# HISTORICIZING TONY MORRISON'S *BELOVED*: THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

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***Abstract***
*Toni Morrison's* Beloved*, although based on a terrible antebellum episode that shook America, is not a historical novel, despite some notable claims to that effect. To come up with a gripping narrative of imaginative engagement with the past, an author like Morrison has to leave out most of the apparently objective facts of history. These facts, far from removing the vividness and pathos of* Beloved*, provide a framework and a substance in contrast to which a work of fiction is more likely to be appreciated in its 'biased' approach to human experience. What follows focuses on the significance of the Railroad Underground in the shaping of the abolitionist ethos in antebellum America, at the time of Margaret Garner's trial.*

***Keywords***: The Underground Railroad, the Middle Passage, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Subterranean Pass-Way, antebellum America

## *1. Introduction*

A task that hardly anyone would assume would be to undertake to rank such works as *Beloved* in a long and remarkable career of a major writer who had, unquestionably, canonical status in American literature while her creative work was still developing and undergoing change. Whether Morrison's 1987 novel is her best fictional work is open to critical debate: whether it is her most memorable is less so. The current text, though, aims at adding a few significant historical touches to a background that has usually neglected the importance of one particular phenomenon: the solidarity of white and black abolitionists and runaway slaves in the management of the Underground Railroad. It stresses the difference it made in the promotion of emancipation and racial equality, in spite of the relative reticence of most Northern politicians, including Abraham Lincoln himself.

The phenomenon under investigation here apparently has a very strange name, since it was neither literally "underground" nor did it have much to do with the development of the American transportation system. Whether the phrase that refers to it looks strange or not is less important, what it contributed to American

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antebellum developments is worth considering, since it brought together people both black and white, both men and women fighting for the same "beloved" cause, challenging established patriarchal race and gender norms in a still young democracy. Some black people took up arms to fight slavery (Nat Turner), others resorted to inconceivable acts of violence against themselves and their loved ones (Margaret Garner). John Brown, a white man, took up arms to wage his own anti-slavery war two years before the Civil War. Is *Belove*d a historical novel or much more than that, in which case, what is particularly missing in a more comprehensive historical landscape from which Morrison's text draws a large part of its substance?

## *2. Two patriarchs, two female novelists, one astonishing act of violence*

Men have been known since times immemorial to have had less trouble choosing between paternal love for a beloved son and orders from above, meant to test the man's submissiveness. The peculiar story of a different Abraham from the great American emancipator and arguably the first imperial president is a good case in point. Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac is one of the best-known illustrations of the harsh law of patriarchy. If a man is a patriarch and he wishes to preserve his power, he has to blindly obey the orders of one's superior, especially when that one is the highest VIP in the universe. Abraham does not know that God is testing him, so he takes the order seriously. Should he not? Sarah, Isaac's mother, is not important in this Old Testament narrative, even if she was the one who had given birth to her only child Isaac, what is more, in very old age. Previously, Sarah, Abraham's wife, had been willingly ceded by her lying husband ('She is my sister") to the powerful Abimelech (Genesis 20:20). Should one not become a feminist after even more terrible stories that followed ever since? What is more important is that another two women, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Toni Morrison will compete for prominence, at different times and in different historical contexts, with such patriarchs as Abraham Lincoln himself, in the vast narrative of African American emancipation.

Toni Morrison is one of those powerful women who emerged as prominent artistic voices during the so-called second wave of feminism, coinciding in the US with the heyday of the Civil Rights movement. Thus, gender and race become very sensitive issues in the country's historical development during and after the tumultuous 1960s. Sensitive issues such as race were dealt with in various ways in those days, with Malcolm X on the one hand and Martin Luther King representing the basic opposite options: violent resistance to injustice vs. patient, gradual, peaceful militancy. It all had to do with the pressing requirements of the moment, as well as with visions of a more equitable future for everyone. Both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were cut down in their prime, so to speak, and did not live to see their dreams, more or less peaceful, come true.

This is the context in which Missy Dehn Kubitschek assesses, at the end of the 1960s, the relevance of such authors as young Toni Morrison, their engagement with the past in order to see its relevance to the present and the future: “By the end of the 1960s, both Malcolm X and King had been assassinated, and the power of their movements had declined. Focusing on a different kind of social and cultural change, African Americans worked to analyze their cultural heritage and its contributions to American civilization” (Kubitschek, 1998: 28). Like many other statements trying to make sweeping generalizations, the one made by Kubitschek about the declining power of the movements advocating an end to racism and more freedoms and rights for more people is easy to contradict. That was an age of various cultural revivals, with more groups, formerly marginalized and oppressed, asking for their fair share of the American democratic pie. Literature is one of the realms in which an increasingly wider cultural debate is being undertaken.

As far as the African American community is concerned, the most important artistic response, combining aspects of patriarchy and history, is arguably Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, seen by such critics as M.W. Iyasere as a historical novel, while also realizing the various challenges the novel poses:

*Why focus on an astonishing act of violence committed not upon but by a slave woman? Why should this slave story be central for Morrison, and why should we be brought to reimagine this chapter of American history through the prism of a haunting, passionate, violent, and ultimately unresolved relationship between a mother and daughter?* (Iyasere, 2000: 84)

Such questions are obviously meant to introduce a discussion of the novel as a piece of history, as one might imagine it to be a faithful reflection of a historical event and of a context that moved America in various ways in the agitated period preceding the Civil War. This terrible incident which inspired Morrison brought, once more, to national attention the story of a group of slaves having managed to run away from a plantation in Kentucky in early 1856, crossing the frozen Ohio River and making it into a free state, Ohio. It was a massive group, family members and friends, receiving attention from African Americans and white abolitionists as well, including Levi Coffin, a Quaker, one of the heads of the Underground Railroad.

Among the historical elements worth considering was the huge impact that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, had made since its first publication a few years earlier, in 1852. In that novel, Eliza Harris, as a result of dramatic changes happening after the plantation she and her family lived and worked on changed white slave-owner hands, runs away and crosses the frozen Ohio with dramatic evens soon following. The novel remained at the top of the best-selling American novels throughout the 19th century, which goes on to show that its echoes

were important among a large section of the American population, especially in the North. Among the generalizing, and therefore distorting, perceptions that many are likely to share today, starting from the echo of such influential books as *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* is to divide the "good North," where every white person is an abolitionist, and the "bad South," made up of white supremacist slave owners oppressing their slaves. It is fair to say, though, that Stowe's narrative also shows some "humane" slave owners, compelled by circumstances to sell some of their "human property," which leads to the critical moment that will trigger the development of the narrative proper. So does Morrison's.

Another important element of that age, apart from the increasing abolitionist sentiment among the white population, is the one which will trigger the tragedy at the centre of Margaret Garner's story, as well as inside Morrison's novel: the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, part of the so-called Compromise of 1850. Another generalization to be avoided is that, politically, the North was abolitionist and that the main reason the Civil War started was because Abraham Lincoln wanted to abolish slavery. George M. Frederickson's very documented book on Lincoln, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race*, shows the great politician, as the title shows, as vacillating. The title of the first chapter is even more revealing as far as the central dilemma is concerned: "A Clash of Images: Great Egalitarian or Hard-Core Racist?" Freeing slaves during the Civil War and accepting them in the Union Army but placating the slave states before that by accepting slavery and its laws, he was, and Frederickson quotes W.E.B. Du Bois himself, "big enough to be inconsistent."(Du Bois qtd. in Frederickson, 2008: xi)

A series of American leaders before Lincoln, and Lincoln the great emancipator included, had been ready and willing to make any compromise to save the union, even if that meant the prolongation of the legal status of slavery in the South. Ironically, the American republic, the land of the free, was still dealing with this painful question – should the South be antagonized about slavery? – while an empire, the British Empire, had abolished the slave trade as early as 1807 and had abolished slavery altogether in 1833.

The previously mentioned Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was a disgrace and a slap on the cheek of the sovereignty of the Northern free states. Not only were Southern slave-owners allowed to undertake incursions, using hounds and armed men to chase runaway slaves well into the heart of the North, but any official or citizen from the free states unwilling to cooperate in the capturing of the runaways risked very severe punishment, even if this law was not always enforced. It was a very shameful compromise. It should then come as no surprise if the combined effect of a book like Beecher's and a very outrageous Fugitive Slave Act should have contributed to the range and power of what will be called the impact of the activity of the Underground Railroad, the focus of the subsequent section of this text.

Eliza Harris was a fictional character, and so was Uncle Tom. Margaret Garner and her children very real people, legally speaking African American slaves. Although the runaway slaves were met with benevolence in the North, the Fugitive Slave Act allowed the "rightful owners" of the very real Margaret Garner, of her husband and of some of the members of their runaway group to be cornered. While some of the group had managed to find their way to freedom in Canada with the help of members of the Underground Railroad, Margaret Garner and her loved ones were in a desperate situation. The woman decided to take her children's lives and then to commit suicide rather than to go back to slavery. In despair, she managed to kill her two-year-old infant and injure the other children before being captured and put on trial, an event that stirred and divided antebellum America.

Even in the context of the horrible reality of slavery, how can one understand a mother killing her beloved baby? A sympathetic artist of that time, painter Thomas Satterwhite Noble, depicting the tragic scene of the horrified slave catchers facing the mother who has just killed her child, has difficulty finding a proper title. His painting is titled "The Modern Medea," which makes one view her as a fierce killer and as a sorceress, like Circe's relative in much of Ancient Greek mythology.

This kind of Medea figure, though, will appeal to Toni Morrison. It takes a great writer to choose such a subject and to turn it into a memorable, haunting narrative that readers should address with pity and awe, very much like audiences of Ancient Greek tragedy. Her story will inevitably highlight and leave out things that history provides, in order to create special artistic effects. Her central character will be seen as undertaking her epic journey towards the North, from the ironically named Sweet Home plantation where she was a slave, across the Ohio all by herself, with occasional help from a couple of isolated individuals. The focus will be on the painful, haunting, yet symbolic presence of a "baby's venom," which will be central in the novel, and on the return of the repressed, in the shape of a mysterious young woman. Beloved is her name. She, not her mother, Sethe, the modern Medea, the runaway slave, will give her name to the novel. The narrative, in its complex formula, accommodates myth, history, while engaging with the main American tradition of the Gothic in one of its outstanding contemporary forms. Beloved the character embodies painful shadows coming from the past, while Sethe refers to her engagement with these shadows as "rememory." She uses the word about a dozen times throughout the novel, while giving it subjective, imaginative, mysterious overtones. Inevitably, focusing on these shadows leaves out the less mysterious facts of history. History, however, completes the fictional picture, allowing it to acquire brilliance and contour.

The current article does not follow in the wake of a long series of critical assessments of a landmark of American fiction, largely having contributed to the author being awarded the Nobel Prize a few years after the book's publication. This

text is meant to complete the historical context of the novel's setting, since such critics as Iyasere and Rachel Lister insist on *Beloved* being a historical novel, rather than on it being an outstanding attempt at transcending history through myth and the power of the imagination. Thus, Lister, acknowledging other critical voices, sees Morrison as using her book as a means to repair the distortions and omissions of history rather than as a work of fiction:

*Morrison uses the novel as a vehicle to scrutinize the many ways in which history has been reconstructed through misrepresentations, distortions, and omissions. While all of Morrison's novels acknowledge the currency of the past on a thematic and formal level, Beloved is generally recognized as Morrison's first historical novel.* (Lister, 2009: 19)

While it is easy to prove that not only fictional narratives, but also historical accounts, however comprehensive and avowedly impartial they might strive to be, deal with what one might call "misrepresentations, distortions, and omissions," since they are inevitably incomplete and subjectively perspectival, what follows undertakes to complete, to a certain extent, what is largely missing in Morrison's remarkable narrative: the human background of the Underground Railroad. If *Beloved* is not a historical novel, the account of the Underground Railroad in the context of antebellum America is part of it.

## *3. From the Middle Passage to the Underground Railroad*

The story of slavery in the land of the free did not start with the twenty Africans put on sale in Jamestown, Virginia, as early as 1619. That was just one notable event, while slavery in various forms was a fact of life that the settlers had brought with them from the Old World. Whether the feudal system had relied on the exploitation of serfs, the American colonists developed their own system of cheap labor: white, European indentured servants, brought to America, usually bound to repay their transatlantic passage. The contract usually lasted for seven years, after which the indentured servants were free to pursue their own ways. Gradually, the international slave trade, involving African kings, emperors, warlords, as well as Muslim merchants and ruthless European entrepreneurs, provided the alternative to the dwindling business based on indentured white workers. Surprisingly, "Massachusetts was the first colony to legally recognize slavery, but Virginia would follow suit."(Mull, 2010: 9)

Plantation owners interested in growing tobacco, rice, and then cotton, became the buyers, representing the massive demand for this inhuman enterprise leading to the ordeal of the Middle Passage, the terrible transatlantic voyage that turned Africans into slaves on American plantations. For centuries, since the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth, hundreds of thousands of captured Africans were

part of the largest forced migration in human history. Tony Morrison dedicates her novel to "Sixty Million/ and more." Various figures have been advanced by historians, none definitive. What is certain is that the middle passage, to South, Central and North America alike, involved a lot of suffering, disease, and death, amounting to an African holocaust. Whether Morrison advanced the figure to augment, by multiplying tenfold, the proportions of the genocide in contrast to the six million Jews thought to have died in Nazi Germany's extermination camps is open to debate. What is undeniable is that the Middle Passage provided the human energy, ruthlessly exploited, to ensure America's welfare for a long while, since, for example, cotton came to be, even in industrial times, the country's major export, North and South included. The shadow of unrecorded, unhistoricized suffering of the innumerable forced migrants, not on the way to freedom, but to lifelong slavery, will feature prominently in an imaginative engagement with the Middle Passage as evoked by the symbolic figure of Beloved in Morrison's novel, returning to Sethe and the other survivors to remind them of unspeakable horrors. The Middle Passage is thus part shadow, part pre-history, and so is the beginning of a few slaves' attempts to break free.

Initially, uprooted from their various cultures and traditions, enslaved on foreign plantations in a foreign land, the Africans had almost no alternative to accepting the slave status forced upon them. Initially, a few of them ran away to the South, to Florida, which still belonged to Spain, where slavery had been abolished. Some of the runaways fled to the still free Native American tribes in the South. Numbers were limited and unrecorded at that time. The urge to run away from slavery gradually turned into something of a network, especially after some of the Northern states declared themselves free states in the late eighteenth century, having taken the Declaration of Independence very seriously. This was also the time when the African enslaved population grew tremendously. According to Michael Burgan, "In 1790, the U.S. enslaved population was less than 700,000. By 1860, it had risen to 3,953,750." (Burgan, 2006: 7) This is the time when both abolitionist sentiment and the dramatic increase in slave numbers created the conditions for the development of a systematic way of organizing escape from slavery, a network which will later be called the Underground Railroad. Whether individual escape attempts by unaided slaves, sometimes successful, but usually ending in failure, are the stuff heroic stories are made of, thus deserving to be turned into memorable narratives, the widespread network and activity of the Underground Railroad is a phenomenon that moved America forward in the antebellum years more than the subsequent decision of one particular American president.

This network almost turned into an (underground) institution in the early nineteenth century, and its name, the Underground Railroad, was first recorded "in the early 1830s, about the time that real railroads began to spread across the country."(Nofi, 2000: 19) The same Albert Nofi goes on to say that, although it had nothing to do with actual railroads, being an underground, unofficial "business,"

the network had “conductors”(guides) and “passengers,” the shelters on the way were called “stations,” run by “stationmasters,” while those who supported the network with money and goods were called “stockbrokers.”

## *4. The Underground Railroad in the pre- Civil War years*

Historians differ in two basic ways about the importance of the Underground Railroad, some stressing its role, while others almost dismissing it altogether. It largely has to do with considering the flight from slavery as essentially an action undertaken mainly by slaves and groups of slaves, usually on their own, or as an undertaking in which numerous white anti-abolitionist groups from the North substantially contributed to the creation and the running of the so-called Underground Railroad. Favoring either of the two options is obviously politically motivated, giving more or less agency to either the runaway slaves and their already free African American brothers or to the combined effort of both whites and African Americans.
Among the first group, one can mention such authors as history professor Larry Gara, for whom the Underground Railroad is one of the legends that have been taken for reality in American history:

*The romance and glamour of the institution have helped endear it to Americans, especially in the North. The legend of the underground railroad tells of intrepid abolitionists sending multitudes of passengers over a well-organized transportation system to the Promised Land of freedom. The fugitives often were hotly pursued by cruel slave hunters, and nearly always they eluded capture because of the ingenuity and daring of the conductors* (Gara, 1961: 1-2).

Romance and glamour were there all right, even in the factual accounts of such stories as Margaret Garner’s trial, with flamboyant orators such as Rev. Bushnell taking the side of the slave woman charged with murder by comparing her painful dilemma with that of Patrick Henry, expressed in the American patriot’s famous words: “Give me liberty, or give me death” (qtd. in May,1999: 35). Abolitionist views were being expressed very forcefully. Larry Gara is obviously biased downplaying some of the details, the actors, and the scope of the enterprise, in which public opinion and less public, underground activities played a part. The numbers and forms of organization are sufficiently well documented, unlike the individual escapes in the earlier, “pre-Underground Railroad” system ages.

A respected member of the African American academic community, the late J. Blaine Hudson, formerly from the University of Louisville, discusses important aspects of the organized network in his *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Network in the Kentucky Borderland* (2002). His study deals with historical evidence about runaway slaves and the Underground Railroad in his native state of

Kentucky, the network's sections bordering the state along the Ohio River. The book provides information about Kentucky as the central section of the Underground Railroad, as the Ohio River, North of it, was the three-hundred-mile border that had to be crossed to reach what had not been a Promised Land formerly. J. Blaine Hudson's volume mentions reasons why people, both black and white, defied existing laws to aid and abet runaway slaves, describes important escape routes, crossing points from Tennessee through Kentucky, naming people who offered help and guidance. What is worth mentioning are such details as "slave escapes and inter-racial relationships" bringing together, apart from the particularly interested African American community, members of the Irish and German immigrant communities in Louisville and Cincinnati (see Hudson, 2002: 79 – 86).

What is undeniable is that remarkable members of the African American community gained particular prominence in the development of the Underground Railroad. One of the most important ones was Harriet Tubman, who acted as a courageous conductor in her youth on several dangerous missions. She gained an iconic stature not only in the context of the network's antebellum years, but also within the larger framework of the Civil Rights movement, which was to gain momentum more than a century later. Through her example, she promoted both the case of her gender and of her race, to be further upheld in the decades and century to come. Tubman has received so wide a coverage in many books and articles about the Underground Railroad that limiting the space devoted to her here allows the sketching of a more comprehensive network in which other figures contributed to the more or less violent confrontation over the reality and institution of slavery in antebellum America.

Books memorializing joint work for the cause of emancipation through the Underground Railroad were written by Adrienne Shadd, Afua Cooper and Karolyn Smardz Frost on the network and its Canadian connection (Shad et al 2005) and Lowell Soike about the Iowa Underground Railroad (Soike 2013), among others, with Hudson's work (2002) on the Kentucky borderland and the Underground Railroad already mentioned above. A very useful book is Graham Russell Gao Hodges's *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City.* It shows how gradual emancipation had started in the Northern states, such as Connecticut and New York, together with a considerate and understanding attitude of the white community toward young black people tempted by a criminal life who managed to mend their ways. Although described as a radical black abolitionist, the protagonist, David Ruggles, moved on from stealing watermelons and horses to nobler causes, having learned from the examples set by such white people as Lydia Huntley Sigourney, one of his first teachers, or from an early white abolitionist his parents respectfully told him about Aaron Cleveland, great-grandfather of President Grover Cleveland, who had

published in the state of Connecticut "a number of antislavery articles and poems in the Norwich Packet in the 1770s"(Hodges 2010: 12).

Tom Calarco authored two very documented and informative books on the people involved in the Underground Railroad (Calarco 2008) and on the places associated with the network (Calarco 2011), both volumes showing the contribution of the white and black communities to a common project. Significantly, as he himself stresses, his *People of the Underground Railroad: A Biographical Dictionary* discusses the activity of 61 white and 39 black individuals, also mentioning the contribution of such white women as Catharine Coffin and Jean Rankin, the wives of famous white conductors Levi Coffin and John Rankin. Calarco's 2008 books also supplies a reliable timeline of the main developments associated with the network, from the foundation of the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage (1775), which would later be called the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. He also notes that Pennsylvania had set the stage for the emergence of the Underground Railroad, while also passing a gradual emancipation law in the state.

## *5. The Underground Railroad and the bloodier side of the emancipation controversy: from Turner to John Brown*

Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel, in *Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas* (2009), about the same time as Calarco, sketches the violent background in which eastern Kansas promoted important figures, while also widening the scope of those turbulent years. This involved not only white abolitionists and black slaves being pursued by Southern posses, but a more complicated context in which emigrant Native American tribes and armed groups of pro-slavery "Border Ruffians" and anti-slavery "Free Staters" were fighting over "Bleeding Kansas" becoming a free or a slave state. More particularly, Oertel focuses on gender issues, showing how violence challenged traditional gender roles in Kansas, and describing women's participation in the violent clashes between pro-slavery and anti-slavery groups. Chapter 3, from its very title, "All Women Are Called Bad: What Makes a Woman in Bleeding Kansas?" (Oertel, 2009: 58 – 84) announces these dramatic challenges.

Alarco's and Oertel's books contain significant sections that explain the more visible violent outbursts that were part and parcel of the years preceding the Civil War, in which the less visible work of the Underground Railroad supported the anti-slavery ethos as a whole. Thus, Nat Turner's slave rebellion of 1831 may be seen as a somewhat isolated backlash against the savagery of slavery in one particular place, the slave state of Virginia. It may explain why slaves like Nat Turner, in his rage against the whites, or Margaret Garner and her fictional counterpart, Sethe, might resort to unspeakable acts of violence against the others or against themselves and their loved ones.

However, one more detail of the overall historical context in which the Underground Railroad features prominently in an otherwise bloodier cultural landscape is the story of one relatively well-off white American citizen, apparently having no axe to grind in the pro-slavery – anti-slavery dispute, by the name of John Brown. He was the great-grandson of American Revolution heroes, while his grandfather had supported American troops fighting the British in the 1812 War. Significantly, his father was a confirmed abolitionist. Also worth mentioning, which also shows the principles, courage and dedication of other abolitionists, are people like Elijah Lovejoy. He was a newspaper editor who had defied pro-slavery crowds, had become a martyr of the cause, killed by a racist mob in 1837 in the state of Illinois. Tom Calarco records the moment when John Brown, in the company of his father, attending Elijah Lovejoy's funeral service, made his solemn plea, combining religious fervor and intimations of violent action: "'Here, before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time,' he proclaimed, 'I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery!'" (Calarco 2008: 40). He would soon come up with his more militant, more military version of the Underground Railroad, called The Subterranean Pass-Way.

Nat Turner had been a humiliated slave who had taken up arms and took revenge on some of his oppressors, as well as some of the whites who had the misfortune to come his way. In despair, like Margaret Garner, he had looked for desperate remedies for himself and those around him. Concerning John Brown, the white abolitionist, many might feel puzzled to understand his radical stand. Brown was not a desperado, but a religious man with abolitionist principles. Religion usually teaches one patience. Brown was not patient, neither did he first act in keeping with his self-preservation instinct. He would imagine a Subterranean Pass-Way that would extend the Underground Railroad a thousand miles South by means of an organized military movement. He thought of an armed insurrection to free the African American slaves by starting "his" war against slavery, after many years of aiding and abetting fugitives going North by way of the "more peaceful" Underground Railroad. That would happen in the years immediately preceding the Civil War.

After Lovejoy's assassination by racists in 1837, Brown took part in some of the violent clashes in Bleeding Kansas in 1856 before his final raid at US Army Arsenal at Harper's Ferry in 1859. His idea was to capture enough weapons to start an African American armed insurrection. His trial for treason divided America one year before the Civil War. It is worth noting that the growing abolitionist cause was not strong enough to stay or to prevent Brown's execution, although many prominent intellectuals publicly advocated his cause, the best-known being Thoreau's "Plea for Captain John Brown" (Stoneham 75-120). The plea had no effect on the Virginia authority, but one month after the Civil War broke out, in May 1861, John Brown's Song was first officially played by a Union army unit.

## 6. Conclusion

The article above claims that *Beloved* is not a historical novel, which is by no means a drawback. A literary narrative focuses on aspects of human experience in memorable ways, highlighting some of them, transfiguring some of them, leaving out most of them, evoking and imagining where history falls short.
To make a powerful narrative out of an apparently despicable act of despair is the kind of formidable challenge that Toni Morrison memorably faced in *Beloved*. Sethe is seen, for most of the narrative, haunted by the unrecorded account of her people's terrible past. To leave out a large part of the historical context enhances the novel's power to impress.

However, to include significant aspects of this context in an interpretation of the novel's relevance to the several time layers it addresses is a necessary step. This applies to anyone who, in addition to reading a remarkable literary text, wants to link it to both the extra-literary present and the past, thus bringing together memory, rememory and a sense of history from an inevitably contemporary perspective.

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