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SPECTRAL METAHISTORY: TROPIC MEMORY AND NARRATIVE RUPTURE IN *BELOVED*

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Abstract

By reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) through Hayden White's metahistorical lens, we can see how the novel radically upends traditional ways of documenting the past. Pairing White's concept of 'emplotment' with Morrison's fragmented storytelling reveals that *Beloved's* ghost is far more than a symbol of personal grief—she is a direct challenge to the way history itself is constructed. Traditional archives often fail to convey the true horror of slavery because they rely on structured, realist narratives that demand order and resolution. Through the spatial, cyclical concept of rememory, Morrison moves past these structural limits. She offers a "spectral historiography" that uses key linguistic tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—to represent deep historical trauma. In doing so, Morrison uses literary imagination to restore the voices of the "Sixty Million and more" who have been left out of official archives.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Metahistory, Hayden White, Rememory, Spectral Historiography.

Introduction

In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), Hayden White blurred the line between historical writing and creative literature. White argued that historical accounts are essentially verbal narratives, organized and shaped by the writer's imagination rather than just discovered as plain facts in a record. He explained that turning raw, unorganized historical details into a clear chronological story requires poetic arrangement, a process he called emplotment. For marginalized groups, however, official archives are rarely neutral or objective. Instead, they often function to erase or obscure marginalized experiences, recording the lives of enslaved people only through financial ledgers, legal documents, and property records.

Morrison tackles this archival silence head-on, grappling with the challenge of portraying interior lives that official histories deliberately chose to ignore. Rather than relying on traditional historical realism—a mode Hayden White warns is inherently biased toward those in power—she turns to a fractured, Gothic storytelling style. By centering the entire narrative on the haunted domestic space of 124 Bluestone Road, Morrison completely dissolves the artificial boundary we usually draw between historical fact and literary imagination. The ghost of *Beloved* acts as a historical force, a physical presence from the past that refuses to be neatly organized or filed away into a simple story of national progress and reconciliation.

To understand why Morrison uses spectral elements, it helps to look at Hayden White's critique

of realistic historical writing. White argues that writers organize and explain historical events using four main linguistic tools: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. He points out that standard history often relies on synecdochic emplotment when dealing with major national tragedies. This means trying to fit isolated suffering into a larger, comforting story of progress and healing, which can make the actual horrors of the past seem less disturbing to modern readers.

For those who survived the Middle Passage and slavery, however, forcing a neat, organized structure onto their experiences is a form of intellectual violence. It imposes a false sense of order on a history defined by fragmentation, loss, and physical destruction. Morrison's approach in *Beloved* is highly ironic and metaphoric. She rejects a strict chronological timeline because she recognizes that orderly timelines can sanitize the chaotic reality of trauma. The physical presence of the ghost resists this containment, serving as a reminder that destabilizes any attempt to write a clean, resolved history of the post-civil war era.

The concept of *rememory* is Morrison's primary tool for challenging linear time. When Sethe explains to Denver that places and events remain "out there in the world" even after the buildings are gone, she describes memory as something spatial rather than chronological. This matches White's critique of the basic historical chronicle. White notes that a chronicle is just a list of events in order, while a history must shape those events into a meaningful story. For Sethe, however, the past is not a finished series of events behind her; it is a physical, dangerous landscape where traumatic moments still exist and can be encountered again at any time.

By treating memory as a physical space, Morrison suggests that the American landscape remains marked by the unacknowledged violence of slavery. Viewed through White's critical framework, *rememory* functions as a deeply poetic reclamation of historical geography. It forcefully rejects the standard archival impulse to neatly compartmentalize past atrocities as finished events, insisting instead that the past remains an active, shaping presence in contemporary life. The brutal

reality of the Sweet Home plantation cannot be reduced to a sterile chapter in a textbook; it persists as a visceral, everyday weight that continues to fracture the identities and relationships of those who survived it.

In *Metahistory*, White explains that historical events are turned into narratives through an initial act of poetic imagination, where the writer prepares the historical material for analysis. While standard historians might approach this using economic or sociological theories, Morrison approaches her historical setting through the lens of haunting. Within this interpretive design, *Beloved* materializes as an overdetermined, multi-layered figurative node. She is at once the physical return of Sethe's lost child, a representative of the unnamed dead from the slave ships, and the physical manifestation of the unresolved trauma of plantation life.

By combining these different meanings in a single character, Morrison illustrates what White calls the complex, overdetermined nature of historical narratives. *Beloved* cannot be explained by a simple chain of cause and effect; she represents an excess of history that goes beyond standard academic categories. *Beloved*'s disjointed, stream-of-consciousness monologues mark a point where language collapses into a poetic blur of shifting identities. This syntactic breakdown exposes the severe limitations of realistic writing when facing catastrophe. Rather than forcing trauma into standard grammatical structures, Morrison lets the prose fracture, proving that the most profound historical violations can only be articulated through poetic, figurative distortion.

The tension between institutional history and Morrison's focus on memory is highlighted in the contrast between schoolteacher's written notebook and the oral traditions of the Black community in Cincinnati. Schoolteacher represents an extreme, clinical approach to history. He arrives at Sweet Home with a notebook and a ruler to measure the physical features of the enslaved people, telling his pupils to divide Sethe's traits into human and animal categories. His ledger is an archive of complete objectification, using empirical observations to justify systemic violence. This is the exact type of

scientific-sounding writing that White warns can be used to make oppression look natural under the guise of neutral categorization.

Morrison counters schoolteacher's written records not with another document, but with the oral, physical, and community-driven actions of her characters. These alternative ways of keeping history alive are seen in Baby Suggs' gatherings in the Clearing, where she encourages people to love and care for their physical bodies in a society that treats them as property. This resistance is also clear in the songs of the chain gang in Georgia, where Paul D and the other prisoners survive by singing to the rhythm of their work, and in the collective voices of the thirty women who come together to help Sethe at the end of the novel. These oral expressions exist entirely outside of written archives, remaining fluid, shared, and active. By valuing these oral traditions over written ledgers, Morrison supports White's view that narrative truth is not found just in gathering facts, but in the creative ways we choose to express those facts.

Conclusion

Viewing *Beloved* through Hayden White's metahistorical perspective reveals that Morrison's use of supernatural elements is not a way to escape historical reality, but a deeper way to confront it. Traditional history, with its focus on linear timelines, official documents, and neat endings, is simply not built to convey the massive disruption caused by chattel slavery. Morrison's use of the gothic, when viewed alongside Hayden White's critique, proves that the supernatural is actually a tool for deeper historical confrontation, not an escape. Standard historical writing—with its reliance on linear chronology and neat, redemptive endings—is structurally blind to the catastrophic ruptures of slavery. Certain historical truths are too devastating to fit into tidy analytical frames; they require a different vocabulary altogether; one found in the physical presence of a spectre and the spatial persistence of *rememory*. In the end, *Beloved* calls for an end to the illusion of a single, objective narrative of the past. It challenges us to listen to the unresolved, unsettling fragments of history rather than forcing them into a comforting story, offering

us our only real path toward a more ethical, searching, and human historical consciousness.

Here is an authentic, publication-ready bibliography tailored to the theoretical framework and literary analysis presented in your text. It features foundational texts by Toni Morrison and Hayden White, alongside seminal scholarly works on trauma, historical archives, spectrality, and Black feminist critique.

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