

# DE-SILENCING THE PAST: POSTMEMORY AND REPARATIVE WRITING IN SELECTED WORKS BY AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

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## Abstract

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory implies a connection with the past that is indirect, mediated by the imagination and desire, transmitted to descendants or generations that have no memory of the traumatic event, but it can also entail a possible yearning to reconnect with the historical past as testimony, remembering and collective memory. This article focuses on this reconnection with the past with the aim of reading, questioning and analyzing traumatic memories of times past in selected works by four nineteenth and twentieth-century African American women writers (Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Jones, and Toni Morrison) whose texts and characters carry the burden of traumatic memories and the will to share postmemories.

**Keywords:** Postmemory, slave narratives, African American women writers, reparative writing, trauma.

## Resumo

**Des-silenciar o passado: pós-memória e escrita reparadora em obras selecionadas de escritoras afro-americanas**

O conceito de pós-memória proposto por Marianne Hirsch implica uma ligação com o passado que é indireta, mediada pela imaginação e pelo desejo, transmitida a descendentes ou gerações que não têm memória do acontecimento traumático, mas também pode remeter para um possível anseio de reconexão com o passado histórico como testemunho, recordação e memória coletiva. Este artigo centra-se nesta reconexão com o passado com o objetivo de ler, questionar e analisar memórias traumáticas de tempos passados em obras selecionadas de quatro escritoras afro-americanas (Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Jones e Toni Morrison) dos séculos XIX e XX, cujos textos e personagens carregam o fardo das memórias traumáticas e a vontade de partilhar pós-memórias.

**Palavras-chave:** Pós-memória, narrativas de escravos, escritoras afro-americanas, escrita reparadora, trauma.

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## Resumen

### De-silenciar el pasado: postmemoria y escritura reparadora en obras seleccionadas de escritoras afroamericanas

El concepto de postmemoria de Marianne Hirsch implica una conexión con el pasado que es indirecta, mediada por la imaginación y el deseo, transmitida a descendientes o generaciones que no tienen memoria del acontecimiento traumático, pero también puede acarrear un posible anhelo de volver a conectar con el pasado histórico como testimonio, recuerdo y memoria colectiva. Este artículo centrarse en esta reconexión con el pasado con el objetivo de leer, cuestionar y analizar los recuerdos traumáticos de tiempos pasados en obras seleccionadas de cuatro escritoras afroamericanas (Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison) de los siglos XIX al XX, cuyos textos y personajes llevan la carga de recuerdos traumáticos y la voluntad de compartir postmemorias.

**Palabras clave:** Postmemoria, relatos de esclavos, escritoras afroamericanas, escritura reparadora, trauma.

*Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget.*

Zora N. Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1992 [1937], 9)

*These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgement.*

Zora N. Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1992 [1937], 10).

## 1. Introduction

Four works by African American women writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were selected to reflect on the importance of postmemory and reparative writing in de-silencing the past, namely *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself* (1861), by Harriet A. Jacobs (1813-1897), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), by Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), *Corregidora* (1975), by Gayl Jones (1949-), and *Beloved* (1987), by Toni Morrison (1931-2019).

During slavery, all slaves were denied basic human rights, but women slaves were additionally denied the most basic rights of women as they were deprived of legal marriage, male protection and maternal rights. Economically valued for their work and fertility, women of African origin were open to sexual exploitation, the

cruellest oppression of all, and separated from their children, who belonged to the “master” (slaveholder).

The works selected for this study address issues such as trauma, domestic and sexual violence, womanhood and motherhood, preservation of memory and postmemory, with slavery in the background or as the context. The idea that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (Hurston, 1992 [1937], 29) is conveyed by different voices who share experiences, recovering memories, de-silencing the past and establishing postmemory.

The narratives by Jacobs, Morrison, Jones and Hurston met the eligibility criteria set to write this article – works by African American women, using a voice that is testimony to their suffering and to the overcoming of obstacles during slavery and since it was abolished. These works engage voice, memory, and history in writing that establishes postmemory and can also be considered as reparative to the writers and to contemporary (women) readers.

The research question was defined to demonstrate how postmemory is conveyed through texts that de-silence the past. According to Susan Sniader Lanser (1992, 7), “the act of writing a novel [...] is implicitly a quest for discursive authority; a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence”. Drawing on the selected narrative sources to reflect on the historical past using history, memory and testimony, the aim of this paper is to focus on the reconnection with the past to question traumatic (post)memory of times past in the present.

## 2. Writing slavery

The genre of the slave narrative is the first form of African American writing and is characterized by both polemics and autobiography. The strident moral voice of the former slave recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophizing and, above all, remembering the ordeal of bondage is the single most impressive feature of a slave narrative. This voice is striking because of what it relates, but even more so because the slave’s acquisition of that voice is quite possibly her/his only permanent achievement once she/he escapes and cast herself/himself upon a newer and larger landscape. Slave narratives are also full of other voices which are frequently just as responsible for articulating the narrative tale and strategy.

According to James Olney (1990), most slave narratives begin with the words “I was born”, and proceed to furnish information about parents, relatives, the cruelty of masters, mistresses and overseers, barriers to literacy, slave auctions, attempts, failures and successes at escaping, name changes, and general reflections on the peculiar institution of slavery, being an invaluable record of the experience and history of slavery.

Slave men and women had different perceptions of their common condition, at least while writing about it. Black women wrote about one eighth or 12% of the

total number of existing slave narratives (Washington 1988, 11), but none became as well known as the narratives written by men. The result has been that the life of the male slave has come to be taken as representative, even though the female experience in slavery was radically different.

In the narrative of ex-slave men, for instance, slave women play subordinate roles and appear completely helpless and totally exploited, being pictured as pitiable objects or victims “of either brutal beatings or sexual abuse” (Carby 1987, 35) without the means of protecting or of defending themselves. The former slave men “explicitly tell stories of [women as] slave breeders and forced prostitutes” (Nardi 2014, 78) or women are simply rendered invisible.

Women’s sexuality is another subject treated very differently by women and men writers. From the narrative perspective of a male slave, for example, sexuality is nearly always avoided, and when it does surface it is to mention the sexual abuse of female slaves. By telling their own stories, ex-slave women do not concentrate on the sexual exploitation they suffered. They do not deny it, but they make it clear that there were other elements in their lives which were important to them as well. In short, they see themselves as more than simply victims of rape and seduction. Their stories show them to be strong, courageous, dignified, and spirited despite the world in which they are forced to live. The slave or former slave women writers focus less on individual performance and more on the positive roles that engaged women. They allot time to the value of family relationships, not only to beatings and mutilations by slave masters. As they relate their stories, ex-slave women take control of their narratives in much the same way as they took control of the circumstances that enabled them to survive and escape captivity.

In the slave narratives written by black women, women’s active roles as historical agents as opposed to passive subjects are placed in the foreground and they are portrayed as affirmative and deciding over their own lives. They document their sufferings and brutal treatment, but in a context that is also the story of resilience and resistance to that brutality. Slave narratives written by women play an important part in allowing us to hear the voices of slave women, showing them as affirmative agents rather than objects of pity, being capable of interpreting their experiences and, like men, able to overcome obstacles and turn their victimization into triumph. Slave narratives by women did not eliminate the association with “illicit” sexuality, nor did they contradict conventional interpretations of black female sexuality, but they portrayed slave women in a wider context.

Nardi confirms this, explaining that in slave narratives,

when women relate their stories the abuse endured in bondage never constitutes the core of their narration: forced and violent sexual relations do not represent [...] and they barely mention their sexual experience. Women see themselves as active agents, able to transform their defeats and difficulties into triumphs through resistance, strong, courageous, spiritually tenacious heroes fighting for their personal survival and that of their close relations. (Nardi 2014, 78-79)

In most nineteenth-century women's slave narratives, writers tried to assert their womanhood to an (mostly white) audience that had long recognized only their "animal characteristics" (Morrison 1987, 237) as "breeders" (Carby 1987, 24-25) and "mules" (Hurston 1992 [1937], 29). To prove that they possessed the same virtues that distinguished white womanhood, writers such as Harriet Jacobs and Harriet E. Wilson<sup>1</sup> often adopted the literary conventions of white women writers, and at the same time opposed the institution of slavery. Women's slave narratives frequently employed the literary conventions of the sentimental novel<sup>2</sup> to persuade white, educated readers that slavery was wrong because blacks had feelings and were, in fact, human. Many slave women writers felt restrained by a code of "decency" that prohibited them from actually focusing upon and narrating the more repulsive details of slavery and spared the readers the worst of their victimization<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. Postmemory, trauma and reparative writing

Erica Johnson (2018, 2) states that "memory – personal and cultural – has come to form an important archival source in how we write about, and feel about, culture and history". Marianne Hirsch's "The Generation of Postmemory" (2008: 106-107) proposes a definition for the concept of postmemory:

[it] describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness,

<sup>1</sup> Considered to be the first African American novelist on the North American continent, Harriet E. Wilson (1825 – 1900) published *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* anonymously in Boston in 1859. For more information on Harriet Wilson see <http://www.harrietwilsonproject.net/harriet-wilson.html>

<sup>2</sup> An example is Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* which, like the sentimental novels of the day, has a moral purpose and often assumes a didactic tone.

<sup>3</sup> Harriet E. Wilson acknowledges this in the Preface to *Our Nig* (1859): "I do not pretend to divulge every transaction in my own life, which the unprejudiced would declare unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen; I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home". Wilson was not legally a slave and did not wish to create too horrible a tale of oppression at the hands of a cruel northern mistress for fear that her narrative might harm the abolitionist movement.

is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension.

Samuel O'Donoghue (2018) explains that "the words trauma and postmemory are now sometimes used interchangeably"; for the author, "postmemory expands the authority of the witness to encompass those with no direct experience of the historical atrocities they narrate [...] the transference of testimonial authority from ancestors to their descendants". In his article, O'Donoghue considers a "revised understanding of postmemory as activism [...] to analyze literary uses of the past in a more critical vein". Hirsch questions whether postmemory can "be transformed into [...] resistance" (2008, 104), since "the 'post' in 'postmemory' signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath" (2008, 106). Postmemory is a construction of fragmented memories and rememories, affection archives that were passed on to those who did not participate in the traumatic event that triggered the telling.

Traumatic experiences are, more often than not, the trigger for remembrance and the need to share memories that will impact the life of descendants, children or grandchildren, family, friends. Living with psychological and physical trauma and its effects stimulates the need to share the histories, the burden, the unwritten facts and memories that defined the life of the teller(s) and will affect the listener, the recipient of the memories:

Inheriting trauma is not straightforward, but rather it is more the psychological effect of living with or being raised by people who have experienced hardships and are thus traumatised. For instance, the memories of parents and grandparents impact their lives, and sharing experiences or rememoring can be affected by past traumas. (Ribeiro and Fonseca 2022)

In *Cultural Memory, Memorials, and Reparative Writing* (2018, 10), Erica Johnson affirms that "reparative writing is more flatly mimetic and less judgmental or even interpretive" than work "improving upon painful histories". For the author, texts that "present painful pasts, and where [...] representation [...] [can be seen as] resistance to some extent, their openness to 'negative' affects is key to the reparative work they do" (*ibidem*). The four narratives considered for this paper "include the affective archives of long marginalized feelings and memories" (Johnson 2018, 10) of their characters as examples for reparative writing through the construction of postmemories.

#### 4. De-silencing the past: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself*

Nineteenth-century African-American author, abolitionist, and reformer Harriet Jacobs published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself* in 1861, an autobiographical narrative, using the pseudonym Linda Brent. In the narrative, she provides details of her life as a slave, the brutality of slavery, the sexual exploitation of female slaves, her escape from sexual harassment and from slavery to the North and the abolition of slavery.

In “Motherhood: From the Slave Narrative to *Beloved*” (1994), Brenda F. Berrian points out that in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* “the writers both call to question nineteenth century double standards or societal values for whites and blacks and the desperate individual acts to maintain some form of autonomy” (1994, 27). By writing her own story, Harriet Jacobs gave the slave woman a voice and paved the way for future African American women writers.

Jacobs wrote to Amy Post<sup>4</sup> about the difficulty of narrating her sexual oppression and the violence she was subjected to while enslaved<sup>5</sup>. Lydia Maria Child, the editor of this slave narrative, mentions, in her introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), the fact that some events remained too terrible to narrate: “This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn” (1987 [1861], 4). Despite this, the narrative was written for a white audience and the author’s name is concealed behind the pen name Linda Brent. Harriet Jacobs’s primary motive for escaping the South was to protect her daughter from sexual exploitation and the fate that she experienced as an enslaved woman.

Jacobs shares the female experience of enslavement and the different forms of dehumanization the female slave had to endure as daughter, mother, sister. But the aim of the narrative is not to focus only on the negative aspects of slavery, but rather to present Jacobs as a caring mother worried for her child’s wellbeing, and to persuade her readers to get involved in the antislavery and abolitionist efforts mostly active in the North. Stating that “death is better than slavery” (1987 [1861],

<sup>4</sup> Amy Kirby Post was an abolitionist and women’s rights advocate, who befriended Harriet and encouraged her to write her autobiography.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from Jacobs’s letter to Amy Post, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1857:

I have My dear friend – ... [obliterated] Striven faithfully to give a true and just account of my own life in slavery – God knows I have tried to do it in a Christian spirit – there are somethings that I might have made plainer I know – woman can whisper – her cruel wrongs into the ear of a very dear friend – much easier than she can record them for the world to read – I have left nothing out but what I thought – the world might believe that a Slave woman \*was\* too willing to pour out – that she might \*gain\* their sympathies I ask nothing – I have placed myself before you to be judged as a woman \*whether\* ... [obliterated] I deserve your pity or contempt.

62), the author “transforms herself into a penitent supplicant” (1987 [1861], xxi) asking her audience not to judge her for her behavior and begs for forgiveness since “the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality” and “remembrance fills (...) [her] with sorrow and shame” (1987 [1861], 55, 53):

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law and custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. (1987 [1861], 55)

The author reflects on the evils and violence suffered in the past and draws attention to her writing as being reparative of the shattered dreams of black women during slavery and post slavery, and whose postmemories can only survive through their readers.

### 5. From possession to voice: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston’s work aims to preserve the rich black cultural practices of the South of the United States. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, written in 1937, is an archive of the vitality of written black oral dialect,<sup>6</sup> a novel about black culture and life with limited references to white society, an issue which does not stand out or define her work. The setting is a black southern community, mainly the “muck” or “the Bottom” in the Florida Everglades, where Janie, the protagonist, finds “authenticity” and happiness and feels liberated as a woman, contradicting her grandmother’s notion of what her life as a black woman should be.

With the idea that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (Hurston 1992 [1937], 29), a lesson learnt from her past and from her personal experience, Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, a survivor of slavery, who has done her best to protect her granddaughter from the evils of the world, decides to marry her to Logan Killicks before she dies: “You ain’t got nobody but me. [...] Neither can you stand alone by yo’self. De thought uh you bein’ kicked around from pillar tuh post is uh hurting’ thing” (Hurston 1992 [1937], 31).

As a slave, Nanny couldn’t fulfil her dreams, “one of de hold-backs of slavery” (Hurston 1992 [1937], 31), but she insists that Janie “just take a stand on high ground lak [...] [she] dreamed” (Hurston 1992 [1937], 32). Sharing memories of her escape to the North and life teachings, Nanny tells Janie that she “raked and scraped” to buy a piece of land so that her granddaughter “wouldn’t have to stay in de white folks’ yard and tuck [...] [her] head befo’ other chillun at school” or be “a spit cup” for men, white or black (Hurston 1992 [1937], 37). Nanny wanted to break the cycle of violence that she had experienced in life and associated protec-

<sup>6</sup> Hurston used the dialect of the South in the dialogues between the characters.



tion with a husband and marriage, but that cycle was cultural and would only be broken by Janie freeing herself from sexual roles and affirming her identity as a liberated African American woman.

The novel “represent[s] the emergence of a black woman’s voice [...] [and] Janie Crawford’s struggle to find voice and through voice an identity” (Lanser 1992, 201), contrasting with the image of the stereotypical strong “mama” figure that dominates classic American and African American narratives, especially of the South.

Finding a voice means sharing experiences and memories of past and present. Janie tells her story to her friend Phoebe, authorizing her to share it with the gossip-hungry community to which she has returned after losing her third husband, “‘cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf”. Janie and Phoebe have “been kissin’-friends for twenty years” (Hurston 1992 [1937], 17, 19) and the telling strengthens the ties between the two and builds the postmemory of Janie’s life. Janie’s memories keep her love for her husband alive: “[Teacake] could never be dead until she her self had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace” (Hurston 1992 [1937], 286).

## 6. Trauma and memory: *Beloved*

*Beloved* (1987) contains all the characteristics of a slave narrative, but with several significant differences. While the classic slave narrative uses memory as the source and as the channel for incidents and facts, Morrison’s narrative emphasizes the dialogic characteristics of memory and its imaginative capacity to create and recreate the meaning of the past, evoking memories and making postmemories for readers to come. While *Beloved* meanders through time, sometimes circling back, other times moving vertically, the slave narrative moves characteristically in a chronological, linear narrative fashion.

The actual story upon which *Beloved* is based is an 1855 newspaper account of a runaway slave from Kentucky named Margaret Garner<sup>7</sup>. Realizing that she was about to be recaptured under the Fugitive Slave Law<sup>8</sup>, Margaret prefers to kill her daughter than to allow her to grow up as a slave. In *Beloved*, Margaret becomes Sethe, a fugitive slave whose killing of her two-year-old “crawling already?” daughter haunts her, first as a “ghost” and later as a physical reincarnation. The novel contains not only Sethe’s version of the past, but also those of her Sweet

<sup>7</sup> See [https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Margaret\\_Garner](https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Margaret_Garner)

<sup>8</sup> Passed on September 18, 1850 by Congress, The *Fugitive Slave Act* of 1850 was part of the Compromise of 1850. The act required that slaves be returned to their owners, even if they were in a free state. It also made the federal government responsible for finding, returning, and trying escaped slaves (American Battlefield Trust).

Home friend, Paul D, her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, her remaining child, a daughter called Denver, and later, Beloved herself.

Jacobs's theme of the outraged mother combined with a mother's deep concern for her child reappears in Morrison's novel. Like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Beloved* is a story about a mother's obsessed and committed love for her children. As Brenda F. Berrian states, Sethe "has to suffer terrible physical afflictions during her struggle to obtain her children's and her own freedom" and "carries forever a tree-like disfigurement on her back [,] walks upon damaged feet [and] carries a mental scar from murdering her baby daughter" (1994, 26).

In *Beloved*, the horrors of slavery are revealed in detail: the physical and psychological abuses suffered by Sethe, the protagonist, by Sethe's mother, the link to an earlier time in slavery, by Paul D, and by the other Sweet Home (male) slaves. Sethe's scars and swollen feet increase rather than diminish her dignity: her beauty lies in her exceptional ability to endure. Moreover, Sethe's "thick" love for her children is depicted in defiance of traditional conceptions of motherhood. To love a child enough to take its life redefines motherhood from the perspective of a slave. Sethe could only express her love for her children through the cruel irony of trying to kill them to take them out of the life-denying situation that was slavery. The racist society drove its victims to respond defensively: murder is considered more humane in problematic terms than recapture and being taken back to slavery. Beloved's death is deeply interwoven with the issues of slavery, and in choosing it as a hidden core of the novel, Morrison makes a poignant commentary on the institution of slavery. Killing is a sort of redemption from history and a key to the function of memory and rememory, as explained by Sethe:

"Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. [...] Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. [...] I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. [...] A thought picture". (Morrison 1987, 44-45)<sup>9</sup>

*Beloved* tells the stories of a family, related or not by blood, formed on the Sweet Home plantation, before the arrival of the violent Schoolteacher, who treated slaves as animals and reduced the slave men to children in no time, destroying the life allowed them by the former owner, Mr. Garner. Since "the narrative strategy [...] turns on the stress of remembering, its inevitability, the chances for liberation that lie within the process" (Morrison 2019), telling allows Sethe to partially heal, while the writing creates postmemories and is also reparative for the author and for the reader.

<sup>9</sup> Inverted commas in the original as it is Sethe's discourse.

Through memory, Morrison enters the psychic and physical consequences of slavery for women, who were the means and source of production of other slaves. Scenes of punishment and brutality, whippings, rape and beatings are evoked and not concealed, as in a conventional slave narrative, to document the relentless suffering and persecution to which the slave was subjected<sup>10</sup>.

*Beloved* goes back to the African American literary tradition of the slave narrative, which it borrows from, but also rewrites. According to Caroline M. Woidat,

By authoring their own texts, writers of slave narratives performed with the pen what Sethe does with a handsaw: an act of self-definition. Just as Sethe's quest for freedom leaves both her back and her daughter's throat irreparably defaced, the authors of slave narratives were often compelled to distort their own features in order to succeed in winning acceptance for their work. (1993, 530)

In exploring a different dimension of slavery, *Beloved* is very similar to and very different from its literary antecedents. It attempts to fill the lacunae in slave narratives. It has the slave's narrative plot of the journey from bondage to freedom, but unlike slave narratives, which sought to be eyewitness accounts of the material conditions of slavery, *Beloved* is less concerned with the standards of decency that influenced earlier writers: it exposes what is unsaid and unwritten in the narratives, the subtexts that exist beneath and within the historical facts.

The narrative fills the unwritten lacunae in the process of slavery – the loss of roots and family, the direct and indirect victims, the overall violence against enslaved humans – and to process the recovering of the forgotten silences, Morrison resorts to the concept of rememory in *Beloved*: for Sethe it is a recollection of forgotten memories and, therefore, repressed memories; Morrison would describe it as “in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past” (Morrison 2019), recovering memories repressed, possibly by a traumatic experience.

## 7. *Corregidora* and the burden of postmemory

*Corregidora* (1975) is Gayl Jones's first book, a novel about love, memory and different traumas of history in Kentucky, narrating the family history of four women who are still dealing with memories of slavery, years after it was abolished.

Four generations of women were and are still victims of *Corregidora*, the white Portuguese slaveholder turned a sort of brothel-keeper, who impregnated

<sup>10</sup> In *Beloved*, slaves are compared to horses and hounds (Morrison 1987, 184), having animal characteristics (Morrison 1987, 237, 309), and are referred to as reproducers (Morrison 1987, 257).

Ursa's great grandmother and then committed incest by violating his own daughter, Ursa's grandmother:

Corregidora. Old man Corregidora, the Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger. [...] He fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed. They did the fucking and had to bring him the money they made. My grandmama was his daughter, but he was fucking her too. She said when they did away with slavery down there they burned all the slavery papers so it would be like they never had it. (Jones 1975, 8-9)

The "slavery papers", the written records, would have been proof of the existence of slavery and of the sexual violence against women during enslavement; to prevent its deletion from history, the women tell and transmit their traumatic experiences from generation to generation, creating postmemories and fighting silence:

"My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mamam told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget." (Jones 1975, 9)

The "'experience' of the trauma is such that [...] [they are] still compelled to remember and repeat" (Sharpe 2022):

Great Gram [...] told the same story over and over again [...] as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory. (Jones 1975, 11)

*They burned all the documents but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood.* (Jones 1975, 72; italics in the original)

Ursa, the protagonist and the fourth generation of Corregidora women, explains when she started to bear witness to the past or when her postmemories began: "I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother's tiddies. In her milk" (Jones 1975, 77). Memory flashbacks of (postmemorial) trauma suffered affect her life and dreams, impeding her from really living as an individual, as all her being is defined by the past of the Corregidora women and the implicit (sexual) violence.

To de-silence and make their experience visible, the Corregidora women are "compelled to remember and repeat", a consequence of the trauma suffered

(Sharpe 2022), “their survival depended on suppressed hysteria” (Jones 1975, 59). There will be no next generation of Corregidora women “to remember and repeat” as Ursa had to have her womb removed after falling down the stairs in an incident involving her jealous and somewhat violent husband, and is thus “unable to fulfill the script her ancestors have written for her, [...] [so she] must redefine her relation to her traumatic inheritance and her purpose as a woman” (Bellamy 2019, 17). Postmemory refers “to an inherited traumatic memory” (Ferrán *apud* O’Donoghue 2018), a memory bound together by female affective ties. Ursa’s memories and postmemories cannot be transmitted as a mother to daughter legacy, and are instead shared with the readers so that future generations will bear witness.

### 8. Reflecting on postmemory and reparative writing

The women writers discussed here carry the burden of postmemory and their writing incorporates testimonies and haunted fragments of marginalized lives, giving them the voice to recover memories to build postmemories that contribute to de-silencing the past. Writing becomes a form of personal and collective reparation. Their works show how easily women could be thrust to the margins of their own lives by the shadow of slavery and by being forced victims to subalternization to black men, white women and white men, the mules of the world.

Reflecting on her writing, Morrison (2019) explained how “the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting’ powered her novels, and in particular, *Beloved*”; the (re)writing of the past bears witness to how trauma of events suffered by past generations still lingers on in the present.

In “The Site of Memory” (1995), Morrison explains her need for creating affective ties in her writing: “What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn’t really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along” (1995, 100). This “participation” can be considered reparative as the reader is involved in the creative process.

There are no photographs to illustrate the memories invoked by the narration of the traumatic inheritance of the black women in the works of Jacobs, Hurston, Jones and Morrison; the harsh visual images created transcend the writing and de-silence history to uncover the past that lives on in postmemory.

Ursa and Sethe are entrapped in the legacy of slavery-related trauma and only sharing their histories and memories can contribute to ease the burden; Janie and Harriet become empowered through actions and space, going South and going North, and through discourse, finding their voice by fighting trauma and travelling towards self-definition.

The four narratives “illustrate how the trauma of distant historical events lingers on in new generations who have no direct experience of those events” (Ferrán *apud* O’Donoghue 2018) and thus decode silence, with the personal voice

of the author becoming a public voice that shares the aftermath of life histories. The trauma-related testimonies of the characters are shared and invoke affective ties, thus allowing for reparative reading and the empowering of (African American) women.

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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