"Reading the Unspeakable"

Emotional Memory and Affective Relationality in Life-Writing Genres

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1. Slave Narratives

"Reader it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage." (Jacobs 1861: n.p.) When reading so-called slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (1861), readers get a feel for what it must have been like to be enslaved, and, what is more, what it must have been like to be an enslaved *woman*. At the height of the struggle over the abolition of slavery from the end of the 18th to the mid-19th century, the genre of *slave narratives* explicitly aimed at motivating readers' empathy and solidarity by recounting experiences of enslavement and often flight from the perspective of formerly enslaved and structurally silenced speakers. Jacob's preface to her life account provides a vivid example of how these texts insisted on the evidence of their authors' experience, since they had to *prove* the factuality of the proceedings recounted:

> READER, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts. […] I was born and reared in Slavery; and I remained in a Slave State twenty-seven years. (Jacobs 1861: 6)

The insistence on experience was crucial for the texts' ability to grant their authors a voice in the discourse of the time. Jacobs was one of many authors who used their personal narratives to point out the structural injustice inflicted on enslaved workers, framing their individual experience of suffering as collective. Slave narratives were addressed to a predominantly White audience in order to mobilize these readers for the fight against slavery. Jacob's text was published under the pseudonym Linda Brent after the author had made it to the North of the United States and

achieved freedom. The narrator – in autobiographical texts also termed *narrative I* – depicts her experience of enslavement, hiding, and escape and the abuse she received at the hands of her master, Mr. Flint. Like most slave narratives, her text documents her journey from bondage to freedom, as she recreated herself as a human and a woman, rejecting her status as *property* and taking her destiny into her own hands. The narrative opens in a typical manner with the words *I was born and reared into Slavery*. By highlighting the very different situation of enslaved Africans, accounts such as Jacobs' broke with the genre convention of autobiographies, which were usually written by White *men of letters* and opened by giving their protagonist's name and date of birth and their family pedigree before then telling their life story in a chronological and straightforward manner. Furthermore, in contrast to most male slave narratives, which generally followed a strictly chronological format and focused on the narrator's life, relating the story of his journey from slavery to freedom, Jacobs' narrative focuses on *incidents* in her life. The structure of Harriet Jacobs'/Linda Brent's account also deviates from that of the traditional – male – slave narrative: some chapters focus strictly on Harriet/Linda's story, others address social or political issues such as the church and slavery or the impact of the Fugitive Slave Law on runaways. Furthermore, the text is marked by references to the private sphere and the household and the particular experience of being obliged to also sexually *serve* her owner. Before trying to escape, Harriet/Linda has two children by Mr. Sands, another white man, a decision that she sees as the lesser of two evils. The text also graphically depicts the master's insecure wife, who blames Harriet/Linda for her husband's behavior, and this leads Harriet/Linda to reflect on the intricate relationships between Black and White women, White men and White women, and the White patriarchal system that enables White men to exercise complete control over their wives and female slaves. Finally, she frees herself from the control of Flint (who threatens to sell her children) and spends seven years hiding in her grandmother's attic to escape her master's insatiable lust. Eventually, in 1842, Harriet/Linda is smuggled aboard a ship headed for Philadelphia and is reunited with her daughter Ellen and, shortly afterwards, also with her son Ben.

Brent's/Jacobs' narrative sometimes resembles the melodramatic style of 19th century romantic novels, which proved useful for the aim of arousing empathy and solidarity and was a style of writing the intended audience of women readers were most probably familiar with.[1] If literary genres provide "culturally and historically conditioned techniques of emotionalization" that "generate different potentials of effect and thus have decisive impact on the text's reception" (Hof 2008: 22, author's

1 The structure of *Incidents*, for example, resembles that of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, an epistolary novel published in 1740 and based on a story about a servant who avoided seduction and was rewarded by marriage. It also bears some similarities to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, first published in 1847 under the pseudonym Currer Bell.

translation), Jacobs' choice proved effectual in the context of the time. Her narrative I specifically addresses White women to whose morality, empathy and, finally, solidarity she appeals:

> In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right? Would that I had more ability! But my heart is so full, and my pen is so weak! There are noble men and women who plead for us, striving to help those who cannot help themselves. God bless them! God give them strength and courage to go on! God bless those, everywhere, who are laboring to advance the cause of humanity! (Jacobs 1861: 49)

As these lines indicate, slave narratives often evoked sentimental modes and appealed to the affective and empathic identification with the pain of Others. This was to become central to British and American notions of modernity and Enlightenment, a process in which the debates on the abolition of slavery were foundational. The strategy of claiming *womanhood*, which can also be observed in Jacobs' text, served two main aims: the recognition of their authors' (gendered) humanity and the mobilization of solidarity on the part of other (White) women. For the British case, Elahe Haschemi Yekani speaks of *affective relationality* in this context, and the empathy with the suffering of others as a means of *feeling modern*:

> The act of reading as empathetic identification with Others – accelerated by the technical revolutions and increased literacy at the time – becomes the principal means of emotional access to this middle-class identity. Modernity in this understanding is also a product of affective relationality. The eventual success of the abolitionist movement enabled the British to imagine themselves as exceptionally modern and progressive in their renunciation of slavery following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1833. (Haschemi Yekani 2016: 117)

Key themes in *Incidents* include the economics of slavery; physical and emotional pain and suffering, community support and family loyalty; self-assertion; and writing as a means of freedom, self-expression, and resistance. Other themes include the moral conflict between slavery and Christianity, racism, motherhood, family loyalty, and abandonment. Also significant is the issue of literacy, which was often used as a metaphor for freedom, because slaves who learned to read and write were often the ones who ran away. For instance, the letters Linda writes while hiding in her grandmother's hut play an important part in her eventual escape:

> Since I have been at the North, it has been necessary for me to work diligently for my own support, and the education of my children. This has not left me much

> leisure to make up for the loss of early opportunities to improve myself; and it has compelled me to write these pages at irregular intervals, whenever I could snatch an hour from household duties. (Jacobs 1861: 6)

Because enslaved Africans had been structurally denied access to education and literacy, slave narratives usually include an *authorization* in the form of a preface by a White editor as well as extensive explanations of why and how the author learned to read and write. Moreover, many slave narratives are marked by the subtitle *Written by Herself* or *Written by Himself*, which highlights the texts' *authenticity* and authorizes the experiences narrated therein. Jacobs' text is introduced by author, abolitionist, and women's rights activist Lydia Maria Child, who also edited the text:

> I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. 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. I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions. I do it with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has power to prevent it, no fugitive from Slavery shall ever be sent back to suffer in that loathsome den of corruption and cruelty. (Ibid.: 8)

In Harriet Jacob's particular case, the text also makes accessible the specific dimensions of experience many enslaved women shared in the form of sexual violence inflicted by their owners, or the denial of motherhood, as in this paragraph:

> When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own. (Ibid.: 119)

Although generally ignored by critics, who often dismissed Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* as a fictionalized account of slavery,[2] the work is heralded today as the first book-length narrative by a former enslaved woman that re-

2 *Incidents* was rediscovered in the 1970s and reprinted in 1973 and 1987 thanks to Jacobs' biographer Jean Fagan Yellin, who also brought *Incidents* to the attention of readers, scholars, and critics who dismissed the work as a fictional slave narrative.

veals the unique brutalities inflicted on enslaved women. The narrative is now also considered a central text in the history of (US) American autobiography, and African American autobiography, in particular, and as important testimony for studies on gender violence under slavery.

1.1 Colonial Gender Arrangements and Strategies of Affective Relationality

By claiming to also *be* a woman and referring to shared experiences such as motherhood or household duties, Jacobs claims a position that had structurally been denied to her as a Black and enslaved woman. The phrase *Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?* tellingly adorned the vignettes circulating at the time in abolitionist circles. Formerly enslaved abolitionist and women's right activist Sojourner Truth addressed this dimension in her famous speech *Ain't I a Woman?* (delivered in 1851 at the *Women's Convention* in Akron, Ohio), in which she claimed her membership of the category of woman, which was represented at the time by (predominantly White) early feminists, while referring to her very different gendered experience:

> Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?
> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Truth 1851: n.p.)

Directly addressing the listeners and pointing to her embodied presence – *look at me!* – Truth asks for attention, acknowledgement, and finally empathy for her experience as a Black (and formerly enslaved) woman who was never ascribed all the presumed physical and mental characteristics White women were presumed to *naturally* share, such as physical weakness and a lack of the strength needed to perform hard manual work. By asking her listeners to *look at her – look at my arm!* and recounting her experience of having been forced to perform hard physical labor – even harder than men – while also having to sell her children into slavery and being denied the position of motherhood White women were reduced to, she simultaneously questions both the institution of slavery and hegemonic stereotypes of those women whose experience was considered representative and was authorized as *fe-*

male. At the same time, she asks for empathy for the pain she has experienced. In her slave narrative, Harriet Jacobs had used a similar strategy, though more subtly. She first references the feeling – *sorrow*, *shame* – that memories of her experiences under slavery evoke in her. While doing so, she also describes the act of putting these experiences into words as painful – *it pains me to tell you of it* – thereby, on the one hand, pointing to the difficult act of recalling pain (and *writing it down*), while, on the other hand, also catering to the moral and cultural conventions of the time:

> And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may. I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness. For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood. The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world. I know what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation. (Jacobs 1861: 83–84)

Her narrative seeks to gain White women's empathy for the violence she has experienced by applying a sentimental mode. At the same time, she knows that claiming inclusion in the category of women, which was dominated by White women and deeply marked by concepts such as purity, chastity and domesticity, requires her to highlight her moral integrity – something that her status as *property* in a sexual sense threatened to undermine. The narrator is thus also careful to be not too explicit in the description of precarious situations, which she relates to the institution of slavery rather than to personal failure:

> But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. (Ibid.)

As these lines indicate, in the particular setting of enslavement, gender positions were implicitly marked by categories of racialization and freedom/enslavement. Gabriele Dietze (2013) distinguishes at least four different gender positions for the US context, which she refers to as *racial quartet* (a pyramid descending as follows:

White man – White woman – Black man – Black woman).[3] Likewise, María Lugones insists on the observation that coloniality – as a structural dimension of power born of colonization – led not to the enforcement of gender positions on the colonized, but produced very particular gender positions and *gender* itself as a colonial category:

> Colonialism […] imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers […] and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, […] and ways of knowing. (Lugones 2007: 186)

The example of Harriet Jacobs' text can only show in a cursory manner how the "evidence of experience" (Scott 1991) was utilized in slave narratives to negotiate the affective relationality with a predominantly White audience whose empathy the text sought to evoke. Using the example of individual personal accounts of the violent experience of enslavement to criticize and work toward abolishing the larger structures, these texts usually also emphasize a collective claim:

> I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can anyone realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort on behalf of my persecuted people! (Jacobs 1861: 6)

Such framings also indicate, however, that *slave narratives* were restricted by the hegemonic moral framework in which the authors and narrators had to operate, strategically balancing and negotiating between all sides in pursuit of a clear political goal. This included ascribing to their intended White female audience a higher moral standard (and not accusing them of hypocrisy).

2. "Neo-Slave Narratives": Imagining "Inner Lives" and "Emotional Memories"

Before I started reading slave narratives, a book that made the experience of slavery accessible to me as a reader was *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987). Morrison – author, editor, theoretician, and the first African American woman to be awarded

3 One could, of course, also add Native American and other positions.

the Nobel Prize in Literature – famously described the slave narrative as crucial element (and origin) of African American literary history: "In this country the print origins of black literature (as distinguished from the oral origins) were slave narratives. These book-length narratives (autobiographies, recollections, memoirs), of which well over a hundred were published, are familiar texts to historians and students of black history." (Morrison 1995: 85)

Her novel *Beloved* is often categorized as a *neo-slave narrative*, a genre which refers to the increasing number of texts emerging since the 1980s and 1990s that depict the experience of slavery but are written by contemporary authors who have not directly or personally experienced slavery. The novel is based on a real event Morrison came across in a newspaper clipping about an enslaved woman named Margaret Garner who ran away and, in 1856, killed her two-year-old daughter while facing her captors who wanted to return her to slavery.

As a literary scholar, I was interested in looking at how the text provides the possibility of access to affective relationality, acknowledgement of (the pain of) Others and thus, specific literary/aesthetic experiences. I asked why the novel had had such an impact on me. Why (and how) did the text make accessible to me what the experience of being enslaved (and of being an enslaved woman) and thus the workings of the institution of slavery must have been like? What is the experience literature can give us access to (and how does it do so)? And how does this relate to (and differ from) what we take as *factual* accounts?

The text circles around the protagonist, Sethe, a formerly enslaved and abused woman who escapes slavery with her three children while pregnant with her fourth child. When, years later, her former owner comes to get her – his property – back, Sethe kills her baby daughter rather than having her experience life under slavery. The text examines the destructive legacy of slavery and chronicles Sethe's life from her pre-Civil War days as a slave in Kentucky to her time in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873. Although Sethe lives there as a free woman, she is held prisoner by memories of the trauma of her life as a slave. After Sethe returns from prison, the baby's ghost returns and haunts Sethe and her house, forcing her to face her traumatic past.

Beloved begins in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873, at 124 Bluestone Road *(124)*, where Sethe has been living with her now eighteen-year-old daughter, Denver. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, had also lived with them until her death in 1865, before Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, ran away. Sethe believes they fled because of the presence of a ghost that has haunted their house for years. Denver, however, likes the ghost, which everyone believes to be the spirit of her dead sister. On the day the novel begins, Paul D, whom Sethe has not seen since they worked together on Mr. Garner's Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky around twenty years earlier, stops by Sethe's house. His presence resurrects Sethe's memories of her traumatic past. From this point on, the story unfolds on two temporal planes: The present in Cincinnati and a series of events that took place around twenty years earlier, mostly

in Kentucky. The past is accessed and described through the fragmented flashbacks of the major characters. As a consequence, readers read these flashbacks several times, partly from various perspectives, with each successive version of an event adding some more information to the previous ones. In this way, the text unravels how Sethe ran away from the farm *Sweet Home* after the overseer and some other men had violated and abused her while pregnant. Beforehand, she had sent her children away to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs in Ohio, which was an ostensibly free state. After crossing the Ohio river, Sethe gives birth to her daughter Denver with the help of a white girl.

Paul D's arrival initiates the series of events taking place in the present timeframe. This incident is reflected in Sethe's inner thoughts, including references to her physical reactions such as memories, which have the physical effect of *making her head hurt*:

> IT WAS TIME to lay it all down. Before Paul D came and sat on her porch steps, words whispered in the keeping room had kept her going. Helped her endure the chastising ghost; refurbished the baby faces of Howard and Buglar and kept them whole in the world because in her dreams she saw only their parts in trees; and kept her husband shadowy but there – somewhere. Now Halle's face between the butter press and the churn swelled larger and larger, crowding her eyes and making her head hurt. She wished for Baby Suggs, fingers molding her nape, reshaping it […]. (Morrison 1987: 86)

Prior to moving in, Paul D chases the ghost away. On their way home from a carnival, Sethe and Paul D encounter a strange young woman sleeping near the steps of *124*. Most of the characters believe that the woman – who calls herself Beloved – is the embodied spirit of Sethe's dead daughter. Sethe's daughter Denver develops an obsessive attachment to Beloved, and Beloved's attachment to Sethe is also overly intense, while Paul D and Beloved hate each other, and Beloved moves Paul D around the house and seduces him against his will. Meanwhile, Sethe's relationship with Beloved grows more and more obsessive. Sethe is keen on satisfying Beloved's increasingly abusive demands and making her understand why she murdered her. After Paul D learns about Sethe's infanticide, he moves out, and Denver also leaves the house, receiving help from her former teacher.

The novel concludes when a group of women from the local community come to the house *124* to exorcize the ghost that has been haunting it and Beloved disappears. Paul D returns to the house to find Sethe lying in the bed where Baby Suggs had died, distraught by Beloved's sudden disappearance.

The plot of *Beloved* follows a loose structure, meandering through forty years with flashbacks and stories about the past told by various characters, from Sethe's birth in 1835 to the conclusion of the novel in 1875. The novel is, in essence, written in frag-

ments, pieces shattered and left for the reader to put together. The juxtaposition of past and present serves to reinforce the idea that the past is alive in the current day. It forces readers to think about both contexts and consider the value and impact of each event, as figuratively embodied by the baby ghost. Morrison uses both verse and stream of consciousness to capture the characters' feelings. Her use of objective correlativism includes Biblical allusions and symbolism. The text is notable for the radical way it gives voice to numerous perspectives by constantly shifting the narrative focus between the different characters. In each chapter, the point of view of the text shifts. The anonymous narrator is omniscient, accessing the interior thoughts and experiences of many characters, and reporting them in the third person, making the reader follow their psychological trajectories and identify with their affective processes. In an interesting example, we perceive Beloved's happiness through the eyes of her sister Denver and her physical and emotional responses to their bond: "She had felt warm satisfaction radiating from Beloved's skin when she listened to her mother talk about the old days. But gaiety she had never seen." (Morrison 1987: 74)

> Luckily for Denver, looking was food enough to last. But to be looked at in turn was beyond appetite; it was breaking through her own skin to a place where hunger hadn't been discovered. […] Denver's skin dissolved under that gaze and became soft and bright like the lisle dress that had its arm around her mother's waist. She floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. (Ibid.: 118)

The novel's climax and key scene – the moment when the plantation overseer, Schoolteacher, comes with his *four horsemen* to bring Sethe and her children back to *Sweet Home* and Sethe kills her daughter – is focalized through Schoolteacher's eyes, forcing readers to observe the scene from this perspective:

> Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four-because she'd had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one – the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left. But now she'd gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her and made her cut and run. (Ibid.: 149)

Creating an effect of alienation, this passage makes the readers confront the (gendered) violence and cruelties of slavery through the eyes and inner thoughts of the

perpetrator. Another chapter is told from baby ghost Beloved's perspective in the style of an inner monologue, also differing formally from the other voices in the text. This part is marked by blank spaces and includes sections in which Beloved reflects on the *unspeakability* of certain memories – *how can I say things that are picture*, a process we as readers follow in the form of the fragmented text:

> I AM BELOVED and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing. (Ibid.: 210)

Symbolism is also omnipresent in *Beloved*. The baby ghost represents the trauma of the past haunting both the house and Sethe. Sethe's back is marked by a maze of scars Paul D calls a *chokecherry tree*. The scars stem from a whipping schoolteacher performed upon her back. The tree, which is ever-present but can never be seen, is symbolic of the traumatic burden Sethe is carrying, which was caused by people who denied her humanity. Significantly, Sethe cannot feel anything where the scar is: "As she raised up from the heat she felt Paul D behind her and his hands under her breasts. She straightened up and knew, but could not feel, that his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree". (Morrison 1987: 17) And Paul D locks away the traumatic memories that make him question his *manhood* in the *tin tobacco box* of his heart, since, like the other man on the plantation, he was not able to protect women like Sethe from being violated and abused. Readers are invited to affectively relate also to the effects of enslavement on Black enslaved men:

> Now, plagued by the contents of his tobacco tin, he wondered how much difference there really was between before schoolteacher and after. Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? That was the wonder of Sixo, and even Halle; it was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether Garner said so or not. It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. (Ibid.: 220)

The narrative ends with the women of the village chasing the baby ghost away and Sethe lying down on Baby Suggs bed, ready to die. The narrative voice reflects on how the community forgets about the mean baby ghost, agreeing that this story is not meant to be told and remembered:

> It was not a story to pass on.
> So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative – looked at too long – shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do.
> This is not a story to pass on. (Ibid.: 275)

This story that is not meant to be passed on stands for the unspeakability of the shared memory of a traumatic past that can hardly be put into words, a process that we as readers are confronted with through the narrative structure and strategies of the text. While she considered slave narratives to be the roots of African American literature, Morrison also referred to the "quiet avoidance of emotional display" in these texts due to the particular context and the restrictions their authors were subjected to: "there was no mention of their interior life" (ibid.: 91). She made it her task to represent these disremembered inner lives in literature.

Morrison further emphasized that African American voices had little narrative authority – and the necessity of White editors to confirm their accounts demonstrate this dilemma. She underscored that "[a] literate slave was supposed to be a contradiction in terms" and asks us to "remember that the climate in which they wrote reflected not only the Age of Enlightenment but its twin, born at the same time, the Age of Scientific Racism" (ibid.: 89), and thus, "American slaves' autobiographical narratives were frequently scorned as 'biased', 'inflammatory', and 'improbable'" (Morrison 1995: 87). As a consequence, as Morrison puts it, "historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic" (ibid.: 91). She therefore aims at including in her texts the inner voices and psychological complexity, the experience of pain, etc. that the authors of slave narratives necessarily had to reduce, disguise, or leave out altogether.

The context in which Morrison made these literary and theoretical interventions was marked by the poststructuralist deconstruction of authority at the very moment when, following the struggles during the social and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, numerous speakers from minority positions had for the first time gained a voice that was perceived by wider audiences in the US context, and which sparked the *canon debate* over which texts should count as representative and teachable. Susan Lanser addresses the dilemma emerging in this situation for marginalized speakers and emphasizes how much narrative authority is linked to power by underlining that "previously suppressed communities […] might be less enthusiastic than hegemonic writers about dispensing with narrative authority […] [and they] understandably seek to create an authoritative voice, not to undermine an al-

ready existing one." (Lanser 1992: 126)[4] At this point, the reference to experience as a source of authorization becomes relevant as a claim against poststructuralist arbitrariness. However, while in the context of abolitionism, slave narratives were authorized by claiming their authors'/narrators' experiences as *evidence* from which authority could be drawn, neo-slave narratives such as Morrison's *Beloved* fall back on more openly literary and aesthetic means. Morrison has continuously emphasized that in her texts she sought to fill in the blanks left by slave narratives by imaginatively creating literary spaces for the inner lives and *emotional memories* of the formerly enslaved:

> For me – a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman – the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'. […] [T]hese 'memories within' are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of people. Only the act of the imagination can help me. (Morrison 1987: 91–92)

Morrison thus consciously blurs the line between "self-recollection (memoir) and fiction" (Morrison 1995: 85), but also makes use of what she calls the similarities of both forms. This distinguishes her texts from autobiographies while simultaneously applying particular autobiographical strategies in order to gain access to the interior lives of her protagonists. She refers to the "imaginative act" as that which marks her texts as fiction and which she achieves by relying on images – "picture[s] and the feeling that accompanies this picture" (ibid.: 92) – that she combines with collective recollections of the past. She sees writing as attached to "emotional memory" and poetically compares writers to the water of a river that in her words "remembers" the paths it has run through and the route to its place of origin: "It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding.'" (Ibid.: 99) Morrison's texts seek to make these emotional memories accessible through their poetic and spoken quality as well as via an honesty regarding the non-transmittable dimensions involved in this process.

Considered as an exemplary case of what has come to be known as a *neo-slave narrative*, Morrison's *Beloved* indicates that such texts, written by authors who did not directly experience slavery, often shift the focus to the inner life and mental and emotional complexity related to this experience. Morrison's text aims to simultaneously provide access to this traumatic and violent experience through multifocal narrative positionings while also pointing to the limits of this endeavor and the impossibility of *speaking the unspeakable*. It is precisely this impossibility of gaining ac-

4 See also Barbara Christian (1987: 51–63).

cess, of putting into words and narratives what has happened and what it felt like, that makes her texts *authentic*, if one will. For, as readers, we are constantly asked to reflect on and (re)consider our own position towards the differently positioned characters and between the proceedings and the text. By accompanying the characters through the process of *going back and working through* we are given an opportunity to accompany them for a while on the path of pain and trauma and, finally, the possibility of healing – which we can also only (aesthetically/imaginatively) participate in when confronting this past and all the positions and experiences involved therein. This effect is heightened by troubling scenes such as the one in which Sethe kills her daughter to save her from slavery, which is perceived from the perspective of the plantation's overseer who had come to catch her and bring her back, or the passages narrated by the baby ghost. In this way, like those of the slave narratives a century before her, Morrison's narrative voices contribute to the negotiation of positionality and potential affective relationality between readers and text, since readers are forced to shift perspective and perceive the events through numerous, very different eyes and emotions.

Stylistically, the depiction of experience and emotions is expressed in starkly physical images – the chokeberry tree on Sethe's back and Paul D's *tobacco tin* heart being merely the most powerful. In a way, the body – and bodily, physical experiences and perceptions – is thus also depicted in its function as an archive, in line with Morrison's claim that her work is comparable to a form of *literary archeology*. Morrison's multi-vocal, multi-genre, partly fragmented, and contradictory text simultaneously addresses and performs the notion of experiences, identities, and memories as necessarily fragmented and full of voids. The text reflects the impossibility of recounting the past and the limits of language by including poetic, stream-of-consciousness, and oral elements.

Morrison positions herself also in a long tradition of feminist writing and scholarship on autobiographical forms/life writing and gender. Being grounded far more in aesthetics than tied to notions of resemblance and facticity, her texts furthermore integrate literary accounts and constructions of self-writing at a new literary level, thus constructing a different form of authority.

3. Wounded Territories: Experiencing Auto/Body/Geographies in the *Borderlands*

There are, undoubtedly, numerous different forms of accessing *emotional memories* by way of the literary imagination. A further text that does this in a remarkable way – particularly in terms of how this act of remembrance is performed in and through

the text – is *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Chicana[5] author Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). Published around the same time as Morrison's *Beloved*, Anzaldúa's text seeks to explore the experience of living at/as the border. In this text, the border is – *literally* – evoked as the concrete material, spatial, and geopolitical border between Mexico and the US, and, simultaneously, as the physical border experience lived by those who are produced by this violent space, particularly women, LGBTQ individuals, and immigrants. This dual meaning is expressed right at the beginning of the text – following a poetic introductory paragraph in English, Spanish, and Nahuatl, which also includes references to Yoruba and other languages. In the first paragraph of the main body of the text, the border is imagined as an *open wound*, evoking the bodily experience of violence, pain and physical harm/suffering:

> The U.S.-Mexican border es *una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. [...] *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.' Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. (Anzaldúa 1987: 25)

The text depicts this border space as produced by the *emotional residue* of this *unnatural* border which is inhibited by *the prohibited*, the undocumented, invisible, etc.: "A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited are its inhabitants." (Ibid.: 3)

The duality of body/border as experienced simultaneously by the inhabitants of the *borderlands* is expressed throughout the text in different forms and voices that shift constantly, turning the text itself into a body/auto/geography (a mapping of

5 The term *Chicana/Chicano* generally refers to people of Mexican descent born in the USA. The term came into popular use by Mexican Americans as a symbol of pride during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and was later adopted by Chicana feminists. Due to the Mexican-American war of 1846–48, in which Mexico lost much of its northern territories to the United States, Chicana/os represent a large percentage of the population in the states of California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Colorado. Most of them are thus not immigrants, but people who have lived there for a long time but whose territory was annexed to the US, though the term now also includes Mexicans who migrated to the US later.

the self and the body). The text is written in parts like a memoir or historical account, partly like an autobiographical account; it contains references to myth, poetry, and popular song. The narrative voice(s) combine(s) and switch(es) between English, Spanish, Spanglish/Chican@ English, and Nahuatl, and borrows from additional languages. In this way, the text intertwines various layers of the history of this border space, imitating and performing the way its inhabitants speak, think and, probably perceive and feel this border experience:

> *La mojada, la mujer indocumentada*, is doubly threatened in this country. Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence, but like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness. As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into the unknown and possibly dangerous terrain.
>
> This is her home
>
> this thin edge of
>
> barbwire. (Anzaldúa 1987: 34–35)

The formatting of the text that descends in a cascade reflects the fragmentation expressed in the metaphorical words that depict life in the *borderland* in terms of the barb wire that typically crowns border fences and walls and is meant to cause pain and keep people from crossing.

Later in the book, Anzaldúa's narrative voice introduces the concept of *Nepantla*, which stands for in-between spaces and experiences, for border places, border thinking, and border art. Again, Anzaldúa's narrator makes reference to the physically painful *scraps* this in-betweenness brings about:[6]

> Nepantla [is] the Nahuatl [Aztec] word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two words. It is a limited space, a space where you are not this or that but where you are changing. […] Nepantla is a way of reading the world. You see behind the veil and you see these scraps. Also it is a way of creating knowledge and writing a philosophy. (Ibid.: 237)

In the last part of the book, she imagines the *mestiza*, the woman belonging to various cultures and identities whose experience is marked by constant in-betweenness, or *nepantilism*. Rather than marking this position as the hegemonic discourse of the time mostly did – as *mixed*, *impure*, *problematic*, and *full of deficits* – Anzaldúa's narrative voice describes it as empowering and a model – the new *mestiza* – for overcoming persistent myths of purity, linearity, and coherence:

6 *Nepantla: Views from the South* also was the title of a journal published by Duke University Press from 2000 to 2003 and indebted to Anzaldúa's (Border) thinking.

> In a constant state of mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to? (Ibid.: 100)

Some parts are referenced in a direct voice, by an I who identifies as *mestiza* and whose thoughts are reflected in the style of an inner monologue:

> Because I, a mestiza,
> continually walk out of one culture
> and into another,
> because I am in all cultures at the same time,
> *alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*
> *me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*
> *Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan*
> *simultáneamente*. (Anzaldúa 1987: 99)

The text here again performs what it expresses, evoking a particular reading experience. By switching from English to Spanish, it invites – and/or obliges – the reader to do so, too, thus experiencing the way the *mestiza I* performs its thought. The words are poetic, referring to the experience of living and constantly negotiating among different cultures and forms and manners of belonging, a *soul between two, three, four worlds* [*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro*]. She describes her perception in vivid terms: *my head is buzzing with contradiction* [*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio*]. She thus feels *surrounded by all the voices that speak to me simultaneously* [*Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan simultáneamente*] and makes the readers (aesthetically) join her in this experience (regardless of whether they understand all the languages included in the text or not). Their effect results more from the tone, rhythm, and poetic-aesthetic appeal than from the content or the direct meaning of the words.

Finally, Anzaldúa's voice reflects on what a *mestiza* consciousness means with regard to knowledge and epistemology, and a new writing of history – of which the text itself already provides an example:

> *En unas pocas centurias*, the future will belong to the *mestiza*. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos – that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the ways we see ourselves, and the ways we behave – *la mestiza* creates a new consciousness. (Ibid.: 102)

At the end of the text, the narrative voice emphasizes a long Chicana/Chicano tradition of a close relationship to the land they worked and planted and the circular notion of *growth, decay, birth* present in many indigenous communities. Moreover, she evokes a close link between the feminine body and the territory identified as *la tierra madre* [mother earth], a common trope in Latin American and Chicana feminisms:

> Yes, the Chicano and Chicana have always taken care of growing things and the land. [...] They [the watermelon seeds] survive and grow, give fruit hundreds of times the size of the seed. We water them and hoe them. We harvest them. The vines dry, rot, are plowed under. Growth, death, decay, birth. The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, renacimiento de la tierra madre.

> This land *was* Mexican *once*
> *Was Indian* always
> and *is*.
> And *will be again*.
> (Anzaldúa 1987: 113, emphasis added by the author)

The final lines express the simultaneity of different temporal and spatial layers that mark the Mexican-US *borderlands,* claiming the continuity of its *Indian* [Native American] heritage, which impacts on its past and present and will endure in the future – a *mestiza* future. Considering the context in which the text (like Morrison's *Beloved*) was first published – a time of so-called *culture wars* and *canon debate* in the US in which conservative voices starkly opposed the inclusion of hitherto marginalized voices into the national imaginary and school and college curricula – *Borderlands/La Frontera* represents a crucial intervention. Affective relationality with the readers is evoked through irritation (as in the use of marginalized languages and their empowerment) as well as through non-discursive elements such as the unusual text organization/layout (which also symbolizes *going against the grain*). Again, the way these last lines are formatted reflects their content and intended effect, adding to the text's implicit questioning of conventional genre and narrative conventions. Through its openness and combinatory characteristics, the text can be read simultaneously as a life narrative, a historical account, poetry, and/or (queer and intersectional) theorizing and as a sort of *queering* of normativities *(avant la lettre*).

4. Outlook: Reading for the Literary

My cursory look at three exemplary texts could naturally only give a small impression of the ways in which gendered experience can be represented in (life-writing) literature, and how exemplary texts negotiate distinct affective relationalities – including the one between gender and genre and between experience and its (necessary) mediation/representation.[7] As demonstrated, the choice of genre has a decisive impact on strategies of emotionalization, self-authorization, and (claims for readings of) affective relationality.

My examples demonstrate various ways in which life-writing literature can provide a space for addressing *unspeakable things*/experiences such as sexual violence, enslavement, or living in border zones. They do so by adopting different strategies of claiming the authority and evidence of experiences – strategies that are not those of Western male individualism. Following Joan W. Scott, the experiences that these texts seek to make accessible and negotiate affectively can be said to represent claims for knowledge that are *unassailable*, "at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted [. . .] always contested, and always therefore political." (Scott 1992: 37) In all three cases, the narrative is linked to/marked by concrete *embodiments* of what is experienced and what readers are invited to empathically join in with (including the experience of unspeakability). Such embodiments range from sentimental appeals to the feelings, morality, and solidarity of White women by referencing the (presumably shared) experience of (denied) motherhood and sexual abuse, to concrete scars resulting from abuse and sexual violence as in the case of *chokeberry tree* on Sethe's back. Further embodiments are metaphors that equate the body to the territory like those of the *barbwire* in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the border as an *open wound* that produces scars, but also the *madre tierra* that heals the wounds and reproduces the productive soil.

The texts discussed thus seek to provide access to experiences that could not be expressed in the past and cannot yet be expressed in the present/future. All three texts open up space for manifold readings and potential affective identifications: compassion and sensitivity for injustice in the case of Harriet Jacobs, whose text can also be read as a crucial expansion of the genre of autobiography in the US context by including the experiences of (formerly) enslaved women, or as a historical account.[8]

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7 On Gender and Genre, see also Braxton 1990, Benstock 1988, Brodzki/Schenck 1988, Hof/Rohr 2008, Kley 2001, Lanser1992, Smith 1987, Smith/Watson 2010, Smith/Schaffer 2004.

8 Which, at the time of the novel's publication formed part of the *canon debate* in the US over which texts, authors, positions, and perspectives should be representative and included in school and university curricula. Currently, Morrison's texts are once again being questioned by representatives of the right-wing conservative spectrum, who have managed to ban some of her books in individual states.

Conversely, *Beloved* seeks to create the aesthetic experience of the psychological impact of enslavement on all those who lived it, including the white overseer through whose eyes readers are forced to observe the novel's central scene. The text represents the unspeakable *as* unspeakable and does not try to dissolve or explain the voids, wounds, traumas, and speechlessness caused by the experiences that resonate in it. This is probably one of the reasons why *Beloved* counts as one of the most impressive representatives of the so-called *neo-slave narrative*, which seeks to make accessible precisely those layers of an individual and collective/cultural trauma that cannot be found or accessed in the same way via historical sources. Emerging at the height of the poststructuralist questioning of old connections and authorities, the text further blurs the line between the *factual* and the *fictional*. Finally, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* seeks to draw readers into the experience of the border and the *mestiza*. The text refuses readings limited to one language or genre, combining numerous voices and historical layers, while maintaining a high level of poetic appeal. In this way, the text insists on and makes a claim for the multiplicity of histories, voices, and experiences that, only if listened to together – like the combination of languages in the *mestiza*'s head – point towards the future. All texts thus add to the visibility of heretofore marginalized dimensions of hegemonic experiences and forms of life and history writing, which have recently again been increasingly contested by forces opposing plurality. The texts invite, encourage, and to a certain extent force us to always (also) read for *the literal* which marks *all* accounts of experience as part of "complex and contradictory processes" of social reality (Scott 1992: 34).

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