

**Daughterly Haunting and Historical Traumas:
Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jamaica Kincaid's
*The Autobiography of My Mother***

Shu-li Chang
National Sun Yat-sen University

Abstract

In this paper, I begin by reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a ghost story that thematizes transgenerational haunting. Morrison writes this acclaimed novel, I argue, neither simply to reclaim a lost identity, nor to construct an empathetic community, but to "disorient" the readers so that we can think otherwise about and act differently towards a traumatic past. To advance my argument, I turn to Jacques Derrida's notion of the "specter" to foreground my discussion of the tales of daughterly haunting. Derrida's proposal that "spectrality" is "a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations" nicely encapsulates Morrison's vision that to purge ourselves of traumatic experiences we have to conjure up the dead rather than chase them away. In the second half of my paper, I consider two women writers' radically different uses of the spectral aesthetic to argue that while transgenerational haunting makes possible the memory and transmission of historically traumatizing events and secrets, not all instances of haunting are equally effective in acting out and working through historically inherited debts and guilt. As the ghost returns to haunt the living, some people hear their wailing and begin to describe their ghostly return. Some writers use the return of the ghost as a literary strategy to activate the constitution and consolidation of identities, cultural, political, or gender. Writers such as Jamaica Kincaid deploy haunting as a gesture for social and political critique, speaking in the voices of the dead to call for justice and recognition. Other writers, such as Toni Morrison, however, do not seem to believe traumas can be exorcised once and for all, and offer a cautionary strategy to describe our ambivalent relations to historical traumas.

Keywords

daughterly haunting, diaspora, trauma, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid

As many readers will agree, literature may indeed be a site of the symptomatic acting out, as well as the critical working through, of traumas, even though we should not expect narratives to heal them all. Though traumas are not all alike, yet in contemporary women's narratives, private traumas are almost always deployed as an allegory for collective traumas. In this emergent narrative pattern, the ambivalent symbiosis between mothers and daughters has been repeatedly explored, investigated, and delineated by women writers both to cope with private wounds and also to allegorize collective traumas. However, women writers' repeated deployment of the mother-daughter script to signify and negotiate with the collective legacies left by traumatic events should not lead the reader to misconstrue that narratives of collective traumas could or should replicate the reconciliation structure of the mother-daughter plot, even though paradigmatic texts such as Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* (1989), Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1993) all emphasize that the formation of communal bonds is only possible through a new appreciation of the mother-daughter affinity. While the conflation of private traumas and collective traumas in these texts can be an effective literary strategy to suggest the possibility that collective traumas can be healed and salvations are imminent, there are also problems.

Dominick LaCapra, for example, has pointed out in a recent article, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," that "structural traumas"—private wounds—are very different from "historical traumas"—collective losses.¹ He asks readers to maintain a clear distinction between these two for they demand rather different ways of dealing with and working through the problems that haunt both the victims and victimizers. However, LaCapra also concedes that in trauma narratives, the differences between historical losses (those that are avoidable) and structural absences (those that are inevitable) are often elided to activate in the readers an intensified effect of shock and empathy. LaCapra posits that this elision facilitates a lineal temporality in conventional narratives of beginning, middle and end, resulting in a predictable narrative movement from the initial tragedy of paradise lost to the comedy of paradise regained. Yet, there

¹ According to LaCapra, structural traumas are those transhistorical and "originary" experiences of absences that constitute one's subjectivity—the separation from the (m)other, entry into language, and the passage from nature to culture—whereas historical traumas are historically, culturally, and politically contingent. While everyone is subject to structural absence, not everyone is a victim to a particular historical event such as the Holocaust, and, more importantly, not everyone traumatized by the Holocaust is a victim. Structural traumas cannot be transcended, but historical traumas can be acted out and worked through. For detailed discussion, please see LaCapra.

are many narratives that do not follow this narrative convention, narratives that “suggest other modes of narration that raise in probing and problematic ways the question of the nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into existence,” LaCapra claims (704-05). In this paper, I focus on two trauma narratives, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), to think through the relations between private and collective traumas and especially the new modes of identity they either endorse or problematize. I choose these two texts because both Morrison and Kincaid use an indeterminate ghostly figure, who is both mother and daughter, to unsettle the reconciliatory structure of the mother-daughter plot on the one hand, and to demonstrate how the private and the collective continuously comment on and collapse into each other, on the other hand.

In the interview conducted by Moira Ferguson, Kincaid says that she has initially set out to write about a private hurt, about what happened to “my mother and me”; it is only later did she realize that she was also writing about collective traumas, about what happens to the “the powerful and the powerless.”² In her *The Autobiography of My Mother*, she collapses private and structural traumas with collective and historical traumas to more effectively act out her anger and rage. While this fictitious auto/biography is mainly used as an index to the collective traumas suffered by the powerless and the defeated, the collective trauma—the sorry story of their defeat and loss—is the inevitable background against which the private injuries she has experienced come to light. Similarly, Morrison dedicates her acclaimed novel, *Beloved*, to the “Sixty Million and more” African slaves who were forcefully transported across the Atlantic Ocean and lost their lives during the Middle Passage. Rather interestingly, though it seems that Morrison sets out to “remember” collective traumas, yet she concludes her novel with the ambivalent statement: “This is not a story to pass on,” as if she intends to render dubious whatever sense of historical recuperation and racial re-identification we can derive from the exorcism of *Beloved*’s ghost. *Beloved*’s ghost, it goes without saying, is a compelling figure which awakens in the reader an under-

² Kincaid says in the interview:

In my first two books, I used to think I was writing about my mother and me. Later I began to see that I was writing about the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. That’s become an obsessive theme, and I think it will be a theme for as long as I write. And then it came clear to me when I was writing the essay that became “On Seeing England for the First Time” that I was writing about the mother—that the mother I was writing about was really Mother Country. It’s like an egg; it’s a perfect whole. It’s all used some way or other. (176-77)

standing of historical wounds and one's ethical relation with them. Kincaid's Xuela, the daughter haunted by her ghostly mother, is also a compelling figure, but she fascinates the reader for a different reason. Xuela's unrelenting anger shocks the reader into an understanding of how traumas can generate other traumas and how history can repeat itself in a different guise. Both *Beloved's* ghost and Xuela's ghostly mother are floating signifiers with ambivalent but powerful significations. However similar they may seem to be, in terms of Morrison's and Kincaid's problematic uses of the mother-daughter plot, the two writers articulate rather different responses to traumas, private and collective. More importantly, they entail and call for rather different identity politics. Whereas Kincaid writes the novel to speak for those deprived of a voice, that is, to give them a recognizable identity, Morrison writes *Beloved* to question the recent race towards "identity politics," not only warning us about the difficulty of mother-daughter dialogue, but also, by extension, reminding us of the necessity of forging and embracing new forms of affinity and recognition across generational and cultural divides.

Tales of Daughterly Haunting: Troubling History and Spectral Identity

In a perceptive study of *Beloved*, Walter Benn Michaels takes issues with those critics who claim that Morrison frames her novel as a ghost story to give a forgotten past a "body" that is racially therapeutic even though it does so by retelling a terrifying story about "disembodiment." He argues that it is perhaps possible to take the ghost of *Beloved* "as a figure for the way in which race can make the past present" (5). An even more productive way to regard the ghost, a more productive way from Michaels's point of view, is to take the figure "for a certain anxiety about the idea of race that is being called upon to perform this function" (5). If we take the latter approach, Michaels posits, the ghost in *Beloved* cannot be taken only as a metaphor to embody the past. As a metaphor, it also gives "body" to an "anxiety" about history and how race matters in the writing of history. Taking a cue from Michaels's reminder about the dual meanings the figure of the ghost bears, I take the mother who repeatedly returns to Xuela's dream in Kincaid's novel both as a figure for history and as a figure for a collective anxiety that this traumatic history should be erased and forgotten so easily.

Though the mother who died at the moment Xuela was born does not appear regularly in the novel, Xuela wonders about “this woman whose face I have never seen, not even in a dream,” about “what did she think” and, more importantly, about “*How to explain this abandonment*” (201, 201, 199; italics mine). For Xuela,

That attachment, physical and spiritual, that confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh, which was absent between my mother and her mother was also absent between my mother and myself [...] and though I can sensibly say to myself such a thing cannot be helped—who can help dying—again how can any child understand such a thing, *so profound an abandonment?* (199; italics mine)

Before Xuela could conjure up her mother’s ghostly figure and see her face, she felt so confounded and annoyed that she “refused to bear any children” as if, by so doing, she would not have to subject her children to this recurrent fate of abandonment. Precisely because the mother remains intriguingly “disembodied” in Xuela’s dream and memories, the daughter-narrator nevertheless feels an especially strong compulsion to write her mother into history so that at the end she can say, without a trace of irony, that “[t]his account of my life has been an account of my mother’s life as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is their account of me” (227). Beloved’s ghost, in contrast, does not merely embody history, but articulates “historicity,” or the process of history. To use Frederic Jameson’s term, Beloved’s ghost signifies “historicity” not merely because it helps us “remember” the past, but also because it helps us “re-describe something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience” (6). Xuela remains uncertain about love even until the end—whether her mother has ever loved her; refusing to be hurt by love, she decides to love none other than herself. Sethe, on the other hand, eventually understands that, though the thickness of her maternal love may be quite murderous, she has to learn to relate to the presence of Paul D and even put her story next to his (272-73). She knows, from the traumas of history, not to possess and master the other, but to learn to live with the constitutive anxieties of historical traumas.

The question, then, is why we need to re-describe the past and why the past can only become part of our own experience at this particular historical juncture through the figure of the “ghost,” especially if our gaze should be directed towards the future.

In this sense, I agree with Cathy Caruth that it is due to our ethical and political obligation to all the suffering others that we should listen to the voices of the ghosts of the past. Indeed, we listen to them and speak with and for them for a number of compelling cultural and ethical reasons. Yet, it would be a blatant misunderstanding, and an unfortunate reduction, of the otherness of the ghost's elusive and even unintelligible presence if we only take it as an urgent call for identity politics. Kathleen Brogan, for example, finds in the stories of "ghostly haunting," of which Morrison's *Beloved* is a paradigmatic example, the psychic need of ethnic Americans to redefine, through the voices of the dead, their sense of ethnicity in the face of collective losses such as dispossessions and dislocations. For Michaels as well, the intervention of the spectral figures in contemporary women's writing, such as Morrison's *Beloved*, which compels us to transform forgotten history into memory, is a culturally charged endeavor to "imagine a history that will give people an identity" (6).

However, both critics fail to pose critical questions that are vital to our understanding of the transgenerational transmission of traumatic memories, of which the ghost is but a symptom. To name some of them: What kind of identity does the recent turn towards the ghostly and the specter help people constitute? Does it imply that, before one's encounter with the specter of the dead, one is without an identity? While Michaels makes a powerful argument in reading the ghost in *Beloved* as precisely such a spectral figure which functions to help us define our "cultural identity," he also sounds quite equivocal about what that "cultural identity" is. Is it racial identity that the ghost in *Beloved* imaginatively performs, or is it national, or gender identity that it helps to delineate? Most importantly, while narratives can be said to facilitate the constitution and negotiation of identities, why are spectral narratives especially effective in the formation of cultural identities in today's world? Does "the current obsession with the troubled interface between history and memory" indicate, as Martin Jay points out, "how concerned we are with the way the past makes cultural demands on us that we have difficulty fulfilling" (163-64). Or is this obsession a uniquely American cultural phenomenon, signifying the "American search for a heritage to bolster common values in a diverse multiculturalism," as well as "to serve the different needs of various groups wishing to adapt national and personal origins to political and global paradigms" (Sicher 59)? When writers in the postcolonial world write about the collective haunting power of a disappearing past, do they try to reclaim a lost identity or do they practice the spectral writing to move into an unknown future that both promises and disorients the formation of hybridized, if not diasporic, cultural identities?

Here Jacqueline Rose's reading of Bessie Head's semi-autobiographical fiction, *A Question of Power* (1974), is especially illuminating. Rose, reading Head's novel as a ghost story, suggests that the novel be "put alongside Morrison's *Beloved* as a novel of transgenerational haunting" (108). Rose goes on to explicate that

[t]he personal dream—the mother's incarceration, insanity as stigma—passes into the daughter, where it re-emerges as the history of a race. [...] Neither hidden from history, nor invisible to history, the woman in Bessie Head's novel is instead the place where the hidden and invisible of history accumulates; she is the depot for the return of the historical repressed (108).

Having argued that the personal and familial guilt not only passes through the mother to the daughter, but also "re-emerges as the history of the race," Rose does not then turn around to call for a politics of identity, be it racial, cultural, or gender. Instead, she takes a cautionary attitude towards the recent turn from identity politics towards identification politics in academia for, she argues, "if you respond to this difficulty [of asserting a coherent identity] by calling for a politics of identification, then the question of what permits and forbids identifications, of what makes recognition (love of neighbor, for example) possible and impossible has to come next" (94). For Rose, Bessie Head's novel of transgenerational haunting is not the answer to the problem of ethnic or racial conflicts, nor is it a passionate and maddening plea for a politics of identification. Head writes *A Question of Power* not to assert or invent a coherent cultural identity, nor does she write it to produce an "empathetic community" that can fully understand her psychic tribulations as well as the historical deprivations of her people. While the politics of identification could indeed call for an empathetic recognition and affinity across races and ethnicities, Rose nevertheless insists, in light of the continuous conflicts in every parts of the world, "perhaps we should give up the myth of perfect understanding, and turn the interpreting strategy back onto ourselves. [...] You can only start seeing—this was Freud's most basic insight—when you know that your vision is troubled, fallible, off-key. *The only viable way of reading is not to find, but to disorient, oneself*" (143-44; italics mine). That is, the only viable way of reading trauma is not simply to identify with those victims; instead, the only viable way of reading and understanding trauma begins with haunting; that is, when one finds oneself being haunted by, in Caruth's words, "what can be heard and understood in the

voice that speaks through it” (*Unclaimed Experience* 45), so that we are constantly ready to recognize our own complicity with conventional orders of representations and find appropriate language to bear witness to historical wounds not yet recognized or articulated.

The questions about the ethical need of “listening to the voice of the other” inevitably bring us back to Morrison’s *Beloved*. While the reworking of history and identity is definitely involved in *Beloved*, *Beloved*’s presence does demand that the reader think beyond identity politics and historiography. The narrative dynamics *Beloved* activates puts her in the same category of Hamlet’s deceased father, whose specter continues to haunt Hamlet and demand a debt be paid off. In *Specters of Marx*, a provocative book in which Derrida attempts to rethink Marx’s continuing influence in a world in which communism has allegedly come to “an end,” Derrida takes the reader through a convoluted terrain to distinguish the ghost from the specter before he renders the distinction collapsible. For Derrida, the specter is “a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other” (6). The persistent haunting of the specter works to keep alive our ethical obligations to the dead, while reminding us of our responsibilities of “trying to live with specters and think with them” (15). As the specter deconstructs the distinction between “the soul and the body,” disturbs the narrative logics of both the mimetic and the gothic, self and other, it makes possible, Derrida argues, a radical critique more in keeping with the legacies of Marx than the class critique of classical Marxism. In other words, in putting forth an innovative notion of spectrality to bring to the fore our political and ethical responsibilities both to the dead of the past as well as to the yet-to-be-born in the future, Derrida makes a bold move in claiming deconstruction a suitable motor in setting into action the specter of Marxism. Derrida makes this move so that Marxist can continue to “haunt” Europe, as Marx has announced in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, beyond its proclaimed demise by optimists inside the academia. Spectrality, for Derrida, is “a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (xix), for it is a politics that is relevant to the past, present as well as future generations.

In speaking of ghosts, one is speaking of certain “*others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us,” but one is speaking of them “in the name of *justice*” (Derrida xix). For this reason, Derrida claims that we need not hasten to chase away Marx’s specter to pronounce Marxism dead, or to exorcise the specters

of communism; instead, we should actively conjure them up so that we can better recognize our entanglements in each other's histories; that is, to use Derrida's own words, so that we can then finally "learn to live" into the future (xvii). Derrida's radical insight nicely encapsulates both Morrison's ideas that to exorcise and forget the dead is to be continuously haunted by them, and Kincaid's notion that one's life stories become inevitably entangled with the stories of the ghostly (m)others "in the name of *justice*." The dead can be put to rest not by our forgetting them but by our learning to listen to and speak with them. Only by so doing may we eventually acquire the belated knowledge, to borrow a phrase from Caruth, that "we are implicated in each other's traumas" (*Unclaimed Experience* 24).

In his explication of and critical response to Derrida, Jameson finds a virtue in the notion of the "specter," for it seems to him that "spectrality is here the form of the most radical politicization and that, far from being locked into the repetitions of neurosis and obsession, it is energetically future-oriented and active" (104). From there, Jameson goes on to associate Derrida's "spectrality" with Benjamin's notion of the "messianic" to reach a rather tautological conclusion: "The messianic is spectral, it is the spectrality of the future, the other dimension, that answers to the haunting spectrality of the past which is historicity itself" (108). Jameson agrees with Derrida that the current efforts by critics to declare Marx finally dead misses the mark for they fail to realize that "the expulsion of the specters only leads to the construction of an even more imaginary entity" (97), which is the ineluctability of the ontology of human "self." Here, Jameson clearly echoes Rose's argument that a return to the "ontology" of the self, or "identity," does not help us settle old debts. Yet, even though Jameson clearly recognizes the thrust of Derrida's argument in proffering a radical critique of the amnesia of the late capitalism of today, he does not explicitly elaborate how spectrality can be politically effective, nor does he explain how literary representation of the spectral can be translated into a politically effective critique. Especially important to my study here, Jameson does not elaborate on the gender dimension of the spectral moment, nor does he explain how literature can be a provocative site in which this politics of memory is linguistically performed. While the ghost of Marx cannot be easily dismissed without our paying a huge debt for it, there are other ghosts lingering at the horizon, refusing to go away as well. Marxism may be a radical critique that haunts the Europe, but is it still an effective tool of criticism in other parts of the world? If ghosts are figures of wounds demanding an audience, what are the lessons they are trying to convey? For a radical theory of trauma, or a radical theory of its belated

consequence, which is *haunting*, we have to turn to Caruth.

The Ethics of the Spectral or the Spectrality of Ethics

The specter is indeed an apt image to register the aporetic relation between history and reference, writing and experience. It enables the nostalgic (or mournful) subject to recognize his/her inexplicable ties to what cannot be experienced or subjectivized fully. The subject in or of traumatic haunting is thus in a painful process of negotiating his/her implication in and with others. The ghost in *Beloved*, in and by itself, does not speak to Americans today to help them negotiate their multi-hyphenated identities. The cultural appeal of *Beloved*'s ghosts in today's America attests to the lingering legacies of slavery which is still haunting its cultural landscape, while the trauma of colonization and immigration is further thickening its pain and wounds. For many cultural critics, the process of becoming a citizen in modern multiethnic societies, such as in the US, involves the assertion of humanist values such as interethnic recognition, respect, and tolerance. However, for critics such as Caruth and Petar Ramadanovic, it involves a radical rethinking of inter-subjectivity and a critical re-examination of ethics. To become a responsible citizen in this global age, says Ramadanovic, involves both departure and arrival, for it entails an ongoing process of arriving at a cultural landscape that is constantly changing, and as such, it entails also a history of continuously dealing with traumas. One of the interesting points that Ramadanovic proffers in "When 'to Die in Freedom' Is Written in English" is the notion that the modern nation-state, in demanding from its citizen a loyalty that sometimes contradicts his/her other identities, racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender, is potentially trauma-inducing. So understood, trauma becomes a belated effect of the nation-building project, and it also provides the incentives for citizens to demand and to construct a coherent sense of self-identity, one that is usually defined in legal terms. In America before the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, for example, being an American citizen was not the same thing as being an African American, since the latter was usually regarded as a lesser American. For an African American, to become an American citizen entails the deliberate act of forgoing his/her racial identity. In this regard, racism becomes the mute underside of the American national fantasy. To rearticulate racism, African Americans first have to dismantle the hegemony of the nationalist fantasy before they can proceed to redefine

and represent their “Americanness.”

Even though the excessive implementation of identity politics may cause trauma, yet, rather paradoxically, “[i]n a catastrophic age [...] trauma itself may provide the very links between cultures” (Caruth, “Trauma and Experience” 11) and, as such, also leads to the imaginative invention of a “shared history” which “would come after the fact of trauma, and would be a not-yet-known-history” (Ramadanovic, “When ‘to Die in Freedom’” 57). Why is this so? At the juncture where two histories or traditions meet is something that is neither here nor there, neither departure nor arrival, neither death nor life, for it is to be something that is the site of the “unclaimed experience.” This “something” needs to be understood, recognized and articulated, even though we know that interpretations and understandings are potentially also misinterpretations and misunderstandings. If trauma, as Ramadanovic suggests, involves both death and awakening and if trauma awakens us to death, it is because trauma, in its inverted repetition of the past, helps us gain the understanding that “[w]e need to invent a new epistemology to understand the past in the wake of trauma, to find a notion or a concept of history appropriate to the events that shape our epoch” (“When ‘to Die in Freedom’” 59).

As historical beings, we cannot afford to forget the past, and most of the time we do study history to find out what happened in the past. Yet taking the past as an object of study is not the same as listening to the dead people talk to us. When Stephen Greenblatt says in *Shakespearean Negotiations* that he is interested in the past not because he wants to take the past as an object of study but because he desires to “speak with the dead” and to “re-create a conversation with them,” he confesses that only gradually did he come to understand, as he strained to listen to the voice of the dead, that “I could hear only my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead” (1). This effort to listen to the voice of the dead and to speak with the dead acquires an additional urgency at this historical juncture when, in the wake of trauma, and “awakened by trauma,” the question of how to repeat the past with a difference so that every repetition ushers in a newness is of paramount importance. Since the present moment is the spectral moment when the cultural space is populated with the return or the visitation of so many ghosts that refuse to go away, the voice that we actually hear, as Greenblatt has discovered, is actually our own “divided” voice. Or to put it in a different way, the moment we are awakened, in the wake of trauma, to the voice of the dead, the “we” of the future then comes into being. It is a “we” that is “another, diasporic, entangled” (Ramadanovic, “When ‘to Die in Freedom’” 58) and it is a subject

with a different mode of subjectivity, working with a new mode of representation.

One potentially effective way of re-thinking the past is by focusing on and re-enacting a traumatic event that happened before our time, without however activating the kind of narrative fetishization that Eric L. Santner criticizes. The use of narrative as fetish occurs, according to Santner, when one becomes so obsessed with the past that one allows the past, with a fixed face, to possess him or her, the mournful subject (214). If the ghost represents a past that returns in a condition of intactness and without any trace of historical wound, it may well be a narrative fetish that allows one to bypass history, rather than tackling it. Yet another strategy to avoid the pitfall of narrative fetishism is, in both Morrison's and Kincaid's cases, to render the return of the past uncertain and ambiguous. For Morrison, the figure of the ghost as specter allows for a literary strategy that gives the past a "body" so that we can begin to rethink what our relation is with a past that neither is ours nor owns us, but is concretely and palpable "there" to be seen and touched. For Kincaid, that the figure of the ghost is "disembodied," without even a face, awakens us to ask disturbing questions about the transgenerational transmission of traumatic memories. The ghost, accordingly, embodies the call of "an other who is asking to be seen and heard," by which "the other commands us to awaken" (9) and to "rethink the possibility of history, as well as our ethical and political relation to it" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 12). What then is the possibility that the speculation on such a traumatic event as slavery or holocaust opens up other than the poignant understanding that "history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 24)?

To Inscribe the Voice of the Dead

As I have earlier mentioned, while critics all agree that literature is an effective site for the transference of traumatic memories across the generations, they diverge on how memories are transmitted across generations and how they can be represented, without reducing traumatic memories to narrative fetishes. While Derrida rightly points out that "[t]o be [...] means [...] to inherit," he also hastens to add that inheritance "is never a *given*, it is always a task" for it "must be reaffirmed by transforming it as radically as will be necessary" (54). Since to be is to inherit and to inherit is itself a task, one can never take one's inheritance for granted, and, instead, has to work hard to

reaffirm it by transforming it on an ongoing basis. Given that I agree with Derrida that our inheritance defines our identities, I am still uncomfortable with his reticence about what strategies we can adopt to reaffirm our inheritance so that we may, rather paradoxically, transform it. Marx's legacy, the specter that is haunting the modern world since the publication of *The Manifesto of Communism*, leads us to imagine a utopian future, one that is fundamentally different from the socio-economic landscape of today's world. In this sense, Derrida is not specifically speaking of the cultural legacies of any specific ethnic group; instead, the "inheritance" that he speaks about needs to be understood as a political and ethical driving force that is impatiently working to bring out a future so that we can answer the unfulfilled desires of the dead. While there are many ways of practicing what Derrida terms as the ethics of "spectrality," many writers choose to render literal this logic by adopting a "spectral" aesthetics in which the problematic presence, or re-turn, of a spectral figure gives the transgenerational desire or inheritance a body, while forcing memories, repressed and unknown, back to those who are "heirs" to those who suffer a traumatic experience of departure.

In a fine study of this thematic of haunting, Caroline Rody identifies a sense of urgency in the younger generation of African-American and Caribbean women writers for the invention of "an aesthetics of magic" to "claim a most intimate, authoritative relationship to a maternal past," thereby "claiming themselves history's legitimate heir" (6). The adoption of what Rody terms the "aesthetics of magic" is not a historical accident, but is dictated by "a newly awakened historiographical desire" to find a usable past in the midst of historical ruins. Different approaches are adopted by different writers from different cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Some turn to construct an idealized mother-daughter romance in a plot of daughterly homecoming. Some take a more cautious attitude towards the mother-daughter bliss. African-American women writers such as Paule Marshall and Alice Walker exalt an essentialist conflation between motherhood, motherland, and memory, while writers from the Caribbean islands such as Michele Cliff and Mary Conde show in their writing a "greater suspicion of the romance of return" (Rody 126), as the experience of dispossession in the Caribbean being more a historical reality than their American sisters', and the trope of the "maternal" bearing a more politically charged implication, symbolizing both the Caribbean islands, the colonizing country, and the African continent. Morrison and Kincaid, two writers with rather different cultural backgrounds, confound this easy paradigm of "celebration versus suspicion," however, for, instead of celebrating motherhood, they both problematize the plot of daughterly haunting in

their narratives. For them, the daughter's return to history, *via* the mother-daughter narrative, functions neither to retrieve the maternal plenitude nor to reclaim a lost identity. Their account of the mother-daughter struggle is a historical struggle tainted with a long history of slavery and colonization during which time the mother's relation to the daughter is disrupted and fractured by the economy of plantation which was dominated by the whites. While Morrison's novel has provoked discussions that move from the critical examination of American racism to the construction of an alternative ethics, Kincaid's novels are poignant, at times angry, invitations that compel readers to experience vicariously the pain and suffering of those dispossessed. Both deal with traumas. While Morrison's novel explores the question whether and how traumas can be worked through, Kincaid seems less interested in working through traumas than in acting out anger, frustration, and disappointment in her novels. This is not, however, to say that Morrison's novel is better or more effective than Kincaid's. They share a lot of similarities, but they are also different, especially in terms of their uses and representation of traumatic history.

The difference between Morrison's and Kincaid's staging of the thematic of daughterly haunting demonstrates not only how traumatic losses demand different strategies of acting out and/or working through, but also how different writers deploy different writing strategies to represent traumatic experiences, depending upon their historical and cultural situations. Once traumatic losses are translated into the space of literature, the distinction between structural and historical traumas—absences and losses—collapses, effecting a provisional use of structural losses as a political allegory to highlight the irremediable nature of historical traumas. With the conflation of historical and structural traumas—the separation from one's (m)other and the enforced exile from one's homeland—the traumas of history can be confronted with the repetitive double movement of “acting out” as/and “working through,” and the social tensions of two historical moments (the “then” and the “now”) are also brought together. Since historical trauma is always a belated effect after the event in history is on the edge of vanishing, to align a disappearing historical trauma (colonization or slavery) with the structural absence of maternal bliss, prompted by the child's forced separation from its mother, is an effective strategy of endowing historical trauma with the affective forces it needs to haunt its readers into thinking and feeling otherwise. This strategy of collapsing structural with historical traumas has an added advantage of rendering the object in and/or of trauma deliberately ambiguous, and untraceable back to an identifiable person or a specific event, thereby making a network of complex social

and historical relations and tensions equally accountable for the emergence of historical traumas, and, indirectly, of the alienating experience of haunting.

Since haunting is the symptom of a trauma whose cause is far from being determined or determinate, the representation of the belated impact of trauma, which is haunting, cannot be framed in language as usual either. According to LaCapra, it cannot be framed in a conventional narrative with a predictably linear movement that by the end resolves all perceivable problems and heals all visible wounds, nor can it be delivered in postmodernist narratives that embrace deferred significations, thereby foreclosing any possibility of working through the traumas. Instead, the representation of trauma frequently requires the invention of a different idiom and structure so that the traumatic after-effects of personal and collective experiences of historical losses can be more effectively registered. Not coincidentally, many women writers find the mother-daughter plot provides a workable framework to bring out the intended effect of haunting because the mother-daughter relation carries so much emotional and cultural baggage that the disruption of this relation is, it goes without saying, most traumatic. In other words, the plot of mother-daughter haunting, strategically speaking, bears a most provocative relation to the historical experience of losses. The use of the mother-daughter plot, in drawing up an analogy between the personal and the collective, both adds up and adds to the haunting effects of historical traumas: adding up, for the pain suffered by the mother and daughter for the severance of a biological tie can function as an allegory of a racial and national trauma; adding to, for the severance of the pre-symbolic bondage between mother and daughter is a structural trauma that no amount of mourning will ever suffice to work through. The mourning daughter is often left melancholic, forever hungering for a fantasmatic union with an imaginary mother. However, the deliberate over-identification between structural absences and historical losses in the mother-daughter plot can also be distracting, for sometimes we have to pause to ask ourselves what memory of the mother/motherland the daughter has constructed, and whether there are memories of (m)others that are left out in her haste to claim personal losses as historical ones. In other words, what huge debt might women have to pay for this equation between the collective and the autobiographical, in our haste to garner sympathy and secure identification? While there are perils both in equating structural traumas with historical traumas and in not equating them, what figure can best capture the ambivalence of women's private traumas on the one hand, and historical traumas on the other hand?

The ghostly and spectral woman, as a voiceless, nameless and powerless figure

haunting the imagination of the living, seems to serve as a potent symptom that bears testimony to the multiple ways women are traumatized, without stabilizing the signification of these traumas. On the one hand, the ghostly woman is the one most articulate, most eager to reclaim a lost family name and recuperate a forgotten family tradition. On the other hand, as Brogan makes clear,

the ghost provides also a metaphor for how women's more restrictively defined roles as bearers of culture might be reconceived. Because female bodies are often the site of a struggle for control over lineage, the shift from metaphors of blood descent to ghostly inheritances reframes cultural transmission in ways that women especially are likely to see as liberating.
(25)

In other words, precisely because private traumas are used as indexes of collective traumas, the mother-daughter plot is expanded to include not only a daughter's relation to her mother but her relation to all the (m)others whose experiences she responds to. Even though it is debatable whether women find this movement from the personal (familial and genealogical) to the historical (collective and imagined) truly liberating (for some women may find it oppressive to continue to bear the burden of cultural heritage on their shoulders), Brogan does call our attention to an unrecognized cultural phenomenon: the fact that many stories of cultural haunting are written by women about a hauntingly ambivalent relation between mother and daughter, a relation that goes beyond genealogy and biology and points toward a re-thinking of how women relate to one another. In other words, in conflating structural with historical traumas, women writers of these stories of cultural haunting are more inventive than recuperative, more imaginative than reconstructive, of the past, of gender and cultural identity, and of what it means to be a human being with the capacity to live a life of and in love.

The Autobiography of My Mother and Beloved

A comparative study of *The Autobiography of My Mother and Beloved* will suffice to pinpoint the potential challenges posed by their strategic use of the over-identification of structural and historical traumas. Kincaid's daughter-narrator is so

haunted by the faint voice and fading shadow of her deceased Carib mother that she speaks in her mother's name and boldly writes her mother's "autobiography." In imaginatively reconstructing the "autobiography" of her (m)other from the moment of her birth to her old age, she ends up writing her own biography, one that is both a life story of hatred and vengeance and a call for justice and recognition. But the narrator's interpretation of her mother's life is potentially reductive, for it fails to engage other historical events which also cause her injuries and losses. As she is convinced that her mother belongs to "the defeated," she refuses to become "(m)other"—one of the defeated—but only ends up translating herself into a feminine version of her father. Xuela recognizes that she "was like him," for both of them "could be described as reasonable" in stubbornly following and practicing their own personal belief (108), even though she has never ceased to hate her father, a manipulating and narcissistic colonial mimic. Kincaid's novel delivers a chilling performance of the negative politics of hatred and anger, the hatred and anger which is the haunting legacy of the traumatic history of colonialism. Such a performance of hatred and rage testifies to the difficulty of coming to terms with the questions of justice, and the futility of the sadistic impulse of victims, for they tend to react to a history of hurt by repeating the sadistic acts committed against them.

Kincaid's narrator speaks in her mother's voice to act out the traumas of historical losses, but she does so with a literary strategy that conflates the lack a child feels when deprived of maternal nurturing with the loss a colonized subject suffers at the hands of his/her colonizers. The structural trauma of maternal schism becomes here the metonymic displacement of and/or supplement to the particular historical trauma suffered by the Caribbean people in the first half of the 20th century. Kincaid does not hesitate to deploy the mother-daughter schism as an allegory of a historical trauma—that of the Caribbean's traumatized history of colonization—to give voice to those who have been made ghostly by the violence of European imperialism. The last thing that interests Kincaid's narrator is the possibility of a redemptive future, for before the wounds of history are healed, the voices of the dead heard, and justice meted out, there is no future, but the abyss of eternal darkness. The power of the past still haunts the daughter-narrator of Kincaid's chilly "autobiography." At the end she can only conclude that "[d]eath is the only reality, for it is the only certainty, inevitable to all things" (228). Yet precisely because the haunting power of the past is so gripping, it also unsettles the reader into reconsidering the psychic violence done to the Afro-Caribbean by the European colonialists. The novel haunts its readers not only because

it deliberately collapses structural traumas into collective traumas to shock the reader, but also because the very form of the novel, its linear, though episodic, presentation of the (auto)biography of a mother, precludes the very possibility of setting into motion an agonistic dialogism among members of this doomed community, and especially the dialogue between mother and daughter. As colonialism is a haunting chapter whose violence touches everyone affected by it, though in an uneven manner, and implicates everyone in a far-reaching structure of debt and guilt, Xuela, the daughter-narrator of Kincaid's novel, is not the only victim in this tragic period of Caribbean history. Though Xuela is haunted, the force of this haunting has failed to activate a psychic translation that transforms her from one who speaks for her (m)other into one who listens to and with the ghosts of her (m)other. As Xuela is so insistent on counting the many wrongs committed by the oppressors (her father, and the white colonialists such as her white husband), she becomes neurotically addicted to her own psychic traumas. Because she sees only her own hurts and injuries, she fails to see how damaging it is for her to take after the father she hates and how much she resembles the white husband she tortures. In failing to develop from her private experiences the capacity of psychic cross-over and identification, Xuela ends up ruining her own life, proving with her life the ambivalent affinity between antagonism and identification. What Xuela wants is merely to stand outside of any community, "refus[ing] to belong to a race," as well as "refus[ing] to accept a nation," for she does not have "the courage to bear" "the crime of these identities" (226). As a result, she can love no one but herself, forever mourning for the self that she may or may not become.

Here LaCapra's warning becomes especially relevant: "When absence, approximated to loss, becomes the object of mourning, the object may become impossible and turn continually back into endless melancholy" (715). That is to say, in acting out a collective historical trauma *via* the specific "autobiography" of her mother, Kincaid's daughter-narrator inhabits a haunting past, re-living a life that is reputedly her mother's, while finding at the end that she "was like him [her father]. I was not like my mother who was dead" (108), though she speaks and writes in her mother's name. Xuela's deliberate effort to exorcise the past shows, rather ironically, that she fails to recognize that her life is doubly haunted, both by the loss of the mother (land) and by the betrayal of the father (country). As a result, Kincaid's novel becomes a powerful indictment of the violence of colonialism; but it is not a novel whose power derives from its ethical vision or its capacity for self-reflection. The affective power of this novel comes from its acting out the vertigo of historical trauma as well as from Xuela's insistence on the

phantasm of egotistic plenitude and imaginary mastery (the fantasy of narcissistic individualism). To put it simply, and perhaps reductively, this is how Xuela's logic works: since they (her father and the white men) only love themselves, I'll love none but myself as well. Kincaid's melancholic daughter-narrator offers a secondary witness to historical traumas by conflating her personal losses with historical deprivations. This conflation of the personal with the historical is central to Kincaid's writing. It constitutes the haunting power of her writing style, one that both engages and enrages her western readers into shocking recognition of the psychic violence of European imperialism. And it also demonstrates the linguistic power Kincaid performs in translating Xuela's mourning for a past that fails to live up to the expectation of the later generation into a text with many edges, a text that intends to hurt rather than to heal its readers. In the end, as Jacqueline Brice-Finch points out, in fabricating a narrator who is monstrous and eccentric, Kincaid has set Xuela up as a chilling "post-colonial Caribbean character stripped of heritage and devoid of the will to conquer" (202), whose monstrous paralysis is emblematic of the entropy of the postcolonial Caribbean in general.

Though Kincaid writes both to remember and to indict, her evocation of history is more general than specific. Nowhere has she been explicit in pinpointing the historical incident that caused the death of Xuela's mother, or the specific historical wounds whose marks were inscribed on the bodies of Xuela and the people on the island of Dominica. If Xuela is traumatized, she is traumatized by the general practices of European colonialism, and it is hard for the reader to find a specific incident as the original event of her trauma, the remembrance of which triggers its belated effect. Since her knowledge of the colonial past is sketchy and lacks specific details, it is easy for her to lapse into a dichotomized logic that pits the victims against the victimizers. Once she literally sees herself as the victim, she finds herself in a rightful position to mimetically return the same wrongs to those who have once wronged her.

In contrast, in *Beloved*, Morrison is interested not only in acting out historical wrongs, but also in working through the haunting of a history in which both blacks and whites are implicated in a complicated economy of guilt and debt. Morrison elides the distinction between the structural and historical traumas for she "attempts to represent the general [trauma] in the particular—slavery in Sethe—but in presenting Sethe, *Beloved* falls short of representing either the general (the slavery) or the particular (Margaret Garner), and manifests only the singular, the unique (Sethe, *Beloved*, Denver, etc.)" (Ramadanovic, "In the Future..." 205). In so making and then eliding the

distinction between the general, the particular, and the unique, Morrison manages to keep open the tension between structural and historical traumas. She sustains the impossibility of naming and resolving structural trauma on the one hand while proffering the utopian hope that historical trauma can be named and worked through with the intervention of community and the enactment of ritualistic practices of mourning on the other hand. This convoluted negotiation between historical givens and structural conditions requires Morrison to adopt a literary strategy of “circumnavigation” that on the one hand acknowledges the impossibility of ever working through historical traumas, and on the other, repetitively circles around the absolute alterity of a traumatic event, not to inscribe it but to circumscribe it. For James Berger, in representing, the writer circles repeatedly around an unknowable event. This mode of representation allows traumas to remain unmastered and unrepresentable, without giving up on the efforts of inventing an oblique “rhetoric appropriate to modern catastrophe” (xx). Such rhetoric is grounded in the repetitive, open-ended psychoanalytic process first described by Sigmund Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* (1938) and then insightfully explicated by Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience*. For Caruth, the traumatic experience not merely entails the “shattering of a previously whole self,” but also allows one “to go through an overwhelming experience” (131) so as to survive it. Traumas, in other words, produce both an effect of destruction and “an enigma of survival” (58). What initiates and sustains this movement from trauma as destructiveness to trauma as survival? Berger’s response is that this dramatic shift is only possible when one attempts to grasp the unknowable catastrophic event by repetitively returning to it, while translating this back-and-forth into a circum-narrative. One returns to a traumatic event not because one already knows everything about it, but because there is more about it that remains unknown and unknowable. While trauma may remain unintelligible, we nevertheless are drawn towards it, as if haunted.

Berger thus cites Søren Kierkegaard’s idea of “circumnavigation,” to supplement the psychoanalytical concept of the belatedness of such traumas that are neither fully grasped nor completely remembered. In a thought-provoking psychoanalytic model, Berger characterizes the repetitive circling as a “circum-narrative” (4), which is also the appropriate model to “recount the symptomatic and ghostly transmission” of American racial traumas into the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, Berger advances the Kierkegaardian idea of “circumnavigation” to describe a method in Morrison’s writing of coming to terms with these traumas. The transmission of the historically “unspoken” and the “unspeakable” thoughts and actions is facilitated through “the figure of the

returning and embodied ghost” (198). *Beloved* is “the site not just of one traumatic return—of Sethe’s murdered daughter” (198) but also “a conflation of all these traumas and repression,” for she is “the sign of a society—both white and black—that cannot narrate its past and thus is trapped in an ever-escalating circle of trauma and symptom” (201). As the site of both personal and historical traumas, *Beloved* exists outside of language; she is the unrepresentable. She signifies not what one already knows about the past, but the part of one’s traumatic past that one does not yet know. In the novel, “[t]he most dramatic instance of traumatic disruption of the symbolic order are the chapters of merger and possession” (205), for these chapters “trace a movement back away from language to a linguistic approximation of pure trauma, both familial and historical, that ends in a complete merger of personalities and withdrawal from the social world” (206). While these moments of complete identifications prove unsustainable, other inter- and intra-subjective relations also prove to be fraught with contradictions and ambivalence. In becoming hopelessly drawn to *Beloved*, Sethe, Denver, and Paul D become possessed by the historical traumas she embodies so that they are compelled to relive the past “with the most extreme ambivalence” (210).

Not only is *Beloved* a novel that conflates historical with structural traumas, it also translates this conflation into an endless process of multiple repetition. Moreover, this drama of the repetition of possession and loss, presence and absence, is being played out “with no trace of playfulness and no possibility of mastery over the fact of loss” (Berger 206). At the same time, however, despite Morrison’s refusal to offer the reader an unambiguous ending that heals all traumas—historical, social, and familial, she plots a “circum-narrative” to represent the ongoing struggles of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D to act out and work through the traumatic symptoms that *Beloved* embodies. The conflation of historical trauma (and institutional violence) with structural trauma (and familial violence) effects a powerful “critique of traditional racism” as well as “an anatomy of African-American self-hatred and self-destructiveness,” “while portraying the victim of trauma as still possessing culture and agency” (Berger 211).

In the final analysis, then, while transgenerational haunting makes possible the memory and transmission of historically traumatizing events and secrets, not all instances of haunting are equally effective in acting out and working through historically inherited debts and guilt. As the ghost returns to haunt the living, whether those still alive are directly responsible for the making of history or not, some people hear their wailing, see their wounds, and begin to describe their ghostly return. Some use the return of the ghost as a literary strategy to constitute and consolidate their

identities, cultural, political, or gender. Some deploy haunting as a gesture for social and political critique, speaking in the voices of the dead both to consolidate identity and to call for justice and recognition. Some, however, do not believe traumas can be exorcised once and for all, and offer a cautionary strategy to describe our ambivalent relations to historical traumas. We cannot decide beforehand what approach to traumas is the most effective one, but we do know, almost always belatedly, a text of ghostly haunting affects the reader in a multitude of ways, some more effective and thought-provoking than others. Perhaps the task of an attentive reader haunted by unspeakable historical legacies lies simply in ethically responding to these voices of the other to better recognize and understand why and how those narratives attempt to remember, transmit, and work through various symptoms of historical traumas. The only responsible reading of haunting is then, in the words of Berger, “to recognize its formative catastrophes and their symptoms, and to identify the ideological sutures that hide the damages and repetitions” (219).

Works Cited

- Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Brice-Finch, Jacqueline. “*The Autobiography of My Mother*: A Book Review.” *World Literature Today* 71.1 (Winter 1997): 202.
- Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts in Recent American Literature*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998.
- Caruth, Cathy. “Trauma and Experience: Introduction.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 3-12.
- . *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Ferguson, Moira. “A Lot of Memory: An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid.” *Kenyon Review* 16.1 (1994): 176-77.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.
- Jameson, Frederic. “Marx’s Purloined Letter.” *New Left Review* 209 (1995): 75-109.
- Jay, Martin. “The Uncanny Nineties.” *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998. 157-64.

- Kincaid, Jamaica. *The Autobiography of My Mother*. New York: Plume, 1996.
- LaCapra, Dominick. "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical Inquiry* 25.4 (1999): 696-727.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. "'You who never was there': Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Holocaust." *Narrative* 4.1 (1996): 1-16.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987.
- Ramadanovic, Petar. "In the Future...: On Trauma and Literature." *Topologies of Trauma: Essays on the Limit of Knowledge and Memory*. Ed. Linda Belau and Petar Ramadanovic. New York: Other P, 2002. 179-210.
- . "When 'to Die in Freedom' Is Written in English." *Diacritics* 28.4 (1998): 54-67.
- Rody, Caroline. *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Rose, Jacqueline. *States of Fantasy*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996.
- Santner, Eric L. "History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma." *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*. Ed. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003. 214-20.
- Sicher, Efraim. "The Future of the Past: Counteremory and Postmemory in Contemporary Post-holocaust Narratives." *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past* 12.2 (Fall-Winter 2000): 56-91.

About the Author

Shu-li Chang is Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at National Sun Yat-sen University. She authors the book, *Border Women Writing Borders* (Bookman, 2000), a critical study of three contemporary immigrant women's writings, and has published *Across the Darkness of the River: Hsi Muren*, a translation of Hsi Muren's poetry (Green Integer, 2001). Her current research focuses on the relationship between gender and trauma in immigrant narratives.

[Received 20 March 2004;
accepted 28 May 2004;
revised 20 June 2004]

Jamaica Kincaid was born in St. John's, Antigua. Her books include *At the Bottom of the River*, *Annie John*, *Lucy*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, and *My Brother*. She lives with her family in Vermont. Product details. I read this book which deals with questions of identity, sexuality, heritage, conquered, conqueror, love, life, and death. I found it to be unsettling in its anger and depression, yet somehow, feel it to be a truer version of reality than the one offered to us by Disney. Read more. 2 people found this helpful. Jamaica Kincaid writes a compelling autobiography of a fictitious character's mother, who died at the birth of the narrator and yet had such strong influence on her life. How do we play with the cards we are dealt? Do we even know the rules of the various card game(s) we (un)engage in? Her aloneness has made her strong, but I ask, "At what price?" I assume that through this woman the author is giving us a message. The title reveals she is speaking not only of herself but also of her mother and unborn children too. What makes one strong? To what extent should self-reliance be pushed? *Beloved*, novel by Toni Morrison, published in 1987 and winner of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize. The work examines the destructive legacy of slavery as it chronicles the life of a Black woman named Sethe, from her pre-Civil War days as a slave in Kentucky to her time in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873. In the novel, Sethe is also a passionately devoted mother, who flees with her children from an abusive owner known as "schoolteacher." They are caught, and, in an act of supreme love and sacrifice, she too tries to kill her children to keep them from slavery. Only her two-year-old daughter dies, and the schoolteacher, believing that Sethe is crazy, decides not to take her back. Sethe later has "Beloved" inscribed on her daughter's tombstone. This epigraph to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* could have very well been uttered by her protagonist, Sethe, to account for some of the main contradictions in the novel. This chapter focuses on the ways the author constructs Sethe's identity within and without the black community by means of an intricate collage of memories, determined by her past as a black slave but defined by a clearly gendered experience where the issue of motherhood becomes crucial to the development of the novel. Individual and collective memory, history and herstory, the real and the supernatural merge in this novel to recover an unacknowledged part of American cultural heritage through the ghost of *Beloved*, Sethe's murdered daughter, who will return to bring the slave past back to her mother's present.