

Haunting Encounters and Re-mystification: Magical Realism as a Literary Device in Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the haunting encounters and influence of supernatural elements on the characters and the stories especially in the postcolonial fiction produced by women writers of both east and west origins. This research is delimited to one novel by Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and one novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha" by Mahasweta Devi. Both the women writers have different origins but their writings show an ample amount of similar traits to present their ideas and they have used supernatural elements and haunting encounters as a literary device in the proceeding of plot and stories in the selected texts. This research is qualitative in nature, theories presented by Jacques Derrida and W.B Faris help as a major theoretical framework in this research. This paper explores different grounds and techniques of using supernatural elements as magical realism by the writers in their fictional works.

1. INTRODUCTION

In arguing that magical realism is a genre particularly suited to postcolonial critique, Faris points to the fact that it "has participated in transculturation processes that have resulted from encounters between different cultures throughout the world" (Faris, 2004, p.34). One reason for this, she suggests, is that the coexistence of two distinct literary modes within it, realism and fantasy, echoes and reflects the process of cross-cultural contact and creates what she describes as a particularly intense dynamics of alterity. Following Faris, there is something about the mode in which texts like "Pterodactyl" and *Beloved* imagine otherness that is particularly disposed to crossing boundaries. Comparing these two texts allows us to recognize the common ground of similarity underlying the specific, situated political and historical projects that Morrison and Devi undertake. For both Devi and Morrison, turning to the supernatural allows for productive political engagements while also calling into question the very cultural foundations upon which those engagements are built. In "Pterodactyl," Devi's work of fiction accomplishes everything that Puran's article accomplishes, detailing the unjust laws and economic policies that cause tribal people to suffer. But it also simultaneously makes a more personal kind of contact with its readers, urging us to recognize the common bonds across difference that connect Puran with the pterodactyl and bring him to understand that, despite their difference, they share a common fate. In a similar way, *Beloved* is certainly a historical novel about slavery and its aftermath, which attempts to imagine the subjectivities of people whom history has rendered voiceless; Morrison's novel is also more challenging for readers to test themselves against the impossible moral questions which Sethe faces.

The consequences of Devi's choice to make a supernatural apparition central to a work of fiction that explicitly addresses the immediate, pressing needs of India's oppressed tribal minority communities. "Pterodactyl", like Devi's other fiction and journalistic writing, articulates a scathing critique of India's government and its Hindu majority, who are responsible for perpetuating the structural inequalities that condemn tribal communities to poverty, illiteracy, and starvation. At first blush, asking readers to accept the possibility that an embodied ghost or specter inhabits this present-day world would seem to detract from the force of such a critique. Examining "Pterodactyl" alongside another equally surprising and provocative depiction of the supernatural, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, helps bring the effects of this strategy into sharper focus. In both "Pterodactyl" and *Beloved*, fictional characters model the response to the supernatural that readers themselves are invited to adopt. By confronting the ghost's face-to-face, these characters recognize a form of mutuality that connects them with the ghosts across unbridgeable boundaries of difference. The relationships with ghosts these texts depict echo poststructuralist formulations of ethics, which define the encounter with the other as the source of ethical responsibility. As readers, we too are confronted with stories that challenge rationalist assumptions about the nature of reality and test our

ability to believe. Like the characters within them, readers of these two texts must learn to connect across boundaries of difference: to recognize their implication in the stories they read, but also to respect the limits that the texts themselves enforce. In Devi's "Pterodactyl," Puran is transformed by his encounter with an impossible, prehistoric creature that appears in an impoverished tribal village in contemporary India. As a journalist for a local newspaper in the city of Patna, Puran travels to the town of Pirtha at the request of an old friend, Harisharan, who is now a local official, to document the ongoing crisis there. Although the government refuses to acknowledge it, the tribal people living in Pirtha and other neighboring towns are dying from a man-made famine and from pesticide poisoning; by inviting Puran, Harisharan hopes to publicize the humanitarian crisis and obtain relief supplies for his starving constituents. In the town, however, a mysterious creature has been sighted—part reptile, part bird—and a tribal boy named Bikhia has carved its image in stone. When Puran first arrives in Pirtha, the local people are mistrustful of him, and his attempts to win their acceptance only further mark him as an outsider. But everything changes on Puran's first night in the village, when the pterodactyl appears seeking shelter in the hut where he is sleeping. His obligation to protect and conceal the pterodactyl, which he believes to be an ancestral spirit of the tribal community, allies him with Bikhia, and together they struggle to care for it and protect the secret of its presence. During his stay in Pirtha, Puran witnesses the dignity and integrity of the tribals in the face not only of starvation, but also exploitation by labor contractors and objectification by international aid workers who seek to capture the tribals' abjection on film. But the pterodactyl's death brings Puran's time in Pirtha to an end. Together, he and Bikhia hide its body in a deep cavern, and Puran prepares to return to his own life and his work as a journalist. The article he writes about Pirtha is scathing; it makes no mention of the pterodactyl and focuses exclusively on the government neglect and corruption that is responsible for the tribals' suffering. At the novella's close, Puran is hailing a truck on the road leaving Pirtha, to return to his life, his profession, and his family.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is perhaps the most well-known ghost story in contemporary American literature, and like Devi's novella, it depicts an encounter with the supernatural that challenges characters' assumptions about the world they occupy. Morrison's novel is set in the black community on the outskirts of Cincinnati in the period following emancipation. At the center of the novel is an event that occurred years before, when Sethe, an escaped slave, attempted to kill her own children rather than allow them to be recaptured and returned to slavery. At the time the novel begins, Sethe is living in isolation with her surviving daughter, Denver, her two sons having fled the uneasy atmosphere of a house purported to be haunted by the ghost of their dead sister. The arrival of Paul D., a former slave from the same plantation, promises to bring Sethe out of her isolation and back into the world. When the two begin a romantic relationship, Sethe hesitantly ventures beyond the house at 124 Bluestone Road, and the black community which had ostracized her begins to show signs of acceptance. But the arrival of another visitor, a mysterious young woman named Beloved, changes all that. At once a helpless, demanding child and a sinister, knowing presence, Beloved drives Paul D. away, but is embraced by Sethe and Denver, who come to believe that she is the embodied ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter. Despite their efforts to "make up for the handsaw," Beloved's insatiable need for love and attention drains the women dry; on the brink of starvation, Denver ventures into the outside world to seek help from the women of the local community, who drive Beloved off (*Beloved*, p.263). At the novel's close, Denver has matured into an independent and capable adult, Paul D. begins to reconcile with Sethe, and Beloved's ghost is gradually, but uneasily, forgotten.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To present the importance of the haunting encounters as a literary device.
- To project the supernatural elements with the physical beings.
- To highlight the characteristics of magical realism with its application on post-colonial texts.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q.1: How has magical realism used in the selected texts to present the cultural perspective to represent the third world post-colonial fiction?

Q.2: How haunting encounters have been used as a literary device in the selected texts?

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories of magical realism as a genre can provide a helpful framework for thinking about the ways in which these texts insert supernatural elements into their otherwise realist narratives, as well as how they invite their readers to respond to elements that defy rational explanation. As Wendy Faris describes it, the first defining element of a magical realist text is what she calls the "irreducible element" of the supernatural, something which cannot be explained by or confined within rational understandings of reality. Her interesting choice of terminology itself points to the very strangeness of such supernatural elements and their absolute incompatibility with rationalistic frames of

knowing. Through its juxtaposition of the natural and the supernatural, magical realism seems to cultivate the experience of the uncanny, presenting a world “in which the natural appears strange, and the supernatural pedestrian” (Camayd-Freixas, qtd. in Faris 11). Indeed, Faris points to the ghostly quality of the extended or enhanced vision that magical realism offers:

“The magical realist vision . . . exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions. Ghosts and texts, or people and worlds that seem ghostly, these two-sided mirrors, many times situated between the two worlds of life and death; they enlarge that space of intersection where a number of magically real fictions exist.” (Faris, 2004, p.21-22)

Following Faris, then, not only do ghosts haunt the characters *within* texts like “Pterodactyl” and *Beloved*, but, much as Gordon suggests, haunting also describes the relationships these texts establish with their readers, by challenging them accept the supernatural and embrace an expanded definition of the real. As Faris argues, magical realist fiction challenges the normative assumptions of Western rationalism in ways that allow voices from the margins to emerge and flourish, and both Devi and Morrison explicitly strive to give voice to the silenced through the medium of their fiction. In her essay “The Site of Memory,” Morrison situates her fiction in relation to the autobiographical tradition of the slave narrative, whose authors were of necessity “silent about many things, and . . . ‘forgot’ many other things” (“The Site of Memory” 191). Her task as a fiction writer, as she defines it, is thus “to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn’t write it” (“The Site of Memory” 193). Derrida seems to describe precisely the fate that befalls both Puran and Sethe, who in offering hospitality, end up playing host to the ghostly. The ghosts that haunt them, like the ones that Derrida describes, undermine and transform the oppositions that defined their realities, giving and withholding orders and pardon. These ghosts’ deconstructive spectrality is indeed “strangely troubling,” and by “troubling” the boundaries of Puran’s and Sethe’s self-declared isolation, the ghosts make them sensible for the first time of their obligation to others. By offering hospitality to the ghosts that haunt them, Puran and Sethe learn to recognize the limits of their ability to know another, and in doing so, become truly responsible.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In many important ways, relationships with ghosts or specters in these two texts echo the direct encounter with the other that lies at the heart of poststructuralist formulations of ethics. For theorists such as Levinas and Derrida, the one-on-one encounter between oneself and any other gives rise to a profound, personal obligation that exceeds the subject’s volition. But despite that profound responsibility, the other remains fundamentally different and inherently unknowable. As Levinas reminds us,

“The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other’s place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery.” (Levinas, 2001, p.43)

For the poststructuralist thinkers, the difference of the other is absolute, and not a matter of degree: inasmuch as the other is distinct from the self, every other is entirely other. This assertion of radical alterity allows the relationship between the self and the other to extend beyond the interpersonal and encompass other kinds of otherness, such as the otherness of God, death, futurity, and knowledge. Derrida goes on to suggest, this radical openness to the other exposes the subject to the risk of being haunted:

“It is necessary to welcome the other in his alterity, without waiting, and thus not to pause to recognize his real predicates. It is thus necessary, beyond all perception, to receive the other while running the risk, a risk that is always troubling, strangely troubling, like the stranger *unheimlich*, of a hospitality offered to the *guest* or *ghost* or *Geist* or *Gast*. There would be no hospitality without the chance of spectrality.” (Derrida, 1999)

At the start of Devi's novella, Puran is portrayed as a man isolated from family and community and adrift in his own life. A middle-aged widower whose wife died in childbirth, Puran has allowed his son to be raised primarily by his own mother, and although he has been in a romantic relationship with his girlfriend Saraswati for years, he is unwilling to commit to marriage. Although Puran prides himself on his efforts to defend and advocate for tribals and other oppressed groups through his journalism, Devi's text makes clear how little Puran understands about the experiences and values of the tribal people he attempts to represent. Despite the man's attempt to explain that a water buffalo is invaluable to a successful farmer, Puran fails to understand the desperation that would push this tribal man to murder. Puran intends well, but Devi ironizes the self-congratulatory attitude with which he recalls turning the man's life-and-death story into a most compassionate small news item. By failing to recognize his own ignorance of the man's experience, Puran succeeds only in transforming him into an object of compassion for an audience of educated and comparatively privileged newspaper readers. Puran embarks on his trip to Pirtha with similar assumptions about the poverty he has been sent to document. As he packs his belongings, he seems to pride himself on his own expert and practiced minimalism: "A sarong, a towel, jeans and kurta top . . . , 'Monkey' brand tooth powder (he can't bear a toothbrush), soap, shaving gear, comb, camera, a small tape recorder, a notebook, three ballpoints" (Devi, 107-8). When he arrives in Pirtha along with a desperately needed shipment of relief supplies, however, the extreme poverty and famine there make a mockery of his carefully prepared travel bag. Confronted with the tribal community's desperation, Puran is moved to respond, but his initial attempts to do so prove hollow and misguided. Understandably troubled by the idea that he should have better food and accommodations than the members of the community who are his hosts, he insists that he will sleep on the floor of an abandoned hut rather than at the house of a local leader, the Sarpanch, and asks for only simple, minimal food to eat.

Both Puran and Sethe mistakenly believe that they know others, and their inappropriate claims to knowledge only serve isolate them and limit their ability to be truly responsible. Although Puran thinks of himself as progressive, his inability to understand the realities of tribal life leads him to produce reductive representations of tribal that arguably do more harm than good. Moreover, in his personal life, Puran finds himself unable to form meaningful bonds with those he most cares about. Sethe, too, is a victim of her own misplaced certainty about those around her. Years later, she still fails to recognize that it is not only the violence of her actions, but also the claim she exercised over her children and her certainty about their future, that troubles her family and friends. Sure that she will be judged by others for her "rough choice," Sethe never gives them the opportunity, cutting herself off from the kinds of reciprocal relationships that define a sustaining community. In opening themselves to ghosts, however, these characters are forced to confront a form of radical alterity that frustrates and invalidates their attempts to know, to explain, or to interpret. After the ghosts' departure they are much closer to the kinds of ethical responsibility that Derrida and Levinas describe: they begin to recognize the limits of their ability to know another, and in doing so, become able to enact their responsibility to others and to accept the singularity that makes them answerable for their own actions.

After only a few hours in Pirtha, Puran begins to realize how little he understands about the lives of the tribal whose suffering he has come to document, and the futility of gestures such as refusing food or theatrically handing over his camera in an attempt to earn their trust:

"He had always thought he was altogether self-reliant since he set out with nothing but a sarong and a toothbrush in his shoulder bag. Now he sees that's not enough. He feels inadequate. It's true that he can't reach Shankar's people by eating little or sleeping on grass mats. There is a great gulf fixed between Puran's kind and Shankar's kind. But he does want to get close." (Devi, 140)

Whereas before Puran believed he could understand and even ally himself with the tribals by approximating the conditions under which they live, he now understands that the difference separating him from them is far more profound than their different lifestyles. With the recognition of this difference, however, comes a new, strengthened desire to connect with the tribals in a more legitimate and respectful way: no longer entirely "self-reliant," Puran now begins to feel the desire to "get close" to the people about whom he previously wrote from a distance, knowing that he will never be able to "reach" them completely. Puran's relationship to the tribal community is transformed by the arrival of the pterodactyl, which appears to Puran in the abandoned hut where he is sleeping on his first night in Pirtha. The pterodactyl singles Puran out, and as in the confrontation with the naked face of the other that initiates the subject into responsibility, the obligation Puran feels to the creature is immediate and profoundly personal. Spivak, who translated the novella, is certainly inspired by this parallel in her reading of the text, describing the

pterodactyl as an “ungraspable other” who calls forth “ethical responsibility-in singularity” from Puran. The pterodactyl’s prehistoric gaze shatters Puran’s isolation and ostensible self-sufficiency, for in it he sees a personal appeal and call to responsibility: “It wants refuge with Puran. Puran cannot betray this, for any reason at all” (Devi, 142). Unlike Puran’s vague if justified sense of collective social guilt as a member of the nation’s middle class and privileged Hindu majority, his obligation to the pterodactyl singles him out as an individual. His contact with the pterodactyl is intense and one-on-one: in order to protect the creature, Puran must conceal it in the private, domestic space of the hut where he is staying. He must provide for it from among his own personal possessions and feed it with his own food: when Puran asks for fish the day after the pterodactyl’s arrival, Harisharan assumes it is for him to eat, but a careful reader realizes that it is intended to feed the pterodactyl. The intense, personal obligation that Puran feels toward the pterodactyl stands in stark contrast to his earlier compassion for the tribals, and by meeting and returning the pterodactyl’s gaze, Puran begins to understand a form of responsibility before another that is far more meaningful than his earlier gestures of altruism.

The taxonomy in Puran’s reference book not only fails to describe the creature he has encountered, but also provides no insights into the reason for its appearance or the message that he believes it carries. Although the text itself is careful not to authorize Puran’s assumptions, Puran believes the pterodactyl is an ancestor of the tribal community that has returned to communicate an important message to modern India in general, and himself in particular. “It wants to say something, to give some news, Puran does not understand. *No point of communication*” (Devi, 158 italics in original). Puran considers many possible messages, including that man-made famine is a crime, that the “collective being” of tribal peoples has been crushed, and that humans, like dinosaurs, are becoming an endangered species (Devi, 157). Against the backdrop of the crisis in Pirtha that Puran is witnessing, all of these messages are compelling and all of them are urgent, but to each question that Puran poses, “the dusky lidless eyes remain unresponsive” (Devi, 157). If indeed the pterodactyl has come from the past with a message, its inability to communicate that message only strengthens Puran’s sense of obligation to it. In the end, Puran poses to the pterodactyl, and in effect confirms to himself, the explanation that human and dinosaur are bound together by the very difference that separates them: “You have come to me for shelter, and I do not know how to save you, is that why I’ll see your death?” (Devi, 158) In this final interpretation of the pterodactyl’s inscrutable gaze, Puran bases the obligation he feels to the pterodactyl—to remain with it and witness its death—on his own inability to understand it. In this moment, Puran seems to see his responsibility to the pterodactyl as being derived from rather than diminished by the unbridgeable difference that makes self-disclosure and understanding between them impossible.

Like Devi’s pterodactyl, which transforms Puran’s understanding of himself and the world around him, the appearance of Beloved forever changes the women living at 124 Bluestone Road. Beloved’s ghost is perhaps the most familiar apparition in contemporary U.S. literature, so familiar that her impossible, supernatural presence risks being taken for granted by readers of this thoroughly canonized text. Although *Beloved* is most frequently interpreted as a novel dedicated to addressing and healing the wounds of slavery, Morrison’s commitment to remembering the past is counterbalanced by a deep-seated concern with knowledge as an exercise of power.² Morrison’s novel is filled with characters who claim to know—and judge—those around them. Sethe is made the object of knowledge, first by Schoolteacher, the slave master who listed her “animal” and “human characteristics,” and later by the black community, including Paul D., who accuses her of inhumanity when he learns of her past actions (*Beloved* 202). But Sethe is also brought low by her own assumptions that she can know her children and her neighbors, both black and white, as well as the ghost that takes up residence in her home. Beloved’s ghost reveals the danger of such assumptions, consuming Sethe’s energy and individuality bit by bit, until she remains only a shell of her former self. It is only after the ghost’s departure that Morrison’s characters are able to recognize and respect their differences, and begin to form relationships across them. Like the pterodactyl in Devi’s text, the young woman who appears outside the house at 124 Bluestone Road defies all rational explanation. When she first arrives, helpless, confused, and insatiably thirsty, Paul D. and Sethe theorize that Beloved has fled someone or something terrible, but her clean, fine clothes and baby-soft feet seem to rule out an arduous escape on foot. Her continued frailty and dependence stand in contrast to surprising feats of nearly superhuman strength; as Paul D. muses, Beloved “can’t walk, but I see her pick up the rocker with one hand” (*Beloved* 59). Her childlike behavior—babbling, playing games, and throwing tantrums—is at odds with her calculated efforts to both seduce Paul D. and drive him away from Sethe. Most importantly, although both Sethe and Denver become convinced that Beloved is the ghost of Sethe’s murdered daughter, the two women’s certainty is never entirely endorsed by the novel. Although Beloved possesses memories, like Sethe’s special song, that only her child could know, she also knows things that exceed Sethe’s grasp, such as her description of the “dark place” she was in before, which merges a

vision of death with the experiences of slaves on the Middle Passage (*Beloved* 264). After Beloved is driven off, the women who come together to conduct the exorcism remain uncertain about exactly who or what Beloved was. And in retrospect even Denver believes at times that Beloved was “sure ’enough [her] sister,” but reflects that “[a]t times I think she was—more” (*Beloved* 281). From the moment of her arrival, Beloved makes powerful and unsatisfiable demands on the women at 124. “Deep down in her wide black eyes, back behind the expressionlessness, was a palm held out for a penny that Denver would gladly give her, if only she knew how or knew enough about her” (*Beloved* 124). Similarly, Beloved’s unrelenting devotion to Sethe reflects Beloved’s singular claim on her. Looking into Beloved’s eyes, “[t]he longing that [Sethe] saw there was bottomless. Some plea barely in control” (*Beloved* 62). Beloved’s intense but undefinable desire, like the pterodactyl’s unknowable message, exemplifies the failures of communication that define an encounter with a ghost. Rather than diminishing the women’s obligation to the ghost, these failures of communication only intensify that obligation, moving Denver and Sethe to try to satisfy Beloved in any way they can, with sweets, stories, activities, and attention. As Morrison’s novel makes excruciatingly clear, however, Beloved’s claims on the women at 124, although they may be justified, can never be satisfied. Beloved’s ghost, as Denver explains, “Was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love, which was only natural, considering” (*Beloved* 220). Separated prematurely and violently from her mother, Beloved is desperate not only for “the best of everything” in the house, but also for the attention and mother-love such small privileges reflect (*Beloved* 253). Both materially and emotionally, however, *Beloved* is insatiable: “Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire” (*Beloved* 253). Whereas Puran does not know how to care for the pterodactyl and fails to find food for it, no amount of nurturance is enough for Beloved, who eats and eats yet is always hungry for more. And the intensifying fights between Beloved and Sethe reveal that no amount of explanation will satisfy Beloved either. Sethe compulsively narrates and re-narrates her past to Beloved, trying to make her daughter understand her impossible choice. Despite Sethe’s desperate efforts to explain herself, however, Beloved remains “[u]ncomprehending,” and rather than forgiving Sethe, Beloved’s demands and tantrums only intensify (*Beloved* 264). Sethe’s determination to make Beloved see her side is a process to which, as Denver recognizes, “there would never be an end” (*Beloved*, 263). Sethe cannot understand Beloved’s description of her suffering in the “dark, dark place,” or the devastation of the infant’s loss of her mother’s face (*Beloved*, 264). And Beloved, in turn, will not be consoled by Sethe’s explanations. Indeed, the justifications Sethe offers for killing her child, like the act itself, reflect a claim over her daughter that denies the fundamental difference between them: “The best thing she was, was her children. Whites may dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (*Beloved*, 264). As Sethe struggles to “make [Beloved] understand,” she refuses to relinquish the logic that led her to murder—the conviction that she *is* her daughter and her daughter *is* a part of her, and although she asks for forgiveness, she refuses to acknowledge the ethical singularity that would allow her to take true responsibility for her actions. The longer Beloved and Sethe struggle, the more the boundaries between the two women blur. In response to the ghost’s demands, Sethe gives herself over to Beloved, dressing Beloved in her clothes and, like Puran, feeding Beloved with her measure of food. As a result, “Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (*Beloved*, 263). Only Denver’s decision to seek help, and the community’s intervention, save Sethe from annihilation. Sethe’s brush with self-loss, like Surajpratap’s nervous breakdown, reveals the danger of claiming to know another. Ultimately, it is Denver’s willingness to enter into dialogue with others across boundaries of difference that saves the family at 124. In her courageous ventures out into the world beyond 124, Denver learns to offer information and gratitude, and receives food and acceptance in exchange. The plates of food given by neighbors, each distinguished by an individual woman’s identifiable dish or covering and accompanied by a single name or mark, are given in return for Denver’s willingness to provide a version of her story and a personal thank-you. Unlike Sethe, who refuses to explain herself for fear of being misunderstood, Denver realizes that “[n]obody was going to help her unless she told it—all of it” (*Beloved*, 266). But even then, Denver cannot provide a full account, and “explained the girl in her house who plagued her mother as a cousin come to visit, who got sick too and bothered them both” (*Beloved*, 267). In exchange for her self-revelation, albeit partial and imperfect, Denver receives the help she desperately needs. The community’s response, in turn, demonstrates the kind of responsibility that thrives across the differences between individuals. Although there is much debate, and even skepticism among the women who hear Denver’s story, many of them come together to protect Sethe and her family from Beloved’s sinister “invasion” (*Beloved*, 270). After Beloved’s exorcism, the reconciliation between Sethe, Denver, and Paul D. reflects how each has been changed by his or her contact with Beloved. Denver has fully entered the world her mother so feared, working, building relationships, and preparing to perhaps attend college. When she tells this to Paul D., he resists warning her that “[n]othing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher,” as he might have before (*Beloved*, 280). Instead, he acknowledges that Denver’s experience might differ from his own, and when she raises the question of his relationship with Beloved, he recognizes her right to form her own opinion. Although Sethe has been brought low by Beloved’s haunting, her questioning response to Paul D.’s insistence that “[y]ou your best

thing” holds the possibility that she, too, may come to recognize and value the difference that separates her from her children. These relationships reveal how Morrison’s characters have been changed by their contact with the ghost, brought into a recognition of difference that allows them to be both singular and responsible in their encounters with one another.

6. FINDINGS

Not only must we suspend our disbelief in imagining the novel’s characters and events to be real, we must also rise to the challenge of accepting, at least provisionally, the existence of ghosts. The presence of the supernatural in these texts brings with it the problem of what Morrison describes as “accommodation”: in “Unspeaking Things Unspoken,” Morrison notes that the ‘women and children’ in her novel are able to accommodate the uncontrollable and incomprehensible presence of Beloved’s ghost (“Unspeaking Things Unspoken” 32). This is precisely what *Beloved* asks of us, as well. Readers of Morrison’s novel must imaginatively accommodate a possibility that, in the world beyond the text, many would likely reject: the return of an embodied baby ghost carrying with it the legacies of slavery. Devi’s text, which locates a living dinosaur in contemporary India, requires a similar leap. And, like Morrison’s women and children, Puran models the acceptance of the supernatural that we as readers must also provisionally assume. Like the appearance of a ghost in one’s house, being confronted with a ghost in the pages of an otherwise realist fiction can and should be shocking. And much as Puran and Sethe are challenged to reimagine their relationship to the world around them, so too are readers who endeavor to take seriously the depictions of the supernatural in these two texts. By inviting their readers to accommodate alternate realities, both in the form of the supernatural and in the form of experiences other than our own, these texts expose themselves to the risk of being misappropriated through interested readings. But texts like “Pterodactyl” and *Beloved* also face another risk: that readers will distance themselves and fail to acknowledge the transformative power of their encounters with the stories they contain. This is a challenge that Dipesh Chakrabarty grapples with in a slightly different context, questioning how historians might best account for non-rational ways of thinking that run counter to their own. Complicating models of historiography that anthropologize non-rational beliefs, Chakrabarty challenges his readers to ask themselves the question, “is this way of being [a belief in gods or spirits] a possibility for our own lives and for what we define as our present?” (Chakrabarty, 2000). Crucially, however, Chakrabarty does not assume that historians who ask themselves this question will abandon the rationalism that serves as the foundation for their politically informed practice of telling stories from the margins. The model of Chakrabarty’s approach to subaltern history offers readers an alternative to the anthropologizing perspective they might otherwise adopt toward the black community of Morrison’s nineteenth-century Cincinnati or the tribal villages of rural India. By challenging us to take their hauntings seriously, these works of fiction also challenge us to take seriously the realities these characters occupy: a world in which the threat of slavery’s dehumanization justifies the taking of a child’s life, or in which relentless drought and famine are not enough to drive one away from the land where one’s ancestors are buried and the culture that sustained them. But like Puran, who knows he must leave Pirtha and protect the secret of the pterodactyl, or like the women of Sethe’s community, who recognize Beloved’s return to the material world of the present as an intolerable “invasion,” Chakrabarty’s model also recognizes the necessity of maintaining a more distanced, analytical approach. Indeed, although both Devi and Morrison create fictions that draw us in, fostering a sense of intimacy and interpretive responsibility, both authors also invite us to step away from the fictional worlds they have created and consider them from a more thoughtful distance.

Like “Pterodactyl,” *Beloved* also insists on stepping back from the immediacy of the haunting past and allowing some stories not to be told. In her novel’s well-known conclusion, Morrison implies that if Beloved’s stay at 124 eventually fades from the community’s memory, such forgetting is protective and productive, for Beloved’s is “not a story to pass on” (*Beloved*, 290). Of course, as readers we cannot fail to note the irony that Beloved’s story *is* passed on through the writing of Morrison’s novel, up to and including the moment in which she instructs her readers about its secrecy. But by reminding us that Beloved exists only through the medium of a story that can be either told or untold, Morrison directs her readers to consider the ethical and political stakes of narrating that story. As Dean Franco points out, criticism on *Beloved* often makes an implicit shift from the register of fictional representation to that of material reality. Indeed, he argues that the work of reparation for which *Beloved* calls can only take place at a remove from the novel itself:

“A national discussion on the efficacy and limits of apology, forgiveness, compensation, and broadly conceived social redress begins when readers turn from the private encounter with the novel to the public history the text produces.” (Franco, 2006)

This shift is facilitated by Morrison's conclusion, which reminds us that her story, like all acts of representation, is inherently compromised, and that our entrance into the world of the text has only been provisional. Like Denver, who steps off the porch and into the world, knowing that she cannot foresee or prevent life's many perils, we are invited to move beyond the haunted world of *Beloved*, and to recognize that, although we may have been touched by that world, we are not of it.

7. CONCLUSION

The depictions of the supernatural in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" by the Indian author and activist Mahasweta Devi. Although the apparitions these two authors imagine the ghost of a murdered child and a prehistoric winged creature differ in important ways, both test the limits of readers' willingness to believe. Echoing poststructuralist formulations of the ethical encounter, the characters within these texts confront the ghosts that haunt them across boundaries of insuperable difference, and in those encounters become both singular and responsible. By challenging readers to take their hauntings seriously, these texts also challenge us to take seriously the realities their characters occupy: a world in which the threat of slavery's dehumanization justifies the taking of a child's life, or in which relentless drought and famine are not enough to drive one away from the land where one's ancestors are buried. But by foregrounding the moments of intentional infidelity that mark their own texts as stories not to be passed on, both Morrison and Devi also remind us that our entrance into the world of the text has only been provisional.

Placing these two texts side by side, and recognizing their similarity, also offers a model of reading world literature that challenges the kinds of hierarchies and structures of power that make *Beloved* far more familiar than "Pterodactyl" to many readers of this paper. For readers who have become comfortable with the central conceit of Morrison's novel, comparing it with "Pterodactyl" reminds us that *Beloved* is a ghost story, and as a literary figure, *Beloved*'s ghost is just as strange and unsettling as Devi's dinosaur. Moreover, for those deeply engaged with the kinds of debates about American history and African American identity within which *Beloved* is most frequently situated, a comparison with "Pterodactyl" foregrounds the fact that Morrison is similarly concerned with questions of knowledge and representation. Conversely, comparing "Pterodactyl" to *Beloved* reinforces Devi's efforts both to bring her stories home to Western readers and to prevent the kinds of tokenizing claims that Spivak, as Devi's translator, is so concerned with. Comparing "Pterodactyl" to *Beloved*, like comparing tribals to Native Americans, suggests that struggles for justice in tribal India carry all the complexity that readers likely recognize in political contests that occur closer to home. Informed by the logic of haunting, a reading of *Beloved* and "Pterodactyl" together demonstrates the comparability of two such different texts and, in their asymmetry, the valences of difference that make the comparison between them meaningful.

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(All the page references in parentheses are taken from these editions only, "Devi" and "Beloved" are used in place of using full names of the books within the paper.)