has been growing exponentially. As such, slavery is remembered after all, be it for the most part in and through writing. In addition to the large amount of literature dealing with the memory of slavery,
Michael Kreyling notes that the trauma theories that had been designed to investigate the trauma of the Holocaust, also came to be used for the analysis of the trauma of slavery. He states that

“Stanley Elkins was one of the first to use emerging analyses of the Holocaust as a way to think about slavery. Scholars and writers have been at the center of an ongoing conversation as to whether the analogy brings us closer to or further from an understanding of either event; both have produced survivors needful of testimony and the recovery of identity and community. Most importantly […] both have challenged the “post” generation to represent what could not, or was not, witnessed.” (Kreyling, 2007, 115)

Kreyling alludes to the attempts of the later generations at recovering and remembering the past, a phenomenon that Marianne Hirsch referred to as “postmemory”. It is this phenomenon that forms the basis for my thesis, and as such the main focus will lie on the aftereffects of the traumas of slavery and the Holocaust and the ways in which the later generations try to translate them into literature. The lion share of my discussion will be devoted to the analysis of two postmodern American novels, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), which deal respectively with the memory of slavery and the Holocaust. The reasons for analyzing and comparing these particular novels are multiple. First of all, both novels are postmodern novels, which gives me the opportunity to compare the form and the postmodern techniques both authors have used to translate the traumas into literature. Secondly, both novels were written by American authors, which makes them especially interesting because of the role America has played in both traumas and the commemoration of them. Because, as mentioned earlier, America is very keen to engage in the memorialization of the Holocaust, despite the fact that the actual event took place on European soil, while the memory of slavery is often covered up by the remembrance of the Holocaust. Rather than dealing with the issue of slavery, which did take place on American soil, America shifts the attention to their role as heroes and liberators of Europe during the Holocaust. The most important reason however for taking exactly these two novels is the different way in which the authors try to commemorate trauma and translate it into literature. Whereas the concept of postmemory, coined by Marianne Hirsch, applies to the remembrance of the Holocaust in Foer’s novel, Morrison’s novel engages in a different kind of memory, namely rememory. This brings me to the principal aims of my discussion, which is to find a correlation between the attitude of America towards the trauma of slavery on the one hand, and the Holocaust on the other, and to explore the different kinds of memory through which these traumas are remembered and translated into literature by later generations. In order to provide a well-structured discussion, I will first give a concise overview of trauma theory and its applications to literature, after which I will briefly return to the role of America in the commemoration of both traumas. This contextual information will then be followed by an in-depth discussion of the two novels. In the end, I hope to raise some new concerns about the role of America in the remembrance of both traumas, and the attempts by later generations of authors to grasp those traumas and give them a place in literature.
2. **Trauma Theory**

Before I start my discussion and analysis of how the past is remembered in *Beloved* and *Everything is Illuminated*, it is important to highlight some of the theories that I will draw upon throughout this thesis. The principal concepts at stake in my discussion of the novels are those of postmemory and rememory, which cannot fully be understood without the theoretical framework of trauma theory. Because it is exactly the peculiar nature of trauma that gives rise to a particular form of memory, which deviates in all aspects from normal, everyday memories. In what follows I will aim to give a concise overview of some of the most important insights in trauma theory.

2.1 **Historical Overview of Trauma Theory**

Originating from the Greek language, the word “trauma” literally means “wound”. As such, it might be interpreted as referring either to a physical or to a mental wound. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “trauma” might refer to “a deeply distressing experience, emotional shock following a stressful event.”, or to a “physical injury” (Oxford Dictionary, 2009, 1534). For the aim of my thesis I will exclusively use the first definition of trauma, in which trauma is defined as an emotional injury due to “a deeply distressing experience”. The first time the term “trauma” was used in this sense was during the late 19th century. As Shoshana Ringel and Jerrold Brandell note, it was the French neurologist, Jean Martin Charcot, who was one of the first physicians to investigate the relationship between trauma and mental illness. (Ringel and Brandell, 2012) Charcot was principally interested in hysteria, a mental illness that affected mostly women. In contrast to his fellow physicians, Charcot argued that the causes of hysteria should be traced back to a psychological malfunctioning rather than to a physical one. (Ringel and Brandell, 2012) This idea was picked up by one of his students, Pierre Janet, who continued Charcot’s research. However, Janet was not the only one who was inspired by Charcot’s ideas. Freud’s early studies were also influenced by Charcot’s theory, as he adopted some of Charcot’s findings in his *Studies on Hysteria*, which he and his colleague Josef Breuer published in 1893. (Ringel and Brandell, 2012) All three of them, Janet, Breuer and Freud, “independently concluded that hysteria was caused by psychological trauma” (Ringel and Brandell, 2012, 2). As such, already in the late 19th century, physicians agreed that trauma was not just limited to the physical part of the human body, but extended also to the psyche.

The first time this type of psychological injury was observed on a large scale was in the immediate aftermath of World War I. The soldiers who had survived the war were diagnosed with “shell shock”, a mental illness that is characterized by symptoms such as “incontrollable weeping and screaming, memory loss, physical paralysis, and lack of responsiveness” (Herman, 1992). Abram Kardiner was one of the leading psychoanalysts who treated the traumatized soldiers that came back
from the war. During his therapy sessions with these traumatized patients, he noticed that “the subject acts as if the original traumatic situation were still in existence and engages in protective devices which failed on the original occasion” (Kardiner, 1941, 82). What Kardiner describes is what is now known as “reenactment”, which is one of the most important symptoms seen in traumatized patients. It are exactly these episodes of reenactment that give traumatic memories an enduring character, as they seem to be ever-returning. The reason why these traumatized soldiers continually relived their trauma can be traced back to our biological roots, an issue to which I shall later return.

After World War II, the same symptoms of mental trauma were noticed in the soldiers who came back from the war, yet as Philippe Codde points out, it was only after the Vietnam War that physicians established a link between the conditions of all the soldiers who had survived the wars. (Codde, course) Chaim Lifton and Robert Shatan were of crucial importance in establishing this link, as they were able to identify 27 symptoms that recurred in all three groups of soldiers. The majority of these symptoms was later, in 1980, catalogued in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, under the diagnosis “posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)”. (van der Kolk, Weisaeth, et al., 1996) With the recognition of PTSD as an authentic mental illness that needed psychological treatment, the research in the field of trauma theory increased drastically and scholars from different fields took a great interest in the subject. In the following part I will highlight some of the most significant insights that came about because of this renewed interest in trauma theory.

2.2 Trauma Theory: A Psychological Approach

We cannot approach trauma theory without taking into account the biological and evolutionary aspects that influence the way in which trauma affects human beings. As psychiatrist Sandra Bloom points out, the way in which we perceive trauma can be traced back to our prehistoric ancestors. She states that “It is impossible to fully understand human behavior and the human response to trauma without grasping key insights about the way our evolution has affected us” (Bloom, 1999, 2). Bloom argues that the way in which we respond to trauma originates from “our mammalian heritage”. The part of this heritage that influences our response to trauma is the fight-or-flight reaction. This reaction is characterized by a complete change in body and mind, as if at the moment of danger, which is the trigger for the fight-or-flight reaction, we become a completely different person. (Bloom, 1999, 3) We can cope with danger in different ways, as the term “fight-or-flight” already implies. Either we try to run away from whatever is threatening to us, or we face it and literally take on the fight. However, as Bloom points out, the victim of a traumatic situation is almost never able to escape that situation unharmed:
“If a person is able to master the situation of danger by successfully running away, winning the fight or getting help, the risk of long-term physical changes are lessened. But in many situations considered to be traumatic, the victim is helpless and it is this helplessness that is such a problem for human beings. As a species, we cannot tolerate helplessness – it goes against our instinct for survival.” (1999, 3)

The helplessness Bloom refers to is caused by our human inability to deal with traumatic situations, as they seem to overwhelm us, leaving us paralyzed and indeed helpless. Bessel Van der Kolk describes the human encounter with a traumatic situation as follows: “Traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat” (1989, 393). As such, Van der Kolk agrees with Bloom’s remark in that he too believes that the human mind is inadequate to cope with circumstances that are traumatizing. Thus, besides the physical harm that can be caused by a trauma, it is in particular the psychological harm that appears to cause the most damage. This psychological damage is due to the peculiar nature in which the human mind deals with trauma. Van der Kolk postulates that psychological research has consistently shown that our response to trauma is bimodal. On the one hand, we experience “hypermnesia, hyper-reactivity to stimuli and traumatic re-experiencing”, while on the other hand the encounter with trauma results in “psychic numbing, avoidance, amnesia and anhedonia” (Van der Kolk, 1994, 254). He further explains this antipodal reaction to trauma as follows:

“In an apparent attempt to compensate for chronic hyperarousal, traumatized people seem to shut down: on a behavioral level, by avoiding stimuli reminiscent of the trauma; on a psychobiological level, by emotional numbing, which extends to both trauma-related and everyday experience […] Thus, people with PTSD suffer both from generalized hyperarousal and from physiological emergency reactions to specific reminders.” (Van der Kolk, 1994, 254)

The avoidance-based reactions to a traumatic experience that Van der Kolk describes, are similar to what Bloom identifies as different types of “dissociation”. According to her, when faced with a traumatic experience, the human consciousness tries to protect itself by dissociating itself from the actual event. Bloom suggests that dissociation may take on different forms, including fainting, amnesia, and emotional numbing. (Bloom, 1999, 7) Bloom also agrees with Van der Kolk in that the response too trauma is bimodal, stating that besides the avoidance-based reactions, the traumatized patient may experience “intrusive” symptoms, such as nightmares and flashbacks. (Bloom, 1999, 8) It are exactly these alternating reactions, described by Bloom and Van der Kolk, that account for the peculiar nature of trauma, and in particular the memory of it. In the following part I will further discuss this issue,
explaining how traumatic experiences are stored in the brain and how they give rise to a peculiar kind of memory.

2.3 Remembering Trauma

How trauma is remembered by the victim is something that has occupied many psychiatrists and physicians over the years. In 1889, Pierre Janet was one of the first to describe how the human brain stores traumatic memories. He suggested that there are two different types of memory, which correspond to different types of categorization in the brain. On the one hand, everyday experiences that we perceive of consciously, are stored as “narrative memories”, which as the term already suggests, can easily be remembered and narrated by the remembering person. Traumatic experiences, on the other hand, are stored elsewhere in the brain as “emotional or traumatic memories” (Janet, 1889). These are the type of memories that are not consciously accessible for the victim. Bloom describes the incapacity to relate those traumatic memories as follows:

“When we are overwhelmed with fear, we lose the capacity for speech, we lose the capacity to put words to our experience. Without words, the mind shifts to a different mode of thinking that is characterized by visual, auditory, olfactory, and kinesthetic images, physical sensations, and strong feelings.” (1999, 5)

As such, traumatic memories differ from everyday memories in that they are not remembered as linguistic entities, but as Janet noted, as visceral sensations or visual images. (Janet, 1889) Van der Kolk notes that it is exactly because traumatic memories are stored as visceral sensations or visual images, that they have an enduring quality that common memories seem to lack:

“Clinicians and researchers dealing with traumatized patients have repeatedly made the observation that the sensory experiences and visual images related to the trauma seem not to fade over time, and appear to be less subject to distortion than ordinary experiences.” (1994, 258)

Because of the fact that traumatic memories do not seem to fade over time, Van der Kolk suggests that they have become “engraved in the mind” (Van der Kolk, 1996). As such, when a traumatized patient “remembers” the trauma, he experiences the trauma in all its authenticity. Bloom even suggests that they relive the trauma, as she states that “When someone experiences a flashback, they do not remember the experience, they relive it” (1999, 6).

Since traumatic memories acquire their haunting quality because of their categorization in the brain as visceral sensations and visual images, it seems that the solution to escape from the traumatic
memories and overcome the trauma, is by transforming those sensations and images into words. The process of narrating traumatic memories, also known as the “talking cure”, will be discussed in the following part.

2.4 Working through Trauma

The process of overcoming trauma and learning to cope with the memory of it, is complex and often involves different stages. Dominick LaCapra identified two different phases through which a traumatized patient may go during the healing process.

Initially, as LaCapra notes, the patient may go through a phase of “acting-out”, in which he continually returns to the place of the trauma, or reenacts the trauma. (LaCapra, 2001) In contrast to the flashbacks and recurring nightmares, to which I have referred elsewhere, acting-out manifests itself on a behavioral rather than a mental level. The patient physically repeats the trauma and seems to have no control over it. Freud called this the “repetition compulsion”, describing it as follows:

“He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating […] He cannot escape from this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering.” (Freud as cited in Van der Kolk and Ducey, 1989, 271)

Thus, as Freud points out, the physical return to the trauma should not just be understood as a coping mechanism, but also as a means to remember the trauma. It seems that the patient attempts to understand his own trauma by reliving it and as such physically remembering it.

The second phase LaCapra identified is the “working-through” phase in which the traumatized person attempts to face and “work through” his trauma. (LaCapra, 2001) It is in this phase that the patient will have to put into words the trauma that he up until this point had only been able to access unconsciously in the form of flashbacks, nightmares or reenactment. Although LaCapra’s theory might give the impression that the two different phases occur consecutively, he does point out that in reality there does not exist a clear distinction between the two phases:

“I would emphasize that the relation between acting-out and working-through should not be seen in terms of a from/to relationship in which the latter is presented as the dialectical transcendence of the former. I have noted that, particularly in cases of trauma, acting-out may be necessary and perhaps never fully overcome. Indeed, it may be intimately bound up with working through problems.” (1994, 205)
As such, LaCapra emphasizes the necessity of both phases in overcoming the trauma and notes that the phases may occur simultaneously. One phase does not have to be completed or closed off before a patient can start working through the trauma, on the contrary, as LaCapra notes, the two phases may even be more effective when they are experienced concurrently.

At this point the question remains how one can work through a trauma. As I mentioned earlier, Freud’s talking cure has proven to be one of the most effective ways to heal from trauma. As Bloom notes, it is during this talking cure that the patient has to transform the visceral sensations and visual images into words. Freud emphasizes that during this process the role of the patient and that of the analyst are of equal importance for the success of the healing process. (Freud, 1955) The fact that the analyst and the patient need to work together in a dialectal relationship, is also confirmed by psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Dori Laub. Speaking from experience, Laub stresses the need for victims to tell their story, as he describes the need for Holocaust Survivors to tell their story: “Yet it is essential for this narrative that could not be articulated to be told, to be transmitted, to be heard” (1995, 69). As becomes clear in Laub’s quote, it does not suffice for the traumatized patient to tell his or her story, since it is equally important for the story to be listened to. When discussing the issue of testifying trauma, Laub repeatedly emphasizes the important role the listener has in the process of narration. He explains why the role of the listener is so crucial for the talking cure to be successful:

“To a certain extent, the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out. It is the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener, which makes possible something like a repossess of the act of witnessing. This joint responsibility is the source of the emerging truth.” (Laub, 1995, 69)

However, it is not only the reassurance of being heard that has a healing effect on the victim, it is also the process of talking to someone who does not yet know about the trauma that is important. Or as Laub put it: “What ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing […] is not simply the information […] but the experience itself of living through testimony, of giving testimony” (1995, 70). Laub highlights the importance of the process itself because it is exactly through the process of narration that the patient “reclaims his position as a witness” (1995, 70). It is by putting into words the trauma that makes the narrator for the first time a witness to the event in which he or she had up until then only been a participant in.

Yet, the process of narration is not without danger for neither of the participants. For the victim, narrating about his trauma entails the risk of becoming traumatized for a second time. Or as Laub puts it: “The act of telling might itself become severely traumatizing, if the price of speaking is re-living; not relief, but further retraumatization” (1992, 67). As such, victims of trauma may simply refuse to testify, afraid to experience the pain and the horror of the trauma all over again. In addition to the risk of
retraumatization, the victim might also refuse to testify because he fears that his pain will be neglected. Laub refers to a passage in Chaim Guri’s film *The Eighty-first Blow*, in which the story of a traumatized person is not accepted as a truthful story:

“This denial by the listener inflicts, according to the film, the ultimately fatal blow, beyond the eighty blows that a man, in Jewish tradition, can sustain and survive. The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story.” (Laub, 1992, 68)

With this quote, Laub highlights that a traumatic story cannot be told to a random listener. It does not suffice for the narrator to know that someone is listening to his or her story, he also needs the reassurance of being believed, of his story being acknowledged. He argues that the listener should be empathic, yet adapting an empathic attitude towards the traumatic story of the victim, entails the risk of being drawn into the same emotions of pain, anguish and fear that the victim feels. Dominick LaCapra refers to this phenomenon as “empathic unsettlement”: “desirable empathy involves not full identification but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims” (2001, 102). It is important to note that LaCapra stresses that the listener should not fully identify with the story of the victim, because in that case listening to the victim’s trauma will not just result in a “virtual experience”, but will become a “vicarious experience” (LaCapra, 2004). In the latter case, in which the listener completely identifies with the story of the victim, the listener is entirely caught up in the story of the victim to the point that he believes that he himself was the one who experienced the trauma. In this case, the listener blurs the boundary between reality and imagination and becomes a “surrogate victim” (LaCapra, 2004). It goes without saying that this situation is far from ideal for the benefit of the actual victim, as he is the one that needs the full attention and acknowledgement of is trauma. As such, as I mentioned earlier, the role of the listener in the healing process of trauma should not be underestimated. One group of people who are faced with a particularly complex situation of listening are the members of the second generation, as they are put in a situation in which the boundaries between reality and imagination are much more easily blurred, since the trauma at stake involves their own parents. In the following part, I will discuss how trauma is inherited by later generations and the different ways in which it might still affect them.

2.5 Inheriting Trauma: the Later Generations

In its most literal and narrow sense, the term “second generation” is used in trauma studies to refer to the children of trauma survivors. Efraim Sicher, however, argues that the definition of the term “second
generation” should be extended to the inclusion of “adopted children, children of refugees, […] the generation contemporaneous with children of survivors who may share many of their psychological, ideological, an theological concerns” (1998, 7). As such, Sicher’s definition of the second generation extends far beyond the biological inheritors, as he includes the whole generation that comes ‘after’ the trauma. Although I do believe that Sicher has a point in that the whole generation that was born after a traumatic history is affected by the memory of it, I also believe that the situation of the actual children of survivors still differs tremendously from that of those children whose parents were not involved in the trauma. Melvin Jules Bukiet’s description of the circumstances in which children of Holocaust survivors were brought up illustrates that these children were affected in much different ways than the children whose parents had nothing to do with the trauma:

“No one who hasn't grown up in such a household can conceive it […]The Second Generation will never know what the First Generation does in its bones, but what the Second Generation knows better than anyone else is the First Generation. Other kids’ parents didn't have numbers on their arms. Other kids' parents didn't talk about massacres as easily as baseball. Other kids' parents had parents.” (2002, 13-14)

Bukiet’s quote clearly illustrates the particularity of the home situation in which children of Holocaust survivors had to grow up. He even goes as far as saying that these children lacked parents. What Bukiet describes here, is what Codde refers to as “dysfunctional families”: “the traumatized parents are incapable of providing their children with the reassurance and the sense of safety they are supposed to give them as parents” (2010, 5).

However, as Bukiet’s quote already indicates, and as is confirmed by Codde, the children of trauma survivors are not only influenced by the behavior of their parents but also through the direct confrontation with their parents’ stories of the trauma. Yet, it is important to highlight that not every parent was capable to testify about the trauma, as Bukiet indicates: “Of course, some survivors spoke incessantly of the Holocaust while others never mentioned it” (2002, 13). As such, those parents who did talk about the holocaust influenced their children through their behavior as well as through their recollections of the trauma they survived. Because of the serious impact the behavior and the stories of the parents have on the following generation, some theorists have argued that the second generation is also traumatized or have inherited the trauma of their parents. LaCapra speaks about an “intergenerational transmission of trauma. (2004, 108).

However, what appears to be the most tedious issue for the second generation, besides the daily confrontation with the traumatizing behavior stories of their parents, is the lack of knowledge about the trauma itself. The children of trauma survivors are only confronted with the aftereffects of the trauma, while left with an incomplete knowledge about the cause of those aftereffects. They are burdened with
a partial memory of something that they themselves were not part of. They are faced with what Marianne Hirsch coined as “postmemory”:

“Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of previous generations shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated.” (1997, 22)

In this aspect, the situation of the second generation mirrors that of the third generation, in that the latter must also reside to their own imagination or the stories of others to access the traumatic past of their ancestors. Therefore, as Codde argues, the term postmemory can be extended to all the generations that ‘come after’. He states, in relation to the memory of the Holocaust, that “While Hirsch coined the term postmemory specifically to reference second-generation mnemonic activity, I believe it achieves additional pertinence as the generational distance grows and the personal connection to the events of the Shoah become increasingly diaphanous” (Codde, 2011, 676). As becomes clear in this quote, Codde even believes that the term postmemory is better suited to define the type of memory the third generation has to engage in to access the past than that of the second generation. The main reason why he prefers to use Hirsch’s term in relation to the third generation, is because they have even less access to the past than the generation before them. The third generation is left with the “inaccessibility of a traumatic past which they can only witness in a highly mediated form (via written or visual documents) but which continues to haunt them” (Codde, 2010, 1). The inaccessibility of the past leads to an obsession with that past and with attempts to “fill in the missing pieces” via their imagination (Codde, 2010, 1). Indeed, it is through their imagination that the third generation in particular has tried to access the past. The vast number of literature written by the third generation of trauma survivors, dealing with the memory of the past of their ancestors, is proof of that.

As I already mentioned in the introduction, the remainder of this thesis will be devoted to the analysis and discussion of two of such novels and in particular the ways in which later generations attempt to represent the trauma of their ancestors.
3. Remembering Slavery and the Holocaust in America

Since I will discuss two American novels that deal with the legacy of slavery on the one hand and with that of the Holocaust on the other hand, it is almost impossible to ignore the amount of literature that has aimed to compare both traumas. Although I have no intention to compare the suffering of African Americans and Jews, I do feel that it is appropriate to give an idea of how both atrocities have been represented and remembered in American culture. As such, the focus of the following chapter will be on collective memory, rather than on individual memory. I take on Avishai Margalit’s notion of collective memory to investigate the ways in which America has remembered the two traumatic histories. Margalit distinguishes between two different types of collective memory, -common memory and shared memory-, arguing that:

“A common memory […] is an aggregate notion. It aggregates the memories of all those people who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually […] A shared memory, on the other hand, is not a simple aggregate of individual memories. It requires communication. A shared memory integrates and calibrates the different perspectives of those who remember the episode […] into one version […] Shared memory is built on a division of mnemonic labor.” (2003, 51-52)

The type of collective memory at stake in what follows comes close to Margalit’s definition of a shared memory. As such, I interpret America’s remembrance of slavery and the Holocaust as mnemonic acts that are constituted by a combination of the memories of the nation as a whole and every single American.

An important thing to keep in mind in dealing with collective memories, is that they are often bound up with group identity. It has often been stated that this is the case for Jewish identity, which seems to be based on the remembrance of the Holocaust, rather than on the notion of a Jewish religion or race. Or as Walter Benn Michaels puts it:

“Many of those who think of themselves as Jews do not think that they are Jews because they have Jewish blood and are in fact skeptical of the very idea of Jewish blood. For them, as for many members of other races (so-called), cultural inheritance takes the place of biological inheritance. […] Thus, Jews can give up the belief in Jewish blood and give up the belief in a Jewish God; what they can’t give up is Jewish culture.” (1999, 195)

Michaels argues that this connection between Jewishness and the cultural inheritance of the Holocaust, is the reason why the remembrance of the Holocaust is so significant for the Jewish community.
However, it is not only the Jewish community that uses a traumatic past as a basis to establish an identity. The African American community might be said to be linked even more closely to their past than the Jewish community. To determine the most important reasons for the strong interconnection between the African American identity and the slave heritage, we have to take into consideration the notions of race and ethnicity. The term “ethnicity” dates from the 1940s, but only became very popular during the 1970s. It was originally coined to replace the word “race”, which was considered a highly inappropriate term since it was strongly bound up with the notion of skin color, the issue of slavery and the racial theories used by Nazism in Europe. Instead of referring to someone’s physical features, the term ethnicity came to be used to refer to someone’s social and cultural identity. However, in the United States, as Ashraf Rushdy notes, the replacement of the term “race” with “ethnicity” did not happen so easily. According to Rushdy, this was “primarily because of the historical fact of slavery” (2001, 24). He explains his statement further, stating that ethnicity theorists often fail to acknowledge an important issue:

“They fundamentally avoid acknowledging the ways that slavery was the institution that played the most formative role in creating not only the basic divide in this country (black/white) but also in historically providing a primary definition for each of these social identities [...] and even more scholars discount the depth to which the idea of slavery remains most resonant in the ascription of African American identity; and almost all fail to acknowledge the foundational role slavery played in creating and giving meaning to white identity.” (Rushdy, 2001, 24)

As such, there is a very strong correlation between the slave past of African Americans and the establishment of their identity. Whereas the Jewish population constructs their identity mainly on the basis of their cultural inheritance, the African American community cannot do this because of their biological inheritance reminding them inevitably of their slavery past. Thus, the remembrance of the past might be considered of even greater importance for the African American community than for any other group in America. However, as will become clear in the following part, there has been and still remains a significant lack of public attention to the commemoration of slavery in America.

3.1 Remembering the Holocaust in America

During the first years after the Holocaust took place, there was a significant discrepancy between the way in which America remembered the Holocaust in the form of public commemorations, and the opportunities given to the survivors to testify about their trauma. Because, despite the fact that, as Jeffrey Shandler posits, “the Holocaust is very present in American discourse” (1999, 33), this has not always
been the case. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, there was little, if not to say no, opportunity for the survivors of the Holocaust to testify about their trauma. Henry Greenspan notes that

“The general lack of American interest in the Holocaust and in survivors during the first decades after the war is now well known. What is perhaps less known, however, is that this was not simply an absence, a vacuum of responsiveness, but an active process of suppression and stigmatization.” (“Testimony and the rise of Holocaust Consciousness”, 50)

Greenspan argues that America deliberately denied the attempts of survivors to testify. He states that Americans did not deny the horror of what had happened; on the contrary, they were very compassionate, but they did not want to hear the survivors tell about it. Greenspan notes that the survivors “evoked a shifting combination of pity, fear, revulsion and guilt” (Greenspan, 50). American society was not ready to hear about the atrocities that had taken place and as such, survivors were not given the opportunity to talk about what they had witnessed, despite the fact that some of them felt the need to talk about it. These years of silencing, as Greenspan notes, came to be known as a “conspiracy of silence”, referring to the unwillingness of others to listen to the survivors, and the inability of the survivors to talk about it. Greenspan argues that the inability of survivors to testify was not only due to the fact that Americans were not ready to listen to them, but also to the fact that testifying about the trauma meant that they had to return to the horror of the camps. As such, the combination of America’s uninviting attitude towards survivors and the difficulty of testifying about the Holocaust, gave rise to the “conspiracy of silence”. It was only much later, as Greenspan notes, in the 1970s, that the interest in what survivors had to tell drastically increased. He summarizes the factors contributing to this tremendous upsurge of interest in their stories as follows:

“Unquestionably many factors have contributed to the upsurge of interest in survivors and in the Holocaust more generally in these years. The passage of time itself, the evolving self-confidence and self-consciousness of the American Jewish community, the changing political climate in Israel, and the general American self-questioning after Vietnam have all been implicated.” (Greenspan, 57)

However, Greenspan argues that the increased interest in the survivors of the Holocaust was not due to the revived ability of survivors to talk and others to listen, but rather to America’s unprecedented interest in “survivor-hood”. Greenspan notes that, during this period, America’s interest in survivors of extreme atrocities was translated into docudrama’s and magazine articles. Given America’s obsession with survivors, it should come as no surprise that Holocaust survivors, who were “the real survivors”, became almost national heroes. As such, Greenspan suggests that “the ‘tremendous interest’ in Holocaust
survivors […] may be more helpfully understood in the context of these cultural trends than simply in terms of some new readiness, on survivors’ part or ours, ‘to talk about it’”. (Greenspan, 58)

The initial lack of interest on the part of America in the traumatic history of the survivors stands in sharp contrast to the abundance of public commemoration that was organized in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. As James Young notes, “The first public Holocaust commemoration in America took place not after the war at all but at the very height of the killing, on December 2, 1924—as a mass protest” (“America’s Holocaust”, 69). This commemoration became the first in a series of mass protests and public ceremonies that were held to support the Jewish communities and to honor those Jews who did not survive the atrocities of the Holocaust. In addition to the public gatherings, America also engaged in a more permanent form of commemoration of the Holocaust: the foundation of public memorial buildings. The most famous of these is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. However, the establishment of this public memorials to commemorate the Holocaust on American soil has met with some serious criticism. One of the strongest claims against museums and other memorial places in memory of the Holocaust, was that “the Holocaust was not an American experience” (Young, 70). Despite this criticism however, Young points out that:

“With the recent dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., it could be said that America has recognized the survivor’s experiences as part of a national experience—and has in this way made the Holocaust part of American history.” (71)

Yet, he immediately adds an important nuance to this statement: “American memorials seem to be anchored not so much in history as in the ideals that generated them in the first place” (Young, 71). Young implicitly alludes here to the idea of America as the “city upon the hill”, a moral beacon for the rest of the world and most importantly, a safe place for every ethnic group. This American ideal was also referred to by President Carter when he was asked why America had founded a national memorial for the Holocaust in the center of America’s capital:

“Finally, because we are humane people, concerned with the human rights of all people, we feel compelled to study the systematic destruction of the Jews so that we may seek to learn how to prevent such enormities from occurring in the future.” (Carter as cited in Young, 1999, 72)

What is striking about Carter’s speech, however, is that he did not once refer to America’s own traumatic history of slavery, when millions of Black people were systematically destroyed. The lack of American effort to commemorate their own history of slavery met with severe criticism and the African American community claimed that they too deserved a place on the Mall to remember their slavery past. However, as Young notes:
“Given the Mall’s own dark past as the former site of holding pens for newly arrived African slaves, the National African American Museum will be placed in an especially difficult position: not only will it be asked to share an authentic site of African American suffering with other groups, but it will also be faced with the unenviable task of teaching Americans that the topographical center of their national shrine is also the site of America’s greatest, ineradicable shame.” (74)

Since America, in its aim to present itself as a nation of democracy and freedom, cannot neglect the claims of the African-Americans to pay more public attention to the remembrance of slavery, it seems that America will eventually have to deal in greater depth with that part of their history they do not want to be remembered of. The need to remember slavery is, as I already mentioned elsewhere, of great importance for the African American community in terms of recognition and acceptance, especially considering the fact that the memory of slavery has been silenced for a long time. In the following part I will paint with broad strokes the most important factors that contributed to the silencing of slavery in American culture.

3.2 Remembering Slavery in America

Ashraf Rushdy refers to slavery as “the family secret of America”, which captures the essence of America’s attitude towards that bleak part of their history (2001, 2). The racist assumptions that lay at the basis of slavery stand in sharp contrast with the democratic ideals that characterize contemporary America. Consequently, the memory of a past of racism, in which millions of Black people were destroyed because of their race, is all the more painful. Rushdy further notes that “Slavery […] functions in American thinking as the partially hidden phantom of a past that needs to be revised in order to be revered” (2001, 2). As such, he acknowledges that the need to remember the trauma of slavery is significant for America’s present and future.

Similarly to the survivors of the Holocaust, ex-slaves had very few opportunities to testify. However, 70 years after the end of slavery in 1865, a large-scale project was set up to record the first-hand testimonies of ex-slaves. This became one of the most famous large-scale projects and was carried out by the Works Progress Administration between 1936 and 1938. Yet, as John W. Blassingame notes, the 2194 interviews with ex-slaves were hardly ever used, until Greenwood Press published them in 1972 (1975, 480). However, despite the fact that the collection of interviews provides an unprecedented number of first-hand testimonies of slavery, their validity has often been questioned. Due to the oral character of the interviews and the nature of the interview situation itself, the objectivity and authenticity of the interviews as a valid source of information was queried. However, nowadays, in addition to the written transcriptions of the interviews, the Library of Congress has made available the original oral
version of the interviews in a collection of audio recordings entitled “Voices from the Days of Slavery”. Associate Professor of the University of Texas, Diana Ramey Berry, notes that

“The audio files are revealing in that one can hear the questions posed and answered in their original form. Historians can compare the questions asked, place the responses in context, and learn about omitted material. This alone allows the researcher a different lens to explore a somewhat controversial historical source.” (Berry, 2010)

As such, the combination of the audio files and the written versions of the interviews seems to increase the reliability of these witness testimonies. However, it is important to bear in mind that witness or victim testimonies should always be taken with a pinch of salt, since they remain subjective recollections of an event. Moreover, since trauma is involved, the witness accounts become even more questionable. Psychiatrist and Holocaust-survivor Dori Laub, describes the difficulty of bearing witness to trauma as follows:

“It was not only the reality of the situation and the lack of responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witness; it was also the very circumstance of being inside the events that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed.” (1995, 66)

According to Laub, it is the nature of the trauma itself that prevents any of the victims of bearing witness. An event so horrible as the Holocaust or slavery is simply too much for the human mind to grasp: “The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event […] that it was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, to imagine” (Laub, 1995, 68). Thus, although the slave testimonies have been recorded orally as well as in written form, they remain witness testimonies, hence they remain largely subjective and questionable.

The reason why so much attention and importance has been attributed to the project of the Works Progress Administration, is because the majority of African American testimonies and stories about slavery have not been recorded on tape or been written down by any official instance. As such there is a discrepancy between what is taught in school about the history of slavery, and what is transmitted orally within the African-American families from one generation to the next. Rushdy explains why most information about America’s slave past has an oral character:
“Slave families were persistently denied the skills of literacy, and since the media apparatus provided few venues for publication of black family histories after the end of slavery, black families were forced systematically to rely on oral forms of transmission in a way families of European ancestry were not.” (2001, 16)

As such, the American slaveholders already precluded the possibility of slavery’s atrocities spreading on a large scale and becoming engraved in American history. However, this is not the only reason why the oral family stories have been questioned in terms of their validity. Rushdy notes that Americans in general tend to invent “a glorious rather than a notorious past” (2001, 17). In the case of the African American families, the notorious past of slavery was often considered as something too shameful to talk about. As such, they tried to hide their slave past, making it a family secret. Thus not only American society felt ashamed about the slavery past, the African-Americans did as well. Slavery was not just the family secret of America, but also the real family secret of many African-American families. Rushdy makes an important remark in relation to these family secrets when he states that: “[T]he important thing about family secrets is that they originate in previous ancestral traumas but haunt those in the present who make up the remembering generations” (2001, 21). These remembering generations attempt to grasp and remember the past that has been hidden from them, and it seems that the most important way in which this is done is through writing. In the last few decades it seems that the remembrance of slavery has well found its own place in American literature, and the number of writers looking back on their slave heritage is still increasing, perhaps as a compensation for the lack of public attention America has paid to the history of slavery. Toni Morrison, whose widely studied novel Beloved I will analyze in the following chapter, famously commented upon the lack of public commemoration of slavery and the urge of black authors to compensate for this lack in and through literature. She explained that the principal impetus for writing Beloved, stemmed from the desire to create a place of remembrance for the victims of slavery and their families:

“There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300 foot tower. There’s no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place does not exist (that I know of), the book had to.” (Morrison, “A Bench by the Road”, 1989)
Thus, driven by the urge to fill in the absence of places to remember the black past of America, Morrison wrote *Beloved* and famously dedicated it to “the Sixty Million and more” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 2005). In the following chapter, I will give an in-depth analysis of this novel, focusing on the ways in which the re-memory of slavery is constructed.
4. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

4.1 Historical background

Although Toni Morrison’s fifth novel was published in 1987, the idea for the novel originated many years before its publication. Almost two decades earlier, Morrison came across a story that would later become the basis for the plot of *Beloved*. The story at stake was that of the fugitive slave woman Margaret Garner who, during the 1850s, had killed one of her children to save it from the atrocities of slavery. Though this act of violence from a mother towards her own child left a significant impression on Morrison, it was only years later, in the late 1980s, that she came up with the idea to fictionalize Garner’s story. However, although *Beloved* has been read by some critics as the representation of a historical account, Inez Martinez notes that “it is essential to recognize that *Beloved* is not history. *Beloved* is an imagination of the subjectivity of slaves passing from slavery to freedom” (2009, 2). The imagination that Toni Morrison envisioned in writing her novel is one that takes on different forms, ranging from myth and biblical stories to African folklore. As such, the story of Margaret Garner should be regarded as a mere starting point that provided Morrison with a foundation for a much larger project, namely the remembrance of slavery as a part of American history. The importance attributed to the imaginative process is emphasized by Morrison’s refusal to look up any other information about the story of Margaret Garner other than one article that reported the “very calm … very serene” condition of the slave woman after she has killed her child (Rothstein, 1987). As such, as Karla F. C. Holloway remarks, “Myth dominates the text” (1999, 67). Morrison’s aim was not to report a historical fact then, but to re-imagine the atrocities of slavery through the life story of one slave woman. Hence, without any further knowledge about Margaret Garner, Morrison created her own re-memory of slavery.

4.2 The Representation of Trauma in *Beloved*

Before proceeding however, I will first give a concise overview of the story. *Beloved* centers around the life of Sethe, a former slave, who lives together with her daughter Denver in a house at 124 Bluestone Road. The house is haunted by a ghost, presumably the ghost of Sethe’s baby daughter that she killed to spare her the horrors of a slave life. Sethe and her daughter live isolated from the rest of the community, not only because everyone fears the ghost that haunts the house, but also because they all disapprove of what Sethe has done to her child. One day Paul D, a former slave who worked on the same slave plantation as Sethe, arrives at Sethe’s house and moves in with the two woman. Shortly after, another figure appears at 124 Bluestone Road: Beloved. Although Beloved never identifies herself explicitly, it gradually becomes clear that she is Sethe’s incarnate murdered daughter. The arrival of
Beloved alters the lives of all the inhabitants, as Beloved’s appearance forces them to revisit the past. While Paul D and Denver grow stronger through the confrontation with the past, Sethe suffers from guilt and is haunted by the past. Moreover, Beloved, who seeks vengeance for what her mother did to her, consumes Sethe. As the novel reaches its climax, Sethe is rescued by her own daughter Denver and the community. With united efforts, they expel Beloved from the house and as such liberate Sethe not only from Beloved, but also from what Beloved represented: Sethe’s past. In the following chapters, I will analyze how each of the characters deals with the confrontation of the past and the memory of slavery.

Morrison’s novel revolves around two traumas that are closely linked together through a cause and effect-relationship. On the one hand, Morrison foregrounds Sethe’s private trauma of her infanticide, while on the other hand, she uses this private trauma as a motif to remember the collective trauma of slavery. As such, the figure of Beloved is not only the incarnation of the daughter that was murdered by her mother, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the embodiment of the repressed slavery-past. Susan Bower observes that “Beloved is the embodiment of the collective pain and rage of the millions of slaves who died on the Middle Passage” (1990, 66). Or as Karla Holloway puts it:

“If Beloved is not only Sethe’s dead daughter returned but also the return of all the faces, all the drowned but remembered faces of mothers and their children who have lost their being because of the force of that Euro-American slave-history, then she has become a cultural mooring place, a moment for reclamation and for naming.” (1999, 74)

In her definition of what Beloved represents, Holloway confirms that Morrison succeeds in reviving the past and the memory of slavery.

The two traumas at stake form the kernel of Beloved and each of them demands from those who are affected by them to be acknowledged and remembered. While Sethe needs to remember her infanticide and work through the pain that that memory evokes, Morrison asks something similar from the readers as they are confronted throughout the novel with the (re)memory of slavery. Although both Sethe and the reader have to face the past, the circumstances in which the past is remembered are obviously completely different. Whereas Sethe is part of the fictional world and, as the protagonist of the story, directly involved in her trauma, the reader, being part of the non-fictional world, is confronted with the a traumatic part of history that he did not experience himself but that is passed on to him from one generation to the next. Throughout the novel, the situation of the reader is mirrored in the character of Denver, Sethe’s youngest daughter, who finds herself in a similar position as the reader as she is left with an incomplete knowledge of her mother’s past. Or as Linda Krumholz notes: “Denver’s relation to the past is primarily historic rather than personal. Denver’s personal stake in retrieving the past, like the reader’s, involves a familial and ancestral inheritance, and her encounter with the past is ‘necessarily painful’” (1999, 120). Especially when Denver is confronted with Beloved
and with the special bond that Beloved and Sethe have because of their shared past, Denver’s hunger for knowledge about the past is triggered. Just like the reader, Denver has to reconstruct the past on the basis of the few traces she is left with. Therefore, she starts to use her imagination to weave together a story about what happened. Sethe also needs to create a story about what happened, but in contrast to Denver and the reader, she must do so on the basis of her own recollections of the past. As such, the different levels of involvement in the traumatic past ask for a different approach towards that past. In the following chapters I will analyze the ways in which Sethe on the one hand, and Denver and the reader on the other hand, attempt to approach the traumas of the past.

4.2.1 Surviving Trauma: Sethe’s Trauma’s and the Concept of “Rememory”

Although it might seem inappropriate to some to define Sethe’s infanticide as an instance of a private ‘trauma’ considering the fact that Sethe is the perpetrator and not the victim, the motives for her action were traumatic. It was the institution of slavery and the thought of her children falling victim to that institution that drove Sethe to her desperate deed. As such, her infanticide should be read in the light of the atrocities of slavery. However, before discussing the moral implications of Sethe’s action in more detail, I will first focus on how Sethe’s trauma is represented and how she copes with the memory of it. In a later chapter I will return to this aspect and discuss the moral and ethical repercussions of Sethe’s infanticide.

Ever since Sethe killed her own daughter, she has been haunted not only by the memory of it but also by a tremendous sense of guilt. Since the memory of her past and the feelings evoked by it are too painful, “to Sethe the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (Morrison, 2005, 51). She does not want to remember, nor does she want her children to. As such, she does not talk to Denver about what happened at Sweet Home. Moreover, she even forbids Denver ever to go near that place, since she believes that the memory of her slave life and her infanticide are still present in that place. She explains this to Denver as follows:

“Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear . . . It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place [Sweet Home] is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there 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; it will be there for you, waiting for you.” (Morrison, 2005, 43-44)

What Sethe describes to her daughter, is what Morrison calls ‘rememory’, a phenomenon according to which someone can reconstruct an event that he did not experience himself, on the basis of traces of
someone else’s memory. Or as Ashraf Rushdy puts it: “These ‘rememories’ not only exist outside the agent’s mind but are available to anyone who enters the sphere of the action” (1990, 303). In the light of Rushdy’s comment, it is not difficult to understand why Sethe does not want Denver to go to Sweet Home: she fears that Denver will be confronted with traces of her past and consequently relive Sethe’s experiences.

However, the rememories described by Sethe are not only present in places; they exist also in the visceral form of scars on Sethe’s back. As such, she carries her most painful rememories permanently with her, as she can never erase the scars on her back that remind her of the violence that was done to her while she was a slave. Or as Henderson puts it: “Traces of the past that Sethe represses (but can neither remember nor forget) have been gouged into her back by the master’s whip and bear the potential burden of both history and herstory” (1999, 86). Henderson implies that the scars on Sethe’s back may give rise not only to the rememory of the historical trauma of slavery, but also to Sethe’s personal traumatic past. As such, traces of collective and individual history amalgamate in a web of scars on her back. Jerry Chang referred to these traces as “corporeal rememories”, a phenomenon in which someone “remembers through the body” (2011, 1). In Beloved, Sethe is permanently reminded of her past because of and through her mutilated body. The fact that the marks of slavery have been engraved in her back, where she herself cannot see them, is also significant. It symbolizes on the one hand Sethe’s attempts to turn her back to the past, while on the other hand the invisibility of her own scars represents the difficulty of recounting a traumatic past. Since she is unable to see her own mutilated back, she has to rely on the description of others to know what her back looks like. Throughout the novel, Sethe’s scars are described three times by different people, respectively Amy, Baby Suggs and Paul D, and all of them give their own version of what they see on Sethe’s back. The different descriptions of Sethe’s scars remind of a postmodern feature that is typically found in novels that deal with the remembrance of the past. In these novels, different versions of one and the same event serve to problematize the (un)reliability of the narrators and imply an impossibility to know the truth about what happened in the past. (Codde, course) This is especially the case for later generations who are faced with the difficult task of trying to reconstruct the past. Every member of the later generations will eventually give his own meaning to the traces that he finds in order to create a version of what happened. (Codde, course)

Chang’s concept of corporeal rememories is especially significant in the context of slavery, since the slave body was almost always permanently mutilated. Hence, the slaves always carried their past with them, not only in the form of scars left by the whiplashes or in the form of the brand number that had been burned into their skins as signs of possession, but also through the color of their skin. This accounts also for the fact that generations of African Americans today are still reminded of their slavery past, as they cannot ‘remove’ the blackness of their skin. Hence not only the victims of slavery were permanently marked by the past, but also the following generations. Sonya McCoy-Wilson argues that “Like a metaphorical palimpsest, the black female body has been layered transgenerationally with ghosts of oppression and slavery” (2007, 3). Thus, the body becomes not only a means to remember the past,
but also a means through which the past is being transmitted to the following generations. In Morrison’s novel, this transmission is most evident in the figure of Beloved. Not only does she represent the past through her bodily form, she also carries within her mind traces of the past. As McCoy-Wilson notes:

“Her re-memory reveals a recollection of collective repressed memories: the transatlantic slave trade and the traumatic middle passage, the trauma of having been murdered by her mother, Sethe, as well as Sethe’s guilt for having committed the act and the trauma Sethe experiences at Sweet Home.” (2007, 7)

One of the scenes in which it becomes evident that Beloved has inherited the memories of her mother is the scene in which Beloved recounts the middle passage:

“All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked . . . the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face.” (Morrison, 2005, 248)

This scene refers to the horrible situation on the ships, where the dead slaves remained chained to the living slaves. Consequently, as the slaves were piled up on each other, it often occurred that a dead body lay on the body of a living person. This is also what has happened to Sethe as is described in this scene. Yet, these are not her own recollections, but those of Beloved to whom she has passed them on. As McCoy-Wilson points out: “Beloved recalls memories that have been transmitted to her transgenerationally” (2007, 8). Throughout the novel it becomes clear that Sethe’s attempt to protect Beloved from slavery has failed, since Beloved does experience it through the memories she inherited from her mother. Freud used the term “archaic heritage” to refer to this kind of transgenerational inheritance and described it as “the memory-traces of the experiences of former generations” (Freud, 1914). However, Beloved does not only have access to her mother’s memories, she is also the embodiment of those memories:

“Beloved is more than just a character in the novel, though. She is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten; she symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried, properly: ‘Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her.” (Rushdy, 1999, 41)
As such, Beloved must be acknowledged by Sethe, not only as the reincarnation of her murdered daughter, but also as the embodiment of a slavery-past.

4.3 The figure of Beloved

Beloved is probably the most important character in Morrison’s novel. Not only is she the catalyst who makes the other characters withdraw into the past to remember the trauma of slavery, she is also the incarnation of that past. She is an ambiguous character, a liminal figure, by some even referred to as a “trickster figure”, crossing the boundaries of past and present, life and death (Krumholz, 1999, 114). Beloved’s liminal nature might be interpreted as representing the fugitive quality of the past and the difficulty for later generations to grasp it. When Beloved enters the lives of Sethe, Denver and Paul D, she forces them to face the past, because she embodies everything that has been repressed. She functions like the unconsciousness of a traumatized patient, intruding in the lives of the characters against their will. Yet, despite the fact that Beloved brings to life a repressed and painful past, she is also the cure for that traumatic past. Once the characters acknowledge her and understand what Beloved represents, they can come to terms with their past and move on. However, this healing process is different for each of the main characters, as Beloved comes to represent something different for each of them.

4.3.1 Sethe and Beloved

As mentioned earlier, Sethe moves through life repressing her past. However, with the arrival of Beloved, she can no longer deny her own traumatic history and is forced to face her past. In contrast with the other characters, for Sethe Beloved represents something very personal besides the trauma of slavery. For her, Beloved represents in the first place the daughter she killed. The return of her murdered daughter infuses Sethe with guilt and as such her response to Beloved’s presence is a plea for forgiveness. When she is first confronted with the ghost of her murdered daughter, she cannot fully grasp what or who Beloved represents. Yet, even though she is not fully aware that this mysterious figure is her daughter, she heaps motherly love upon Beloved, driven by a deep motherly instinct. When she eventually realizes who Beloved is, she becomes obsessed with trying to explain to Beloved why she has murdered her. Sethe, who is now consumed by the past and by Beloved, cannot move on in the present. She loses her job and puts her own life on hold as she tries to justify her actions to her daughter. However, though it might appear like some sort of “talking cure” when Sethe narrates the story of how and why she killed her baby-daughter to Beloved, she does not find the healing reassurance she is looking for. The presence of her past literally consumes her, as she slowly pearishes, while Beloved grows stronger and larger by the minute. Sethe fails to overcome her past, because she is stuck in an attempt to justify what she did, as if she wants to change the past. The only way in which she will be able to heal, is when she can accept what she has done as something that is part of her slavery-past. Only
when Sethe can see her actions in the context of the atrocities of slavery from which she wanted to protect Beloved, will she be able to move on. Or as Rushdy puts it: “Sethe’s process of healing occurs when she acknowledges her act and accepts her responsibility for it while also recognizing the reason for her act within a framework larger than that of individual resolve” (1999, 47). Thus, Sethe has to remember the reason why she murdered Beloved instead of the act itself. Eventually, all she wanted was to protect her daughter from a life of slavery.

However, not only Sethe has to place her actions within the larger framework of slavery, her community needs to do this as well. Because, if the other slave mothers fail to look at Sethe’s infanticide from a different perspective, Sethe will not be able to free herself from her past. She will never be able to liberate herself from the guilt that haunts her if she is constantly exposed to the guilt that is being cast upon her by her community. As Martinez notes: “In Morrison’s novel, Sethe becomes the carrier for the community of the guilt complex resulting from a structural inability of slave mothers to provide free lives to their children. She is scapegoated” (2009, 10). While these mothers seem to have no choice but to raise their children in captivity, Sethe did make a choice, refusing to let slavery determine the life of her progeny. She chose death over a life of slavery. But although the other slave mothers find themselves in a similar position each time a child is born, they cannot or will not understand Sethe’s choice and turn their backs on her. As such, Sethe carries not only her own guilt, but also the guilt that is cast upon her by her community. Only when her fellow slave mothers help her to exorcise Beloved, is she able to overcome her past. With the help of the community, Sethe is liberated from Beloved and as such from the past that Beloved represented. The fact that she is supported by her community is significant, because it means that her crime is now understood as something that she did out of love.

To conclude this discussion of the relationship between Sethe and Beloved, there is one character that I want to highlight, since she is of utmost importance in Sethe’s healing process. This is Ella, a white slave woman, whose life mirrors that of Sethe in that she too has killed her baby. However, in contrast to Sethe who murdered out of love, Ella let her baby die because she refused to feed “a hairy white thing, fathered by ‘the lowest yet’” (Morrison, 2005, 305). Ella was raped by her slave masters—referred to as “the lowest yet”—and, in refusing to feed the child that came about as a result of that rape, she refused to let the institution of slavery determine her future. Thus, because Ella did not want to be reminded of the violence been done against her, she let her baby starve. In contrast to Sethe however, Ella never lingered on her past. She moved on and did not let the past interfere with her future. As such, when she hears that Sethe’s past, incarnated in the figure of Beloved, has come back to torture Sethe, Ella decides that something must be done to liberate her, because
“Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe’s crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy. Daily life took as much as she had. The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out.” (Morrison, 2005, 302)

Consequently, since Ella believes that the past should remain in the past, she goes to the haunted house, accompanied by the other slave mothers to exorcise Beloved. Thus, it is through the help and understanding of Ella and her community that Sethe can cast off the guilt and free herself from her past. Or as Rushdy puts it: “Ella, by exorcising Beloved, by not allowing the past to consume the present, offers Sethe the opportunity to reclaim herself” (1999, 54).

4.3.2 Paul D and Beloved

Although the figure of Beloved is generally taken to be the most important catalyst for bringing back the repressed past, the appearance of Paul D in Sethe’s life is of equal importance in conjuring up that past. When Paul D, one of the male slaves on Sweet Home who was in love with Sethe, returns to her, the memories of the slave life on Sweet Home also return. “Paul D’s reappearance serves as an overture to Sethe’s ‘rememory’ of the past. […] what he represents are the repressed memories returned” (2011, 3). However, Paul D not only brings back the repressed memories, he also makes the ghost that haunts Sethe’s home appear in the flesh. Or as Chang concisely puts it: “What Paul D digs up then is not only Sethe’s repressed past but also Beloved incarnate” (2011, 5). As such it seems that Beloved and Paul D have a very similar role to play in the resurrection of the repressed past. Chang notes that their analogous function is mirrored in the way in which they first appear at the house:

“Since Beloved and Paul D appear in the same fashion (Beloved sitting on the stump parallels Paul D sitting on the porch), the two characters seem to serve a similar function. If Paul D triggers Sethe’s rememory, Beloved is a further catalyst for that.” (2011, 5)

Yet, although Chang makes it seem as if Beloved and Paul D work together as a team to bring back the past, this is far from true. While Beloved’s motive to return is mainly based on anger and a desire to revenge her death, Paul D seems to return without a clear motive. The memories that Paul D brings with him do not involve a conscious act of rememory, they are just so closely bound up with him as a person that Sethe cannot look at him without seeing also those memories. Moreover, in contrast to Beloved, who actively brings back and represents the past, Paul D does not want to remember the past. Kreyling notes that “Paul D, the only survivor of Sweet Home and slavery, responds to the call for memory by trying to forget” (2007, 123). Indeed, Paul D had to endure so much horror and indignity that his past is
something he does not want to remember. He was not only a witness when he saw his own brother being hanged, his friend Sixo being burned alive, and Sethe’s husband Halle going insane after watching Sethe getting raped by the white men; Paul D was also a victim himself. Martinez summarizes the indignities he had to endure as follows:

“As mentioned earlier, Paul D had also suffered his own degradation in his being collared, harnessed with a bit, chained to a line of 46 other slaves, stored at night with them in a train of boxes buried in the earth, and forced to give oral sex to the guards.” (2009, 14)

Since the memory of all those atrocities are too much for Paul D to bear, he has stored them away in his tobacco tin, which is a substitute for his heart. The only way for Paul D to regain his heart is “through his sexual relation with Beloved” (Martinez, 2009, 15). However, although they are engaged in a sexual relation, neither of them feels any personal affection for the other. Beloved wants to have sex with Paul D because she believes that it will bring her closer to her mother when they share the same lover. Paul D on the other hand, not yet aware that she is Sethe’s murdered daughter, cannot resist the request of Beloved, but afterwards “he remains convinced that he did not want to have sex with her” (Martinez, 2009, 14). Yet, Paul D does heal through his sexual intercourse with Beloved. Martinez explains Paul D’s healing as follows: “African-American hearts have been defended against the suffering undergone by African-American women during slavery. By joining his masculine potency with the unlaid ghost of black slave women’s suffering, Paul D becomes a man capable of full human feeling” (2009, 15). As such, Beloved healed Paul D in that he was able to replace his tobacco tin full of horrible memories with a human heart full of feelings.

4.3.3 Denver, the Reader and Beloved

As I mentioned earlier, Denver and the reader are put in a similar position, since neither of them has direct access to the past. However, despite the fact that both of them lack vital knowledge, it seems that Denver does not want to have anything to do with the past: “The present alone interested Denver” (Morrison, 2005, 141). Yet, it gradually becomes clear that this is only a façade, since Denver is interested in finding out more about her sister and her mother’s past: “Ironically, although Denver thinks that the present alone is what interests her, she luxuriates in the past, in dwelling in a shadowy history that she is unwilling to confront or to confirm” (Rushdy, 1999, 50). Denver feels safe in her own illusory world, where the only company she has is that of the ghost. Indeed, from as early as she could remember, Denver felt comfortable with the presence of the ghost, in contrast to her brothers, who ran away because of it. However, when the ghost disappears to return in the flesh, Denver feels abandoned and alone, having to share Beloved now with her mother. The only moments she feels ‘complete’ is when she is alone with Beloved, or as Martinez puts it: “As long as Beloved is with her, Denver can vicariously
experience a miraculous survival of her mother’s murderous response to being a slave mother” (2009, 15). However, the mere presence of Beloved is not enough for Denver to feel satisfied; she needs to tell stories to Beloved, stories about her past, in order to feel complete. One of the stories that Denver most liked to narrate, is the story of her own birth, because only then could she really experience that moment: “When she repeats her birth story for Beloved, ‘Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved’” (Krumholz, 1999, 120). Yet, it is only when Denver has undergone a “ritual of mergence” that she is able to “fully remember her past and her mother’s past” (Krumholz, 1999, 120). This “ritual of mergence” is described over four chapters in which each of the women proclaims her possession of one of the other women:

“In the first three chapters, Sethe first proclaims her possession of her daughter Beloved, then Denver of her sister Beloved, then Beloved of her mother. The fourth chapter is in the form of a poetic chant, in which the memories and minds of the three combine in a mutual song of possession—“you are mine”. (Krumholz, 1999, 120)

It is in this ritual that Denver for the first time experiences the past in its totality and that she can remember what her mother has done to Beloved in all its details. The ritual is not only significant for Denver’s remembrance of the past however, it also provides her with the opportunity to move on into the future, or as Krumholz puts it: “The ritual of possession breaks through her isolation and grants Denver an experience of the past that can lead her into the future” (1999, 120).

Yet it will take more than only this “ritual of possession” for Denver to be able to move on. She can only completely break out of the prison of the past when she sees how the past, embodied by Beloved, is consuming her mother. Whereas Denver initially feared that Sethe would harm Beloved again, it becomes clear to her that this fear is unfounded, as she witnesses Beloved torturing her mother and not the other way around. When Denver can no longer stand the sight of her mother being tormented by her past actions, Denver decides to break through the isolation and steps into the ‘real’ world. She literally removes herself from the poisonous situation in which she, Beloved and Sethe have been living and starts to develop as a strong, independent woman who can provide for her family. As such, Denver constructs her own identity, not based on the past, but on the actions she undertakes in the present. The next task that lies ahead of her is to liberate her mother from the past as well, a task which she completes with the help of the community, that joins Ella and Denver in the exorcism of Beloved. Thus, while Beloved is a catalyst for Sethe to revisit the past, for Denver she is a catalyst to move on into the present and future.

Besides being the liberator of her mother, Denver also has different roles to play in the novel “that of the teacher, the historian, and the author” (Krumholz, 1999, 121). However, before she can take on those roles, Denver has to face a different part of the past, namely that of her ancestors and their history of slavery. The first time Denver is made aware of the fact that her
mother’s past has to be understood, as Rushdy notes, “in light of a larger narrative” (1999, 51), is the moment when Beloved explains why she tried to choke Sethe. In an attempt to defend herself against Denver’s accusation of trying to choke Sethe, Beloved argues that she was not the one who grabbed their mother’s neck, but that it was the institution of slavery that was responsible for it. She says “I didn’t choke it. The circle of iron choked it” (Morrison, 2005, 119). Rushdy notes that Beloved alludes in this passage to the institution of slavery: “Slavery, Beloved is saying in a lower frequency, is the thing to blame. Denver will have to listen to that lower frequency” (1999, 51). By making Beloved herself refer to the larger framework of slavery as a means to understand Sethe’s infanticide, Morrison highlights the enduring influence an unacknowledged past can exert on the present. Beloved draws attention not only to herself as a victim of trauma then, but also to the circumstances which forced her mother to do what she did. The appearance of the ghost of Denver’s grandmother Baby Suggs, shortly after Denver decided to leave the house, is also significant in this respect, as her grandmother yet again points to the past as something that one needs to be aware of if one wants to move on in the future:

Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn’t leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. ‘You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can’t walk down the steps? My Jesus my.’

But you said there was no defense.

‘There ain’t.’

Then what do I do?

‘Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.’” (Morrison, 2005, 287-288)

“Know it”, in those two words Baby Suggs captures the essence of the whole novel: know about the historical past of your forefathers. Know it, understand it and move on. As such, what Baby Suggs seems to advocate then, is knowledge about the past without dwelling on it. The past should be acknowledged, yet it should also remain “the past”.

As it is clear to Denver now what she has to do in order to liberate herself and her mother from the suffocating presence of Beloved, Morrison puts forward the act of storytelling as a means through which Denver can come to terms with the past. Storytelling, however, is not only something that is useful for Denver in her search for the past; it is also used by all the other characters as a way to speak the unspeakable. In the following part, I will discuss the ways in which Morrison relies on the tradition of storytelling to highlight the oral character of African history, while emphasizing its utility as a healing device.
4.4 Speaking Trauma and Speaking History: Storytelling in Beloved

When discussing the act of storytelling as it is used in Beloved, a distinction needs to be made between three different motives for storytelling. First of all, storytelling in Beloved is used as a means to articulate a repressed trauma. This form of storytelling resembles Freud’s talking cure, which I have discussed in chapter 2 as a successful method to help traumatized patients overcome their trauma. In Morrison’s novel, Sethe and Paul D are the characters that benefit most from this type of storytelling, as they attempt to face their trauma by putting it into words. However, the process of articulating their trauma is difficult as it becomes clear that they lack a language that is able to represent exactly how they feel. As they have been dominated by the language of the white men, they lack a language of their own. As such, they will have to seek alternative languages to talk about the traumatic past that haunts them.

The second motive for storytelling stems from the attempts by the later generations to access the past via their imagination. In Morrison’s novel, it is in particular Denver who uses this type of storytelling to create her own version of the past, as she lacks knowledge about the past of her ancestors. Through this type of storytelling Morrison foregrounds also the (un)reliability of the narrator and the difficulty for later generations to access the past.

Thirdly, the act of storytelling itself, as portrayed by Morrison in her novel, illustrates how the history of slavery has been preserved. In this case, storytelling takes us back to the origins of African culture, which is based on storytelling, myth and folklore. All of these typical features of African culture return in Morrison’s novel, underscoring the crucial role storytelling has had in the preservation and transmission of African history. In the following parts I will discuss these motives for storytelling in greater depth.

4.4.1 Storytelling as a Means to Heal Trauma

As I mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis, Freud’s talking cure is generally considered to be one of the most effective ways in helping traumatized patients to work through their trauma. During this process, the therapist and the patient work together to transform into linguistic entities the traumatic images that have been engraved in the patient’s mind. Verbalizing the trauma is essential, but how does one put a trauma into words when one lacks a language of one’s own? Throughout Beloved this issue is explored by foregrounding the impossibility of the African slaves to put their traumatic history of slavery into words as they lacked a language of their own. The absence of their own language precludes the establishment of an identity of their own. The slave masters have stripped their slaves of their pre-slave identity by renaming them. The name given by their slave masters becomes the symbol of their slave-identity and erases every trace of their pre-slave existence. Rafael Pérez Torres argues that the slave masters were able to do this because language has power. He states that “Power belongs […] not to
those whom words define but to those who define words” (1999, 187). As such, having been defined by the language of the white slave-master, Sethe lacks the power to establish her own identity and her own language. Yet, as is noted by Pérez-Torres, “the defined do not entirely lack power. Those who live with the absence of power reserve to themselves the persistent practice of decoding and recoding signs” (Pérez-Torres, 1999, 187). As such, Sethe needs to ‘decode’ and ‘recode’ the signs by which she was marked by her slave-master. The scene in *Beloved* in which Amy Denver takes care of Sethe’s injuries is significant in this respect. When Amy sees the scars on Sethe’s back, she describes them as follows:

> “It’s a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk—it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom.” (Morrison, 2001, 93)

Pérez-Torres notes that instead of referring to the scars as marks of slavery and oppression, Amy refers to them as symbols of growth and fertility:

> “Both women have been marked by their position as owned property. As the signs of slavery inscribed on the one are transformed by the other into an image of fruition instead of oppression, Amy gives back to Sethe her identity as a nurturing source.” (1999, 187)

Amy uses the power to rename to liberate Sethe from her slave-identity and she does so by using a different type of language than that of the male white oppressor. She uses a maternal language to describe the traces of slavery on Sethe’s back. Or as Mae G. Henderson notes “Morrison uses the metaphor of maternity to establish an alternative to the metaphor of paternity common in white/male historical discourse” (1999, 94). Once Sethe learns that she can think and talk about herself and her past in the maternal discourse of her mother and grandmother, she is able to overcome her own trauma. Before Sethe discovered this maternal discourse to talk about her infanticide, her child-murder had always been interpreted by the community the same way the white sheriff interpreted it, namely as “the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred” (Morrison, 2001, 177). However, once Sethe learns that she is able to articulate her own story in her own motherly language, she can overcome her trauma. She killed her own daughter out of motherly love, and not, as the white sheriff thinks out of some uncontrollable, cannibal urge. Sethe explains to Beloved that she killed her because she did not want Beloved to experience what she had experienced herself, namely
“That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. […] And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing […] She might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter. And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper.” (Morrison, 2001, 295-296)

As such, Sethe explains to Beloved that she had to kill her because she could not bear to witness her own child falling victim to the atrocities of slavery. Henderson notes that

“Sethe creates a counter-narrative that reconstitutes her humanity and demonstrates the requirements of mother-love. By shifting the dominant white male metaphor to a black maternal metaphor for self and history, Sethe changes the plot and meaning of the story—and, finally, the story itself.” (1999, 98)

As Henderson argues, Sethe does find a language of her own which enables her to reclaim herself, her past and her story. However, sometimes even a language of one’s own does not suffice to articulate the pain of trauma. Jeffery Andrew Weinstock notes that Beloved’s monologue illustrates the failure of language to represent trauma. In this part of the novel, the text literally falls apart because of “the introduction of spatial gaps and the absence of punctuation” (2005, 144). As such, the text itself comes to represent the incapacity of the normal semiotic system to translate trauma. Or, as Valerie Smith puts it: “this section of the novel resists explication. It prompts, rather, the recognition that what is essentially and effectively unspoken can never be conveyed and comprehended linguistically” (1993, 352).

However, although the text fails to convey the essence of the trauma through the traditional linguistic system, it does convey meaning exactly because of its untraditional form. As such, it is not the words themselves that carry the meaning; it is the form in which they are arranged on the page that is meaningful. Shoshana Felman argues that the “breakage of words” seems to enact or perform the trauma, instead of merely reporting it (1992, 39). Weinstock observes that the ‘breakage of words’ of Beloved’s monologue functions performatively to enact and communicate horror without attempting to explain it or reduce it” (2005, 145). Yet, it is not just the fragmented text that conveys the pain and horror of the trauma. The gaps, introduced by Morrison, invite the reader to actively engage in the creation of meaning. Morrison encourages her readers to fill in the spaces as she believes that a single truth, meaning or interpretation of the past does not—and cannot—exist. She describes the ambiguity that her texts bring about as follows:
“These spaces, which I am filling in, and can fill in because they were planned, can conceivably be filled in with other significances. This is planned as well. The point is that into these spaces should fall the ruminations of the reader and his or her invented or recollected or misunderstood knowingness.” (Morrison, 1989, 29)

As such, Morrison asks her readers not just to read what is already there, but to read the absences. Through the character of Ella, who helped Sethe escape and who rescues her in the end from Beloved’s vengeance, Morrison makes clear what she expects the reader to do: “Ella wrapped a cloth strip tight around the baby’s navel as she listened for the holes—the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask” (2001, 108, my emphasis). What Morrison demands from her readers resembles what Dori Laub demands from the listener to trauma, who “must listen to and hear the silence, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within speech” (Laub, 1992, 58). Just as Laub’s ideal listener will understand what is left unspoken, Morrison’s ideal reader should be able to read what is left unwritten. Filling the gaps of the past is also something Denver is faced with as she tries to grasp her mother’s trauma and the reasons why Beloved seeks vengeance. In what follows I argue that throughout Beloved myth is employed as a means to access the past.

4.4.2 Storytelling and Myth-making

In contrast to her mother, who uses storytelling as a device to overcome trauma, Denver primarily creates stories to fill in the gaps of the past. As she is left with very little knowledge about her mother’s past slave-life and about her infanticide, Denver feels the urge to create her own versions about what happened. As such, Denver too needs to fill in the gaps left by her mother, just as the reader needs to fill in the gaps left by Morrison. The stories Denver makes up for herself serve also another purpose, as they become sources of knowledge about herself. Trudier Harris notes that “The consequences for Denver learning about herself is that she can begin to form the basis upon which to grow into an adult human being” (1999, 142). As such, while Denver attempts to (re)construct the past, she is also constructing her own life. It is interesting to look at the way in which Denver creates a story, since this process resembles that of the third and later generations of African Americans who try to learn more about the past of their ancestors. Both Denver and these post-generations have so few facts available that the lion share of the version they construct about the past is based on their imagination.

Throughout the novel though, it becomes clear that it is not just Denver who engages in storytelling and myth-making. The whole community is involved in myth-making, a process of which the prime example is the story of Denver’s birth. As Harris observes, the story of Denver’s birth seems so incredible to the townspeople that it “already has components of legend, myth, and outright lying before it begins to get reshaped in the minds and memories of Sethe, Denver, and their neighbors” (1999, 139). The reason why the story already acquired a mythological status before it was molded by the
imagination of others, is due to the incredible, seemingly fantastical content of the story itself. The whole story of Sethe giving birth to Denver on the banks of a river, assisted by the white girl Amy Denver, who cared also for Sethe’s injured back and feet, is for most of the townspeople too incredible to believe. Yet, despite the fact that they seriously question the authenticity of the story, they keep retelling it, each time adding new elements or adjusting it to the audience to whom the story is told. Rafael Pérez Torres notes that

“Each telling, each version of Denver’s birth, shares similar phrases and images […] No one telling ultimately takes precedence over the next. Each rather adds information through the telling. This repetition and variation creates a sense of the story as always having been present and that one is hearing again a story with which one is already familiar. In this respect, the strategy suggests the quality of orality.” (1993, 705)

Pérez-Torres puts his finger on one of the most important elements Morrison aimed to convey through her novel: the aspect of orality that is so typical of African culture. Through the retelling and reshaping of the story of Denver’s birth then, Morrison takes her readers back to the origins of African culture, a culture based on the oral transmission of stories. In the last part of my analysis of Beloved, I will discuss how Morrison uses her novel to foreground the oral nature of the stories told in the African communities and the ways in which they are passed on from one generation to another.

4.4.3 The Oral Nature of African Culture and History

As I already mentioned in the previous part, the way Morrison uses storytelling in Beloved is closely intertwined with her aim to highlight the oral nature of the African American culture. In one of her interviews, Morrison explained that she wanted the stories that feature in her novels to resemble the oral traditions typical of the black communities:

“The fact is that the stories look as though they come from people who are not even authors. No author tells these stories. They are just told—meanderingly—as though they are going in several directions at the same time […] The open-ended quality that is sometimes a problematic in the novel form reminds me of the uses to which stories are put in the black community. The stories are constantly being retold, constantly being imagined within a framework.” (Morrison, 1983, 427)

As such, it is not just through the content of the novel itself that African American history and culture are remembered, but also through its form. Or as Ashraf Rushdy puts it: “The novel as a form of ‘Black art’ works with history as its subject in order to criticize and revise”(1999, 56). Morrison deliberately
chooses to make her novels perform the stories and to give them an oral quality so that the reader can hear them as if they were being passed on to him or her by someone else’s voice. She does this because she asserts that it is only through this particular form of literature, in which the text itself comes to speak, that the black oral tradition is preserved. She puts it as follows:

“the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before […] We don’t live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypical stories that we heard years ago.” (Morrison, 1984, 340)

Since she asserts that the African American culture of an oral transmission of history has almost completely disappeared, Morrison attempts to recreate it in and through her novels. However, the oral quality of her novels not only revives the traditional oral culture of the African communities; it also allows Morrison to voice her critique on the Western culture of print media. Rushdy notes in this respect that

“Morrison criticizes the ideological imperative of print media in order to establish the value of oral historical relation. This criticism of print media is very much part of the overall revisionist motive in criticizing the historiography of slavery. It is, after all, only when slave narratives and slave accounts began to be taken seriously as historical documents that the other side of slavery could be articulated.” (1999, 57)

Rushdy’s quote brings me back to an issue I already touched upon in chapter 3, where I argued that it was exactly due to the oral nature of slave testimonials that the history of slavery has so long been unaccounted for. Furthermore, I noted that part of the reason why the African American slaves had recourse to oral means to transmit their history and culture, was because they were deprived of the opportunity to become literate. Unable to read and write, they had but their voice to pass on their knowledge and family history to the next generations. Being forced into illiteracy, it was all too easy for the Western print media to keep the oral history of African Americans out of their history records, claiming that the validity of those stories could not be compared to that of the written historical records. The contrast between the literate white man and the illiterate black slave is highlighted in the scene when schoolteacher teaches his pupils to write down the characteristics of the slaves of Sweet Home. When Sethe accidently walks by and hears him say “I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right,” she instantly feels a deep aversion towards the written medium (Morrison, 2001, 228). That Sethe does not want to have anything to do with the written culture of the white oppressors becomes clear a few pages further in the novel, when Sethe, rejoicing about the plan to escape from Sweet Home, thinks by herself “Ha ha. No notebook for my babies and no measuring
string either” (Morrison, 2001, 233). As Rushdy notes, Sethe “refuses to allow the written to usurp her humanity, and she finds that her humanity is best represented by the spoken word” (1999, 57). Hence, Sethe resorts to the language of her grandmother:

> “Nan was the one she knew best […] And who used different words. Words Sethe understood then, but could neither recall nor repeat now. […] What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma’am spoke, and which never would come back. But the message—that was and had been there all along.” (Morrison, 2001, 74)

What Nan told Sethe is the story about Sethe’s mother, who murdered all her children who were fathered by white men. With the return of Beloved, who asks about Sethe’s mother, Sethe remembers what Nan told her so many years ago. Besides the story itself, She is also able to remember the language of her grandmother, which she thought she had forgotten. Remembering her grandmother’s language has a healing effect on Sethe: “Now, in remembering her own relationship to her two daughters, she is able to understand her mother’s acts and her grandmother’s code. By situating herself within a communal narrative of grandmother-mother-daughter relationships, Sethe is able to understand herself” (Rushdy, 1999, 59). Thus, as Rushdy argues, once she is able to remember the language her grandmother used to talk about a traumatic event, she can use it in turn to overcome her own trauma. The linguistic code of her grandmother, which is made available to her through the act of remembering, becomes now the code in which she can articulate the trauma of her infanticide and her slave-life on Sweet Home. It is in these scenes, when Sethe remembers the language of her mother, that the text starts to perform: “The scenes of hearing the mother’s tongue, understanding the mother’s code, knowing the mother’s history—these are themselves the very enactment of an ongoing generational oral transmission” (Rushdy, 1999, 60). As such, Morrison succeeds in reviving and remembering the history of slavery and the oral transmission of stories, typical of African culture, not only through the content of her novel, but also through its form.
In a similar way as Morrison, who took the real story of the fugitive slave woman Margaret Garner as a starting point for her novel, Jonathan Safran Foer drew inspiration from his own life when he wrote his debut novel *Everything is Illuminated*. Foer’s initial aim was to write a non-fictional account of the trip to Ukraine that he undertook when he was 22. Foer embarked upon this journey to find the woman who presumably saved his grandfather from the Nazi’s. The principal aim of his trip to Trachimbrod was thus to learn more about the past of his grandfather. Once arrived at Trachimbrod, however, Foer’s hope to find out more about his grandfather’s past quickly dissolved into disappointment, as he found “nothing but nothing, and in that nothing—a landscape of completely realized absence – nothing was to be found” (Foer, Interview). Faced with this emptiness, Foer says that he felt compelled to use his own imagination to fill in the holes of the past. Yet, the choice to use fiction to represent historical facts of such ethical and emotional value as those of the Holocaust, was not an easy one to make, as Foer admits in one of his interviews:

“My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints. But I wondered, is the Holocaust exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one’s responsibilities to ‘the truth’ of a story, and what is ‘the truth’? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? The eye with the mind’s eye?” (Foer, Interview)

In Foer’s novel, these questions and ethical dilemmas take on the form of two distinct narrative voices, “one realistic, the other folkloristic” (Foer, Interview). The realistic voice is that of Alex, the Ukrainian translator who, together with his grandfather, accompanies the fictional Jonathan on his journey to Trachimbrod. The folkloristic voice on the other hand belongs to the fictional Jonathan who creates a magical-mythical story about the shtetl of Trachimbrod, which tells the life story of his grandfather Safran. Foer explains that

“With the two very different voices, I attempted to show the rift that I experienced when trying to imagine the book. […] *Everything is Illuminated* proposes the possibility of a response of duality, of ‘did and didn’t,’ of things being one way and also the opposite way. Rather than aligning itself with either ‘how things were’ or ‘how things could have been,’ the novel measures the difference between the two, and by so doing, attempts to reflect the way things feel.” (Foer, Interview)

Foer’s principal concern was not for his novel to be historically accurate, but rather to illustrate how fiction can be a useful alternative for the third generation to access the past via their imagination. If they cannot know the truth about what happened, they might as well attempt to create a possible version of
it. In the following chapters I will analyze the way in which Foer uses his imagination to represent the traumatic past of his grandfather.

5.1 More than One Story: Narrators and Embedded Narratives in *Everything is Illuminated*

Part of the brilliance of *Everything is Illuminated* derives from its layered structure. As the novel unfolds on different levels, the reader only gradually learns about the past that affects the lives and families of the two narrators. The actual first level is metafictional, since it is the level of the real Jonathan Safran Foer, who wrote the entire novel. He is the one who composes the layered structure and who introduces two main narrators that reside on the same fictional level. On the one hand, Foer presents the reader with a fictional version of himself, which I will refer to as “Jonathan”, and who, in a similar fashion as the real Jonathan Safran Foer, undertakes a trip to Trachimbrod to find Augustine, the woman of whom he has a picture in which she and his grandfather pose together. Presumably this is the woman who saved his grandfather during the war and, as such, Jonathan wants to find her so he can learn more about what happened to his grandfather. He is accompanied on his trip by two other men, Alex Perchov, who functions as his translator on the trip, and Alex’s grandfather, who takes on the role of chauffeur. Arrived at Trachimbrod, however, similarly to what Foer experienced himself, Jonathan encounters nothing but absence. The shtetl is gone, and so are its inhabitants, except for one old woman, Lista, whom they assume must be Augustine, but whose identity remains a mystery until the end. After his journey to Trachimbrod, which was disappointing because he did not learn more about his grandfather’s past, he writes a fictional story about the life of his grandfather and the shtetl of Trachimbrod. The other narrative voice and co-author of the story, is Alex, who, in contrast to Jonathan, did find out more about the past of his own grandfather. Whereas Jonathan provides the reader with a magical-mythical version of the past of his grandfather, Alex feels obliged to give a very realistic and truthful account about their trip to Trachimbrod. Francisco Collado-Rodriguez argues that Alex is more reluctant to use his imagination because he is not only a narrator but also a witness:

“The first narrator, Jonathan, comes to relate a series of fantastic events […] By contrast, the second narrator, Alex, has a very limited capacity of understanding. Although eventually he also discovers relevant information about his own family that amounts to a story of his own, Alex functions as narrator-witness of Jonathan’s identity quest and, as such, he tries to stick to an order of plausibility that follows the premises of realism.” (2008, 57)

As such, the reader is presented with a mixture of realism and magical-mythical invention, which “helps the readers to come to a better understanding of unsayable traumatic events” (Collado-Rodriguez, 2008, 57).
Intersected in between the alternating chapter of Jonathan and Alex, are the letters that Alex writes to Jonathan in which he comments upon Jonathan’s story of Trachimbrod and the past he invents for his grandfather. However, only the letters that Alex writes to Jonathan are present in the novel. The letters Jonathan writes to Alex are absent and as such the reader only learns about their existence because they occur as “absent presences” in Alex’s letters. The theme of “absent presences” is an important motif in Foer’s novel to which I will return in the remainder of my analysis.

However, the layered structure does not end here, as the reader is confronted within Jonathan’s fictional story of Trachimbrod with two other embedded stories that take on the form of two books, namely the Book of Recurrent Dreams and the Book of Antecedents. These books are collectively written by the people of the Trachimbrod shtetl to preserve the town’s history. However, not only the past is present in these books, also the future is sometimes foreshadowed.

Because of the non-chronological order in which the story is presented and the layered structure, it is almost impossible for the reader to know “the truth” about what happened. Foer deliberately uses this layered structure to demonstrate the situation of the third generation, who can only access the past indirectly. As such, the reader actively experiences their struggle to access the past indirectly.

5.2 The First Generation and the Representation of Trauma

Although Foer’s novel is exemplary for its representation of the situation of the third generation and their quest for the truth about a past that is highly inaccessible to them, the novel also stages the difficulty of the first generation to testify about a traumatic past. The latter generation is represented in Foer’s novel by Lista, the woman whom they think is Augustine, and Alex’s grandfather. Both of these characters are forced to testify about the past and both of them show the difficulty in doing so.

5.2.1 Lista’s Trauma

Jonathan’s aim of his trip to Trachimbrod was to find Augustine, the woman who stands next to his grandfather in the photograph that triggered Jonathan’s curiosity about his grandfather’s past. However, when Jonathan, Alex and his grandfather arrive at the place that once must have been Trachimbrod, they only discover a vast emptiness. There is only one small house left, in which an old woman, whom they presume must be Augustine, lives. The woman appears to be the only living survivor and identifies herself as Lista, not Augustine. Yet, despite the fact that she says that her name is Lista, Alex describes how all three of them “continued to think of her as Augustine, even though we knew that she was not Augustine” (181). Clearly, all of them want her to be Augustine, as she is the only presence of the past in the vast emptiness that has replaced the shtetl of Trachimbrod. However, at first it seems that Lista cannot help them in their quest to find out more about what happened to Jonathan’s grandfather, as she repeatedly says that she has not witnessed any of the people in Jonathan’s photograph. Alex however
continues to interrogate her about her knowledge about the people in the photograph, because he is convinced that she knows more than she is telling them:

“Have you ever witnessed anyone in the photograph?” I inquired, and I felt cruel, I felt like an awful person, but I was certain I was performing the right thing.

“No” she said, “I have not. They all look like strangers.”

I periled everything.

“Has anyone in this photograph ever witnessed you?”

Another tear descended.

“I have been waiting for you for so long.” (118)

It turns out that Alex needs to reformulate his question and instead of asking her if she was a witness, he needs to ask her if she herself has ever been witnessed by any of the people in the picture. Only then it becomes clear that she was not only a witness, but also, and in the first place, a victim of trauma. In this scene it is apparent that Alex is more than just a funny guy, as he understands Lista’s need for an empathic listener. Dori Laub, who I referred to in chapter 2, emphasizes this need for a victim of trauma to be listened to empathically. Alex embodies this ideal listener and as such encourages Lista to testify about her past. However, she only manages to testify about what happened to her parents and sisters, leaving herself out of the story as if she was only a witness in the whole event and not one of the victims. Lista describes how her pregnant sister was shot in the belly after which she crawled away to the woods in an attempt to escape, only to return when the Nazi’s were gone. Yet when she then describes how her sister put everything that was left of Trachimbrod into boxes when she had returned from the woods, it becomes clear that there is a possibility that Lista is the pregnant sister she described in her story. This assumption is led on by the fact that Alex describes that her house was overflowing with items and boxes in which a variety of things had been stored away. Thus, after hearing Lista’s story, it seems very plausible that she has stored away all that was left of Trachimbrod in her house. Yet, there are also other indications that the pregnant sister from the story is actually Lista. First of all, when Alex’s grandfather asks her how she managed to escape, she answers “[m]y sister, I told you, was not dead” (187). She thus answers to a question that concerns herself by taking on the identity of her sister. Secondly, she talks about “her baby girl”, which might be interpreted as the baby her sister lost when she got shot in the belly. The reason why Lista conceals her own identity and does not reveal herself as a victim of trauma, might be because she cannot endure to live with the memory of it. Codde argues that Lista’s behavior proves that she is a victim of trauma who is still stuck in the past and lives in denial about the atrocities that she has survived. (Codde, course) Only when Lista is able to talk about what happened to her and identify herself as a victim of trauma, she will be able to overcome her trauma. However, it is important to emphasize that Lista’s true identity remains a mystery, despite all the indications that are given as to who she might be.
5.2.2 The Traumatic Past of Alex’s Grandfather

Lista’s traumatic history is not the only one that is revealed on the trip to Trachimbrod. After the visit to Lista’s house, Alex, Jonathan and Alex’s grandfather open a box Lista had given to them and that is labelled “in case”. Besides an old map of Trachimbrod and “The Book of Past Occurrences”, they find an old photograph in the box, which at first sight appeared to be an ordinary picture. Jonathan however, after closely examining the photo, screams out that Alex’s grandfather is the man in the photograph. As Menachem Feuer points out, this identification of the grandfather as being the man in the photograph resolves two things:

“On the one hand, this clarifies the ambiguity concerning the question as to whether the grandfather really lived in Trachimbrod. On the other hand it pushes the grandfather to the edge of confessing something that turns the entire novel around.” (2007, 34)

Indeed, what Alex’s grandfather will eventually confess does alter the whole story. Although the actual confession of Alex’s grandfather is only reported in one of the last chapters, significantly entitled “Illumination”, it is made clear in the preceding chapters that Alex is having a very hard time at reporting what his grandfather has done during the Holocaust. At one moment he even asks Jonathan to do it for him:

“I have written to this point many times, and corrected the parts you would have me correct, and made more funnies, and more inventions, and written as if I were you writing this, but every time I try to persevere, my hand shakes so that I can no longer hold my pen. Do it for me. Please. It is now yours.” (226)

It is clear that what his grandfather has done is almost unbearable for Alex to speak about, let alone to report in writing. As Alex is already suffering that much because of something that he himself was not even involved in, one can only imagine how difficult it must have been for his grandfather to confess it to someone else. As mentioned earlier, the actual confession of the grandfather is mediated by Alex in the chapter “Illumination”, despite the difficulty he had in doing so. In one of the most brilliant and experimental scenes of the novel, Alex describes how his grandfather has betrayed his friend Herschel to the Germans. At the climax of the scene, the part in which Alex’s grandfather says the actual words of him pointing at his Jewish friend in front of the Germans, the syntax breaks down into one long sentence without punctuation. Collado-Rodriguez notes that:
“The use of experimental techniques in trauma fiction frequently suggests or symbolizes the victim’s—not the perpetrator’s—posttraumatic condition, especially when she or he becomes the narrator. […] The grandfather’s voice highlights the ambivalence of his own position as alleged perpetrator. His report is uttered in the fragmented manner associated with victims.” (2008, 63)

What Collado-Rodriguez suggests is that the grandfather is not only a perpetrator for betraying his friend, but also a victim, because he was forced into this by the Germans. It becomes clear that Alex’s grandfather was pushed into what Primo Levi called “the gray zone”, and had to betray his friend in order to save his own family. This reminds of what happened to Sethe, the protagonist of Morrison’s novel Beloved, who was also pushed into the gray zone when she saw no other option than killing her own child in order to protect her from slavery. Thus, similarly to Sethe’s infanticide, which should be understood within the larger context of slavery, what Alex’s grandfather did should be regarded within the larger frame of the Holocaust.

The story of Alex’s grandfather does not end there however, as his confession sheds a whole new light on a previous scene in the novel where Lista recounts how a Jew named Eli betrayed his friend Herschl to the Nazi’s. What is particularly striking about this scene is the reaction of the grandfather to this story. Only after reading the grandfather’s confession we can understand why he became angry and rude to Lista for telling the story about Eli and Herschl. While Jonathan and Alex were under the impression that Lista was just recounting another traumatic story, Alex’s grandfather knew that he was the Eli whom Lista was talking about, and that he was the one who betrayed his friend Herschl to the Nazi’s. This implies that his grandfather, who in the beginning of the novel was primarily characterized by his anti-Semitic attitude, is a Jew himself. Or as Feuer notes: “if the grandfather killed Herschl, and Augustine tells them that Eli killed Herschl, then the grandfather is Eli; he is Jewish” (Feuer, 2008, 45). Yet, despite the fact that the reader is given these indications that point to the real identity of the grandfather, Feuer points out that the grandfather himself “right until the very end of the novel does not think of himself or recognize himself as a Jew. […] If anything, the grandfather’s being Jewish only matters for the reader” (2008, 46). What is even more important though, is that Jonathan, the one person for whom the Jewish identity of the grandfather might matter, remains silent about it. This might be interpreted as “a refusal to think of the implications of Jews killing other Jews” (Feuer, 2008, 47). What Feuer implies is that Jonathan does not believe in a “gray zone”; for him there is a clear division between perpetrators and victims, a division that he clearly extends to the later generations, as he is unwilling to fulfill Alex’s request to forgive his grandfather and as such is unwilling to come to a reconciliation. I will return to this issue in the chapter in which I discuss the ethical implications of Foer’s novel.
5.3 The Third Generation and Postmemory

In *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer foregrounds the situation of the third generation in different ways. The novel’s layered structure, which I discussed in the previous part, is only one of them. As will become clear in the following chapters, Foer also uses fictional stories, unreliable narrators and the motif of loss and emptiness to exemplify the relation of the third generation to the past of their ancestors.

5.3.1 Imagining the Past

As mentioned earlier, the aim of Jonathan’s trip to Trachimbrod was to find Augustine and learn more about the past of his grandfather. Although the journey to Trachimbrod does reveal two traumatic histories, the trauma of Lista on the one hand and that of Alex’s grandfather on the other, Jonathan’s wish to find out what happened to his grandfather remains unfulfilled. Disappointed by the absence encountered at the site where once the shtetl of Trachimbrod had been, the unsuccessful quest to find Augustine and the nonachievement to access to his grandfather’s past, Jonathan decides to use his imagination and create his own version of the past. He invents a magical-mythical history that begins with the origin of the shtetl of Trachimbrod and ends with its destruction. The history of the shtetl runs parallel with the family history that Jonathan invents and begins with the birth of Brod, whom Codde identifies as “Jonathan’s earliest ancestor”, and ends when his grandfather’s family is killed in the eradication of the shtetl (2011, 677). Codde further notes that his grandfather’s diary and pictures lie at the basis of Jonathan’s fictional story. He notes that one picture in particular becomes a source of imagination for Jonathan. In one of his grandfather’s baby pictures Jonathan believes his grandfather has teeth, which he then uses as an opportunity to invent a whole series of things that are caused by the fact that his grandfather had teeth as a baby:

“It’s because of those teeth that my grandfather was pulled prematurely from his mother’s well, and never received the nutrients his callow body needed. [...] So it was because of his teeth, I imagine, that he got no milk, and it was because he got no milk that his right arm died.” (166; my emphasis)

The list of things that are caused by his grandfather’s teeth goes on and it becomes clear that almost all aspects of his grandfather’s life can in one way or another be explained by the fact that his grandfather had teeth as a baby. Jonathan makes it clear to the reader, however, that all of this is invented, hence the “I imagine”. Or as Codde puts it: “Foer stages his artistic project as metafiction, showing the hand of the novelist at work during the postmemorial invention of his character’s lives on the basis of a few material remnants” (2011, 677). The reader is constantly made aware that what he is reading is not the truth about the past, but an invented version of it.
The most conspicuous example of history being invented, however, is the Book of Recurrent Dreams, in which more than 150 years of Trachimbrod’s history is recorded. As Shannon Margaret Seiferth notes, all the past occurrences are recorded in such detail that the book forms a remarkably sharp contrast with the emptiness Jonathan encountered in Trachimbrod. (2012, 14) She further argues that the Book of Recurrent Dreams “seems to be a self-conscious move on the part of Foer, standing in as an examination of the different ways in that history might be recorded and preserved” (2012, 15). Indeed, it seems that Foer uses the Book of Recurrent Dreams to illustrate the limits of a written record to preserve history. Seiferth notes furthermore that on the one hand, Foer demonstrates the very fragile nature of the printed medium, when the book is destroyed in the eradication of the shtetl, while on the other hand the format of the book exemplifies the “impossibility of recording everything” (2012, 16). The fact that Foer’s novel “exists in a written form” leads Seiferth to conclude that the inclusion of the Book of Recurrent Dreams and the demonstration of its shortcomings to preserve history in Everything is Illuminated, highlights the novel’s “own shortcomings as a means of preserving history” (2012, 16). As such, Foer does not only draw attention to the novel’s own fictional nature, but also highlights its limits in representing and preserving history.

5.3.2 Multiple Voices and Unreliable Narrators

Another means Foer uses to demonstrate the problems members of the third generation have to face when trying to access the past, are unreliable narrators. As time goes by, firsthand witnesses of the Holocaust become scarce, and as such the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors usually have to rely on other people’s accounts of the past, which are obviously highly mediated by the person who is speaking. However, due to the very nature of a traumatic event, even an actual trauma survivor cannot always provide a reliable account of the past, an issue which I already discussed in chapter two. In Everything is Illuminated, Foer includes multiple voices and events are described from different perspectives. As such, he leaves the reader in the same position as that of members of the third generation: confronted with multiple accounts of the same event, one can only guess which one is the most truthful. The opening scene of Jonathan’s fictional story is notable in this respect. In this scene Jonathan describes how “Trachim B’s double axle wagon did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River” (8). The “did or did not” already points to the very uncertain nature of the event. As the story proceeds, the reason why the whole story has a highly questionable nature, becomes clear. Although only minutes after the event, the various witnesses are not able to provide an analogous account about what happened. With this scene Jonathan sets the tone for the rest of his invented Trachimbrod-story, in which the truth about many of the events remains a mystery, either because they are described from different perspectives, or because they are highly mediated due to the various layers through which they have to be accessed. Even the most important scene, the one in which the destruction of the shtetl is described, is highly mediated. Codde notes that
“[T]he ontological status of this incident is highly questionable, as layer piled on layer of discourse separates the reader from the historical event: the description of the bombing appears as a predictive dream—that is, an invention—recorded by Brod in the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*. This invention is in turn invented by Jonathan in his inset novel within Foer’s own novel.” (2011, 678)

As such, as Codde concludes, “neither the characters nor the readers are given a direct, unmediated impression of the disaster” (2011, 678). This highly mediated description of the shtetl’s eradication obviously demonstrates again the mediated way in which third generation-members have to access the past. However, the scene of the bombing of Trachimbrod is also notable because of two other important aspects. First of all, it highlights the failure of ordinary language to represent trauma and secondly, it functions as one of the most striking examples of an “absent presence”. In the following parts, I will subsequently discuss both of these aspects.

5.3.3 Failure of Language

Although the bombing of Trachimbrod is described in the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, Jonathan does not explicitly describe it in his Trachimbrod fable. The actual description is left out and replaced by a series of dots. Codde notes that those dots “are the only traces of the event transformed into an absence, a void within the novel that suggests the trauma’s inexpressibility in language” (2011, 678). Indeed, it seems that whenever Jonathan arrives at the description of a traumatic event and is confronted with something that is almost indescribable, he only manages to describe the trauma indirectly. Seiferth notes that the rape of Brod is another instance in Jonathan’s novel in which a traumatic event is only represented to the reader indirectly. Moreover, she argued that there is a striking parallel between the ways in which both traumas are told: “[B]oth traumas unfold by only revealing themselves at discrete moments in the narrative, rather than all at once” (Seiferth, 2012, 39). Especially in the case of the description of the rape of Brod, the reader is only able to understand what happened to her on the night of the Trachimbrod festival at a point much later in the story than when it was first alluded to. The first time the reader is confronted with Brod’s trauma is through a passage in the *Book of Antecedents*: 
THE FIRST RAPE OF BROD

The first rape occurred amid the celebrations following the thirteenth Trachimday festival, March 18, 1804. Brod was walking home from the blue-flowered float—on which she has stood in such austere beauty for so many hours on end, waving her mermaid’s tail only when appropriate, throwing deep into the river of her name those heavy sacks only when the Rabbi gave the necessary nod—when she was approached by the mad squire Sofiowka N, whose name our shtetl now uses for maps and Mormon (89).

What is remarkable about this passage is that a lot of time is spent on the description of Brod’s appearance and tasks at the festival, while the actual rape is only hinted at in the last sentence, when Sofiowka, the man who raped Brod, is introduced. The passage is then suddenly broken off, which again might be interpreted as pointing to the difficulty of describing a traumatic event. The actual description of what happened to Brod that night occurs only much later in the novel, “when the passage in the Book of Antecedents is completed” (Seiferth, 2012, 40). Seiferth concludes that

“The fragmented nature in which the entire story of Brod’s rape unfolds points to the difficulty of expression in traumatic narrative. Rather than creating coherence out of experiences that are in many ways incoherent and beyond comprehension—that is, the experiences of trauma—Foer embraces the incoherence of these elements.” (2012, 41)

Indeed, Foer does embrace incoherence, because as a member of the third generation, he has to do so if he wants to get a sense of the past. The only access he has to the past of his grandfather is via incoherent stories of which the pieces rarely form a puzzle. However if he wants to know anything about what happened to his ancestors, even an incoherent story is better than no story at all.

5.3.4 Absent Presences

When Jonathan leaves out the actual description of the bombing of Trachimbrod, he does not only point to the shortcomings of language as a means to translate trauma, but also to the absence of information the third generation is confronted with when trying to encounter the past. Codde states that “The bombing of Trachimbrod is represented as an absent presence in the novel” (2011, 678). This is true because, although we can be relatively certain about what should have been written at the place of the dots, it is not there explicitly. The concept of “absent presences” is explained quite explicitly by Foer
himself. In a remarkable passage in the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, entitled “The dream of the disembodied birds”, Foer acquaints the reader with his idea of an “absent presence”:

You will remember when a bird crashed through the window and fell to the floor. You will remember, those of you who were there, how it jerked its wings before dying, and left a spot of blood on the floor after it was removed. But who among you was the first to notice the negative bird if left in the window? Who first saw the shadow that the bird left behind, the shadow that drew blood from any finger that dared to trace it, the shadow that was better proof of the bird’s existence than the bird ever was? (38)

When applied to the situation of the third generation, the negative bird represents all of the traces third generation-members encounter while they are searching more information about the past. They know something must have been there, exactly because of the traces, the negative bird in the window, the dots. All of these things are remainders and reminders of something that was once there. As Foer describes in this passage, although they cannot provide the whole picture, or the whole story, those traces, those “absent presences” are meaningful exactly because they are proof of what was once there.

With regard to the scene of the bombing of Trachimbrod, there is one other important aspect that should be noticed. As mentioned earlier, at the moment when the reader expects to get a description of the bombing, the words are replaced by dots. While this interruption highlights the shortcomings of language to represent trauma and illustrates the theme of absent presences, it also suggests an ambition on the part of Foer to alter history. Codde argues that “In this remarkable scene, Jonathan tries to stall time in order to give the hopeless residents of the shtetl an opportunity, a second chance, to escape their impending doom” (2011, 678). However, despite the fact that it seems as if the dots annihilate the eradication of the shtetl, the fact that Foer ends the scene with “After the bombing was over, the Nazis moved through the shtetl” and the fact that he inserts an actual description of the bombing itself in the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, proofs that he knows that his attempt to alter history in writing is illusory.

5.3.5 Mythology and Chances for Reinvention

Despite the fact that Foer does realize and makes it clear that it is not possible to change history in writing, the use of myth and allegory in his Thrachimbrod fable seems to emphasize his desire to do so. The first scene of Jonathan’s fable is again notable in this respect, because it is the scene in which a child is born out of the water. Codde notes that this might be read as a reference to the Greek goddess Aphrodite, who was also born out of the water. Moreover, Codde argues, both Aphrodite and Brod are so beautiful that they can make every man fall in love with them. (Codde, course) Menachem Feuer on the other hand interprets this scene as some sort of allegory, which he calls “the allegory of the origin” (2008, 37). He argues that “this allegory no doubt denotes a beginning born of trauma, wherein the
subject of the trauma is floating in fragments” (Feuer, 2008, 38). Indeed, in this scene, death and birth are reunited, as Brod’s father, and presumably also her mother, die in the accident, while she survives. The remainders of the accident, in which Brod is floating can be interpreted as representing the task of the writer: “his role is to take the fragments, in the form of words, representations, and memories of the past, and bring them together into a narrative” (Feuer, 2008, 38). Feuer’s remark is in particular true for those writers who are members of the third generation and are familiar with a fragmented past of which they try to make sense. The act of putting together fragmented pieces to create a new story recurs also elsewhere in Jonathan’s Trachimbrod fable, when Jonathan’s grandfather, Safran, and the gypsy girl with whom he is in love, create a love story out of newspaper fragments about the war. As such, as Codde notes, they do not just put fragments together to form a new text, but they “literally turn a bad history into passionate love notes” (2011, 680). The idea of turning something bad into something good, can also in a way be related to the accident and its consequences for the life of Yankel. Although the accident was a tragic event that caused Brod’s natural father to die, something good did came out of it. Yankel, a man who had known a lot of misfortune in his life, was appointed as Brod’s new father. From that moment on, his life takes a new turn, and Brod becomes his source of happiness. He adores, almost worships the girl and his whole life is centered around her. Seiferth notes that “Jonathan imagines Brod as embodying, for Yankel, a chance at rebirth” (2012, 36). Indeed, Yankel seems to be reborn, not only because Brod’s existence gives him a new purpose in life, but also because he is allowed to invent a past life for himself to talk about to Brod. In that past life, he imagines to have had a happy marriage with the woman whom he invents to have been Brod’s mother. As such, Yankel is able to undo the unhappy years of his past in his imagination. Seiferth further points out that Yankel’s imagined past resembles the fictional family history that Jonathan creates for himself. (2012, 36)

However, despite the fact that the theme of reinvention is an important and recurrent motif in the novel, Foer does realize that his attempt to undo the horrors of the past is a futile one. Throughout the story, Foer draws attention to the fact that all of what the reader gets to read is invented. He even lets his narrators, Alex and Jonathan, comment upon the fact that they are inventing a story for themselves. This is most notable in the letters that Alex writes to Jonathan, in which we get an almost ethical reflection upon a writer’s legitimacy to alter history. These ethical ruminations are closely bound up with an issue that lies at the core of the novel, namely the question if a reconciliation between victim and perpetrator is possible. In the last part of my analysis of Foer’s novel, I will analyze how Foer attempts to represent this delicate subject.

5.4 *Everything is Illuminated*’s Ethical Standpoint

Although Jonathan proves himself to be a master of reinvention, he refuses to alter his story when it comes to the past of Alex’s grandfather. At the start of the novel, Alex enjoys reading the chapters Jonathan invents about Trachimbrod and the past of his grandfather. Gradually though, Alex becomes
more critical about the past that Jonathan invents for Safran, and in one of his letters he even becomes angry at Jonathan for making the past of his grandfather so negative:

*I could hate you! Why will you not permit your grandfather to be in love with the Gypsy girl, and show her his love? Who is ordering you to write in such a manner? We have such chances to do good, and yet again and again you insist on evil.* (240)

Moreover, since Jonathan is already “being nomadic with the truth”, Alex wanders “why do we not make the story more premium than life?” (179) It becomes clear in Alex’s letters that he is confused about the way in which Jonathan combines fact and fiction. His remark to alter everything and make the story “more premium than life”, is not illogical though, because if Jonathan already invents so many fantastical things, why not make the story extraordinary? Seiferth provides a possible explanation and notes that Foer’s principal aim was not to write a fictional story, but to “draw attention to the multiplicity of vantage points from which one may arrive at a form of truth” (2012, 48). The fictional story then, is only a means Foer uses to show the possibility of multiple truth’s about the past. However, despite the fact that Foer adopts a flexible attitude towards the past and embraces the possibility of various truths, he does not endow his narrator Jonathan with a similar flexible attitude when it comes to matters of reconciliation between victims and perpetrators. Jonathan seems to be caught up in a mindset of black-and-white categories, either you belong to the white category, that of the victims, or to the black one, that of the perpetrators. Jonathan’s narrow-mindedness influences the way in which he perceives the betrayal of Alex’s grandfather. As Propst notes “Alex’s grandfather falls within […] the ‘Gray Zone’, where the distinction between victim and collaborator blurs” (2011, 43). Indeed, Alex’s grandfather does not correspond to the definition of “perpetrator”, because he was forced into this role, which I believe makes him more of a victim than a perpetrator. Nonetheless, Jonathan refuses to alter his story and remain silent about what Alex’s grandfather has done, even when Alex explicitly asks him to forgive not only his grandfather, but also to forgive him. Jonathan however remains indifferent to Alex’s request. Feuer argues that “The reason for […] the fact that the gap between Alex and Jonathan is left open has much to do with history and memory and not just the act of writing” (2008, 27). Feuer points to an important fact, namely the historical conflict between Jews and Ukrainians. Propst summarizes this historical conflict as follows:

“Jewish anger over Ukrainian collaboration and Ukrainian views of collaboration as a necessary survival tactic have resulted in a historiographic conflict: many Jews blame Ukrainians *en masse* for anti-Semitic violence, and many Ukrainian histories minimize the participation of Ukrainians in the suffering of the Jews.” (2011, 39)
As such, Jonathan’s unwillingness to forgive Alex’s grandfather might be explained by his historical hostility between Jews and Ukrainians. Or as Feuer puts it: “[Jonathan] thus retains the original plot of difference between victim and perpetrator” (2008, 46). However, when it is revealed that Alex’s grandfather is actually a Jew himself, Jonathan’s argument not to forgive Alex’s grandfather because of the historical foe between Jews and Ukrainians becomes groundless. As mentioned earlier, however, Jonathan does not seem to acknowledge the Jewish identity of Alex’s grandfather, because that would complicate his idea of his own Jewish identity. Feuer significantly notes that “we need to ask what Jonathan’s Jewish heritage, that is, his Jewish identity; is based on” (2008, 46). On the one hand, Jonathan’s refusal to forgive Alex’s grandfather “puts him in the camp of those who link Jewish identity to the memory of the Holocaust” (Feuer, 2008, 47). On the other hand however, Jonathan does not seem to be proud of his Jewishness, given the fact that he invents such a bleak story about his Jewish past. (Feuer, 2008, 47) Yet, regardless of Jonathan’s ambiguous attitude towards his own Jewish identity, Feuer observes that:

“[H]e sees history and his position vis-à-vis history as a fact of difference; otherwise, he wouldn’t insist, to the very end of his novel, on his difference from Alex and his grandfather […] This proves that his identity, like the end of his novel, is caught up in these questions of history and forgiveness.” (2008, 47)

As Feuer notes, Foer’s novel foregrounds the complicated relation between history and forgiveness. In the end, the whole story seems to come down to one question: can later generations be blamed for what their ancestors have done in the past? Jonathan clearly believes that what happened in the past cannot be overcome and forgiven, and as such a reconciliation between him and Alex is impossible for him. Alex however, does realize the consequences Jonathan’s story will have for his grandfather. He is, in contrast to Jonathan, not concerned about himself, but about his grandfather. As such, Codde notes, that Alex is the moral center of the novel, and not Jonathan. (Codde, course) When Alex realizes the impact the past may have on the future, he pleads Jonathan to alter his story. Codde argues that Foer suggests that

“we should be careful in our representations of the past in historiography, memoirs, and the fictional forms of narrative, because of its impact on the future. The task of the novelist, in other words, does reside in the future, but via the past.” (2011, 680)

Indeed, it is a balancing task to represent the past in such a way that on the one hand, it does transmit a feeling of how it must have been, while on the other hand not getting caught up in feelings of resentment about what happened in the past. Conveying the belief that letting go feelings of vengeance and anger about something that happened ages ago, and accepting that what happened in the past cannot be
changed, is the best way to remember the past, I believe that *Everything is Illuminated* should be read in the first place as a reflection about how to remember the past.
6. Conclusion

Besides the fact that Beloved and Everything is Illuminated are both postmodern American novels in which later generations attempt to represent a legacy of trauma, I believe that the most notable similarity between them, is the ethical contemplation that lies at the core of both novels. In Beloved Morrison makes the reader sympathize with Sethe, despite of what she has done. Through the confrontation with Beloved and the evoked memories of Sethe’s former slave life, one comes to a better understanding of the situation that compelled Sethe to murder her daughter. She was pushed into the Gray Zone by a trauma that she herself had already been fallen victim to: slavery. As such, Beloved emits a message of forgiveness and pleads for an approach to the past that takes into consideration the larger picture of events. Foer’s novel centers around a similar moral consideration. In Everything is Illuminated, it is Alex’s grandfather who is pushed into the Gray Zone. Yet, as became clear throughout my analysis, Foer made Alex the moral center of the novel, because he knew that Jonathan’s unwillingness to forgive Alex’s grandfather’s past would have a devastating impact on the future. In this respect, both Foer and Morrison suggest that remembering the past does not equal letting the past interfere in the future, and they both propose an empathic attitude towards those victims who were also forced into the role of perpetrator by circumstances that go beyond human understanding.

However, although Beloved and Everything is Illuminated share a similar ethical position, I believe that my analysis of both novels also brought to the light a remarkable difference between them. I deem that there is a notable difference in emphasis between the novels. Whereas in Beloved the emphasis lies more on the trauma of slavery itself and the process each character has to go through to deal with the legacy of slavery, I believe that Everything is Illuminated focusses more on the ways in which later generations can access and represent the trauma of the Holocaust. I argue that this difference in emphasis might on the one hand be explained by the different intentions both authors had in writing their novels, and on the other hand by the difference in America’s attitude towards the traumatic histories that form the backbone for the novels. In Beloved, Morrison uses the individual trauma of one slave-woman to represent, remember and make tangible the collective trauma of slavery. The principal aim Morrison had in writing her novel, was to give the African American slavery past a place to be remembered and acknowledged. As such, the trauma of slavery itself and the impact it had on its victims, lies at the core of the novel. Foer on the other hand focusses more on the individual struggle to access the past of his grandfather imaginatively. Although the trauma of the Holocaust forms the backbone of Everything is Illuminated, the emphasis lies more on the attempt to remember and represent the trauma in literature, than on the trauma itself. I believe that this difference in emphasis might be explained by the different attitude of America towards both of the traumas. As mentioned earlier, America is more reluctant to publically remember slavery, whereas the Holocaust is remembered in various places throughout America and on various occasions. Since the Holocaust is widely acknowledged as one of history’s most atrocious events, there seems to be less need for the Jewish-American population to seek
recognition or acknowledgement for the trauma of their ancestors. Consequently the focus of the later
generations of Holocaust survivors lies more on the ways in which they can remember the trauma, rather
than on the ways in which they can find recognition for the pain and suffering of their ancestors.
Especially now that the survivors of the Holocaust become scarce the third generation displays an ever
more obsessive tendency to hold onto the past that seems to be slipping away together with “the truth”
about what happened. This obsessive tendency to fill in the holes of the past is present in every aspect
of Foer’s novel. All of the devices employed by Foer—the layered structure, the unreliable narrators,
the absent presences, the use of myth, and the theme of reinvention—serve to make the reader experience
the struggle of the third generation to access the past.

In the case of slavery on the other hand, it seems that because the trauma and its impact on the
African American population has received much less attention in America and has not been
acknowledged so widely and publically as the Holocaust, there is less emphasis on the ways in which
the trauma should be remembered and more on the recognition of the trauma itself. The African
American population is still struggling to get the appropriate recognition for the atrocities their ancestors
had to live through, while the members of the Jewish-American community already have that
recognition and have been able to move onto the next phase in which they can mourn and remember
what happened to their ancestors. I believe that it is because of this reason that Morrison’s Beloved
focuses more on the trauma of slavery itself and its enduring effect on later generations, while Foer’s
Everything is Illuminated concentrates in the first place on the ways in which later generations attempt
to access and remember the past. The figure of Beloved makes the trauma of slavery very present in
Morrison’s novel, and alters the lives of every character. Her presence forces the characters to face the
memory of slavery, because before her arrival, Sethe, Denver and Paul D were not actively trying to
conjure up memories of the past. On the contrary even, Sethe and Paul D spent their life repressing any
memory of their former slave life. Morrison makes the trauma of slavery come alive through Beloved
and as such creates a similar situation to the one every African American is confronted with on a daily
basis. For them, the memory of slavery is present and alive, not only because the color of their skin is a
permanent reminder of it, but also, I believe, because of the way in which America’s avoidance-based
attitude towards it. I believe that the plausibility of my hypothesis intensifies when comparing the
concepts of postmemory and rememory, which apply respectively to Foer’s Everything is Illuminated
and Morrison’s Beloved. While the concept of rememory, as coined by Morrison, is used to refer to the
enduring presence of the memory of slavery, the concept of postmemory, which applies to Foer’s novel,
highlights in the first place the absence of memory. Considered in this way then, these concepts are each
other’s opposite, one foregrounding the presence of memory and the other emphasizing the absence of
it. I argue that this contrast might also be explained by the way in which American culture has dealt with
the trauma of slavery on the one hand and that of the Holocaust on the other hand. As such, I believe
that Morrison uses the concept of rememory to demonstrate how the trauma of slavery is still present in
the everyday lives of African American people, exactly because it has not yet received the proper
recognition that is needed. The concept of postmemory on the other hand foregrounds the absence of the past and the obsessive tendency of later generations of Holocaust survivors to fill in that absence. Although I do not question Hirsch when she explains that this obsession of the third generation to fill in the holes of the past, stems from a frustration of not being able to access something of which the traces still haunt the present, I do believe that this obsession might also in part be grounded in a fear that, once the trauma is recognized, people will forget about it more easily.

There is no question that this hypothesis requires much more investigation, including an extending sample of novels that deal with the reception of both traumas by later generations, to hold credit. But I do believe that the link between the difference in emphasis of both novels and the way in which the traumas of slavery and the Holocaust have been attended to by America, is a very realistic one, and might lead to further interesting research.
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