**“Haunting is the cost of subjugation. It is the price paid for violence, for genocide.”**

If the Glossary of Haunting had said something along the lines of, we are guided and influenced by the actions of our past, both the good and bad, it would not read as negatively as the above quote does. Haunting implies malevolence. Entire societies and civilizations are **haunted** by terrible deeds of a systematic nature. To contextualise this with America today, football player Colin Kaepernick ignited a political furore when he sat down during the national anthem at a game, proclaiming he wasn’t going to stand up to show pride to a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color[[1]](#footnote-1). In his mind, America is haunted by systematic oppression that has manifested itself in different ways and continues to this day. By speaking out, Kaepernick and his followers started to unmask and demystify “oppression”. To exorcise a ghost is to solve the problem and make it go away; the material world is not so unequivocal.

To say that everything I grapple with in political philosophy disregards systematic oppression would be painting a wide stroke over a huge issue -- but it does not seem so far from the truth. I am interested in exploring how Isiah Berlin as a Western philosopher would read Beloved and specifically, the way that Sethe conscientiously made a choice to kill her first daughter upon being chased by slavecatchers.

Political theory is a branch of moral philosophy, which starts from the application of moral notions in the sphere of political relations. Historically, social movements and conflicts have been understood through the ideas and attitudes attached to them. This mode of thinking attaches such movements to history rather than considering them isolated events. In this paper, I consider slavery as a movement that **haunts** the philosophical concepts theorized by Berlin in the aftermath of slavery. I use Berlin’s *Two Concepts of Liberty[[2]](#footnote-2)* as a lens to read Beloved. Berlin’s main argument is that one of the greatest topics of concern in moral life is the question of obedience and coercion. “Why should I obey anyone else? Why should I not live as I like? Must I obey? If I disobey, may I be coerced?”[[3]](#footnote-3) According to Berlin there are two main conceptions of liberty -- positive liberty and negative liberty. Negative liberty is the freedom from external interferences that prevent one from doing what one wants while positive liberty is the freedom to control one’s own life. The essence of this account is that one cannot use the typical discourse that old, white, and male philosophers indulge in; rather there is a need to contextualize events in history with all their specificities in their present. Sethe would rather take her child’s life with her own hands than allow Beloved to grow up a slave. We can’t say her decision was premature because ‘slavery would have ended in a couple years anyway’ and her children would only have to live as slaves for a couple years. We can’t say that her years as a slave rendered her weary and emotionless, making the murder an easy choice.

Choice.

Much of the discourse surrounding Beloved ends up asking the question of whether Sethe’s choice was **justified**. However, my reading of Beloved complicates the notion of what kind of choice she actually had. Drawn from Holocaust scholar Lawrence L. Langer, there is a concept called choiceless choices. “Such choices do not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of ‘abnormal’ response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way the victim’s own choosing.” The nature of survival is not simple; it doesn’t depend simply upon your willingness to live or your liberty to choose to live. There are external circumstances that take away your freedom to choose (negative liberty) that are beyond your will.

With my knowledge of political theory, I am grappling with the question of how Berlin would read Sethe’s decision (from here on out I will refer to the act as a decision rather than a choice for aforementioned reasons). The questions above speak to how Berlin perceived the topic of obedience and coercion; he asks questions that the ‘oppressed’ would voice, rather than the questions the ‘oppressors’ would voice. If Berlin were to subvert his premise, he might have asked questions like: Who am I coercing? What gives me the power to take away freedom? How does my exertion of my freedom infringe upon that of others?

The very nature of slavery is that the people subjected to it were seen as sub-human. Black people were property with neither citizenship nor rights for themselves, they were subject of white-imposed zoomorphism for centuries, the legacies of which were lasting. Even Paul D, a former slave, tells her “You got two feet, Sethe, not four,”[[4]](#footnote-4) suggesting she acted like a beast in attempting to murder her own children. So how does Sethe fit into Berlin’s framework? The loss of self that came with slavery then turns his entire theory on its head; how are we supposed to talk about freedom and coercion and choice with respect to mankind if the very people often subjugated and denied said freedom aren’t even considered human?

Political philosophy always seemed like an unwelcome arena in my area of study -- the uncle you were forced to make nice with at family reunions but never made you feel comfortable. It is one thing for Berlin to say “freedom for an Oxford don is a very different thing from freedom for an Egyptian peasant”[[5]](#footnote-5) but in actual practice, a study that pays no heed to the injustices that Black and Brown communities face in this country is one that I’m often not sure how to engage with.

In the context of Beloved, Sethe’s decision could be framed as an exertion of her negative liberty in that Sethe would never be able to live with passing on slavery through generations to her daughter and was forced to murder her child. It could also read as an exertion of her positive liberty in that she took control over a lose-lose situation and used her agency to make the best decision for her daughter. Berlin sees these two concepts as incompatible with one another - as rival, incompatible conceptions of liberty. He deems negative liberty to be truer and more humane -- he rejects positive liberty on the other hand as a metaethical account of value pluralism, which he believes to be central to freedom. Berlin shows clearly enough how it applies to the individual who wishes to be his own master and so must learn the limitations that life imposes so that he may become free precisely through his understanding of necessity, that is, his freedom from illusion. For him, when people are rational they will come to the same conclusions about what it means to be free. Who has defined rationality? Freedom is not, in reality, granted to he who simply understands his limitations.

My experience with political science has shown me that it, more often than not, does not consider ghosts of the past. It does not consider the fact that the very science - in not only an American context, but also a Western context - is haunted[[6]](#footnote-6) by history and theorists who make up the foundations of political science are very much complicit in this. Beloved further developed my ideas about the inadequacies of political philosophy, but I was also able to recognize the limits of a purely literary reading of Morrison’s text. I am thinking about how if we don’t consider our ghosts, if we exorcise them completely as Gordon[[7]](#footnote-7) would have us do, if we take haunting as “the price paid for violence and genocide”[[8]](#footnote-8), we fail to build upon our failures, pick ourselves back up, and move on from there. A reading of Beloved in a vacuum of literary analysis is inadequate because understanding Sethe’s story with the context of history is what completes it and lends a hand to future generations. My aim is to look forward while keeping an eye on the ghosts. Ghosts will always be there, especially in the society we will in today. They will always be there.

1. Wyche, By Steve. "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat during National Anthem." NFL.com. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Oct. 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Isiah Berlin was a British theorist and philosopher whose distinction between positive and negative liberty remains a basic starting-point for theoretical discussions of the meaning and value of political freedom [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty." Liberty (1958): 166-217. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Beloved*, page 165 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Two Concepts of LIberty*, page 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Haunting is the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society’s assurances of innocence and reconciliation. Haunting is both acute and general; individuals are haunted, but so are societies. ie. United States is permanently haunted by the slavery, genocide, and violence entwined in its first, present and future days. *Tuck and Ree, 642.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, page 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *A Glossary of Haunting,* page 643 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)