

Abstract

Title of thesis The Presence of Ghosts in African American Literature

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The enslavement of Africans in the Americas was also a repeated trauma experienced across generations. The lives of some individuals exemplify the widespread experience of suffering and degradation. The first half of this paper explores how writers of historical fiction represent the lives of those individuals, namely Margaret Garner and Tituba of Salem. In their respective novels, both Toni Morrison and Maryse Condé claim a connection to the ghosts of Garner and Tituba. What ethical questions emerge from such a relationship? Is the ghost a projection of the needs of the living; do these writers use the dead to authorize their texts? In other words, does the choice to bear witness through writing have more to do with the demands of a living readership than the needs of the ghost? The second half of the paper reads in *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones and *Praiseong for the Widow* by Paule Marshal what *Beloved* and *I, Tituba* are unable, or unwilling, to accomplish. That is the possibility of redress, of using memory as a political tool through which to claim a lost heritage. This half of the paper also questions whether remembering through writing moves the trauma from private, inconsolable grief to public, political grievance.

THE PRESENCE OF GHOSTS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
LITERATURE

by

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Introduction: Witnessing the Ghost

The presence of ghosts, in literature and film, has been the subject of much criticism over the last few decades. These un-gothic ghosts appear in ordinary locations, removed from the genre-convention of “an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society” and without the romantic plot centered on “the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover” (Sedgwick 9). The sprawling gloom and decaying castles of gothic landscapes often serve a psychological function, physically manifesting the unresolved internal conflicts of the characters. The boundaries of the hidden, or suppressed, self destabilize in a way that grants the reader access to the irrational, subconscious mind. Apparitions from the past serve to further illuminate the psychological unraveling of the principle characters. Un-gothic ghosts, the postmodern ghosts of our contemporary epoch, have less to do with the hidden desires of those who perceive them and more to do with the desires of the ghost themselves to make invisible things visible, to replace deferment and absence with a “seething” presence. These ghosts often manifest as a result of a collective experience of violence so their presences serve as a kind of retribution.

Ghosts are especially ubiquitous in American popular culture. On any given episode of *Ghost Hunters*, one can find the wily team of Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson looking to document encounters with the paranormal. Armed with digital cameras, devices capable of conducting electromagnetic field readings, and audio equipment to pick of electronic voice waves, the two enter locations reported as haunted. The team records what can be described as sketchy evidence, at best—a scratchy, muffled voice, a

shadowy figure. This type of evidence points to the reason the figure of the ghost has been a useful poststructuralist academic trope—its form eludes precise, categorical documentation. As a figure of the past appearing in the present, it disrupts historical chronology. In doing so, it collapses the meta-narratives of history by intruding as an underwritten or absent discourse.

Some have attributed academic and popular culture's obsession with the ghostly to retrogression, an inability to let go of the past. Spectral discourse often appears in the language of trauma studies as a kind of pathological remembering. Cathy Caruth explores the "peculiar and sometimes uncanny ways in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them" (1). For survivors, being borne back into a past that should be forgotten, can feel like experiencing the event all over again, the sensory experience of re-memory can be so vivid. I use Toni Morrison's term re-memory instead of remembering because re-memory suggests a physical, tangible experience, and much like ghostly apparitions, re-memories do not obey a linear model of time.

Hauntings and re-memories share much in common. Even more than an individual or a collective desire to ceaselessly go back to flashpoint events or traumatic locations, both point to the past's hold on us. The repetitions of re-memories in the lives of trauma survivors "seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control" (Caruth 2). Ghosts intrude in the same manner. They emerge from lives fractured by violence and refuse to cooperate with burial rituals that signal a departure. They linger,

disturbing the linear progression of time by constantly reminding those they haunt of the past. Like, re-memories, they hold some people, against their will, in a suspended state of temporal dislocation.

The television series *Paranormal Witness* reenacts firsthand accounts of unsolicited hauntings. Participants often have difficulty articulating what happened. Prolonged silences punctuate interviews. Such linguistic lapses are associated with trauma; however, in these cases, the origin of the trauma, what caused the haunting in the first place, is not the interviewee's own experience, but rather the person who experienced the wrongful death. "Lady on the Stairs," an episode from the series, elucidates the origin of the ghost in an especially frightening manner.

Mari-Lynn and her husband Mark woke one morning in their Michigan home to find claw-like scratches covering their arms and back. They had no explanation. Mari-Lynn feared the worst—the supernatural invader occupying their home had become more aggressive. She had already heard, in the middle of the night, the phantom sounds of babies crying and small children playing. She had already seen door handles rattle and windows open without physical, human intervention. Although it would take seeing an apparition to convince Mark of the presence of ghosts in his home, Mari-Lynn was already a believer.

The paranormal activity escalated. One night, Mark, Mari-Lynn, and their son Jessie were gathered in the kitchen preparing their dinner plates. Just as Jessie reached for a drumstick of chicken, he began screaming in pain and clutching his side. Mari-Lynn lifted his shirt and found an expanding red burn.

Mari-Lynn could no longer sit idly—even her son was falling victim to some

malignant presence. She contacted local historians to learn about the previous owners of their home. The researchers discovered that the house had been a farm in the early 1870s, and a young girl named Theresa Stison lived there with her aunt, uncle, and a young orphan boy. When the unwed Theresa became pregnant, her uncle sent her to a sanatorium. She gave birth to a sickly boy who lived only a few days. Shortly after, Theresa herself became violently ill. On her deathbed, she told the nurses at the sanatorium that her uncle had been the father of the boy. Although her uncle was arrested, tried, and found guilty of incest, the judge threw out the case because much of the evidence was “hearsay,” based on testimony from the orphan boy who lived with the family.

With this new information, Mari-Lynn felt peace. She knew the ghost was not evil, only troubled, having never received justice for the rape committed against her physical body. As Mari-Lynn recalled aloud the woman’s story, she felt her spirit being released from the house. “Lady on the Stairs” not only provides insight into why ghosts haunt, but also, typifies the way in which trauma functions in spectral advances: “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 2). Ghosts signal the unrepresentable—a Victorian-era woman raped by her uncle and impregnated and a pregnancy dealt with in secrecy and a crime unobserved in a court of law. Events in Theresa Stitson’s life passed shadow-like and were not accounted for when they occurred. Nipped at gestation, these events persisted through time and space patiently waiting to re-emerge and anachronistically implant in the present and manifest as

scratches and burns, the soft cries of an infant—echoes of a life marked by violence; a life that never fully formed.

Although justice could not be served corporally for Theresa, Mari-Lynn's remembrance of her life, a form of tribute to her suffering, allowed her soul to move on. Avery Gordon's approach to sociological investigation provides a framework for understanding this type of remembering. She proposes listening and talking to ghosts, not chasing them away as if they were demons to be exorcised. She calls this type of dialogue conjuring because it is alchemic in its effects; it involves "calling up and calling out the forces that make things what they are in order to fix and transform a troubling situation" (22). Hauntings are not accidental; those who see ghosts are in some ways charged with the duty of performing the conjuring trick, of saying the prayers or incantations, of penning the manuscripts, of, ultimately, transmuting the haunted space into livable space.

Ghosts emerge from trauma. In the case of Theresa Stitson, the trauma resulted from patriarchal jurisdiction, which rendered her female body vulnerable to violation and offered no recourse or protection through the legal system. Theresa Stitson represents one of many women who were silenced by male authority in 19th century America. The enslavement of Africans in the Americas was also a repeated trauma experienced across generations. The lives of some individuals exemplify the widespread experience of suffering and degradation. The first half of this paper will explore how writers of historical fiction represent the lives of those individuals, namely Margaret Garner and Tituba of Salem. In their respective novels, both Toni Morrison and Maryse Condé claim a connection to the ghosts of Garner and Tituba. What ethical questions emerge from

such a relationship? Is the ghost a projection of the needs of the living; do these writers use the dead to authorize their texts? In other words, does the choice to bear witness through writing have more to do with the demands of a living readership than the needs of the ghost?

The second half of the paper reads in *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones and *Praiseong for the Widow* by Paule Marshal what *Beloved* and *I, Tituba* are unable, or unwilling, to accomplish. That is the possibility of redress, of using memory as a political tool through which to claim a lost heritage. This half of the paper also questions whether remembering through writing moves the trauma from private, inconsolable grief to public, political grievance. For example, in *Praiseong for the Widow* mourning occurs in a public space, and in *Corregidora* memory serves a political function as evidence for court testimonial.

Talking to Tituba: Representing History in Fiction

My concern in this section is the overarching concern of the entire project—how do contemporary writers deal with hauntings from the past, particularly ghosts from slavery? What role should fiction writers and historical writers play in representing those erased from history? In the afterward of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walkers claims the title of “medium,” what Marjorie Pryse in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* observes as an association between authorship and magic (1). According to Pryse, magic is the mechanism through which black women writers transmit tradition and culture. Does Maryse Condé, a black female writer from Guadeloupe, position herself as a conjurer of supernatural forces, a communicator with the dead? If so, what authority does she gain from such claims? The section will look closely at Condé’s work of historical fiction, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, which tells the story of an enslaved woman named Tituba who was one of the first women arrested during the witch trails of Salem that began in 1692. Condé’s work begins in Barbados, Tituba’s birthplace, and so is the first francophone novel to connect the English Caribbean with the colonial United States (Condé 187).

In the epigraph to *I, Tituba*, Condé informs the reader, “Tituba and I lived for a year on the closest of terms. During our endless conversations she told me things she had confided to nobody else.” Condé hails a convention of African American writing that values what has been secreted away, unwritten, or untold. By introducing her story within a spectral framework, she recognizes novels like *Beloved*, which stand as archetypal representations of how writers manage the ghosts of slavery.

By positioning herself as a medium with special knowledge, Condé sets up a proximity to Tituba. Through her dialogue, the past and present become inextricably linked as co-creative forces in the project of narrative recounting. By standing in between the oral transmission of the story and its translation into written language, Condé witnesses the life of Tituba. She is much like the character Yetunde, an obeah woman who becomes Tituba's surrogate mother when her own passes. Yetunde, whose name had been creolized into Mama Yaya, serves as an interlocutor: "She had cultivated to a fine art the ability to communicate with the invisible" (9). Her creolized name bears the signature of her ability to shuffle in between Africa and the "new world."

She is not creolized by her ethnicity for she is a "Nago from the coast" (9); however, her geographical location as an African in the Caribbean produces her syncretic identity. Mama Yaya—the alliteration of letters and syllables suggests a purposeful pairing and it echoes the meaning of Yetunde, which is "mother has come back." A woman who had no children of her own lives as a universal mother, in particular care of orphans like Tituba. Although Mama Yaya is not a principle character of the story, she serves as Tituba's teacher and thus plays an instrumental role in passing down an Africanist heritage to the next generation. According to Tituba: "Mama Yaya taught me the sea, the mountains, and the hills. She taught me that everything lives, has a soul, and breathes. That everything must be respected. That man is not the master riding through his kingdom on horseback" (9). The knowledge Tituba gains from her posits that all things are sacred and there are no hierarchical relationships in creation. The Judeo-Christian tradition that positions man as a supreme being in charge of subduing nature is de-centered by this animist cosmology.

Much of the novel works to de-center European models and Condé accomplishes this, in part, by linking her own identity to Mama Yaya. She also accomplishes this by locating “‘home’ in the text in the Caribbean, thus marginalizing Salem in the journey of Tituba’s life: “Insofar as exile cannot be understood without the counterpoint of ‘home,’ it is important that Tituba comes to identify closely with Barbados and its people during her exile in Salem” (Johnson 103). Barbados as home is a major theme of the novel and this is not surprising considering that Condé wrote the story at a point in her life when she wanted to address issues of birthplace and origin, of ancestry and inheritance. She says “When I wrote Tituba, I had just decided to come back to Guadeloupe... Tituba came to me or I came to her (as you prefer) at a period of my life when really I wanted to turn toward the Caribbean and start writing about the Caribbean” (204).

When Tituba is in the colonial town of Salem, Massachusetts, she yearns for Barbados: “I filled a bowl with water, which I placed near the window so that I could look at it while I busied myself in the kitchen and imagine my Barbados. The bowl of water managed to encompass the entire island, with the swell of the sea merging into the waves of the sugarcane fields, the leaning coconut palms on the seashore, and the almond trees loaded with red and dark green fruit” (62). It is significant that even though Tituba takes ownership of Barbados by referring to it as hers, she mentions elements of the island that are beyond human control. Moreover, as a slave she cannot legally own anything. The relationship Tituba has with her homeland is more like what family members share. This is represented when elements of the island become anthropomorphized in Tituba’s dreams: “By morning sleep had taken me into his loving arms. He was considerate with me. He took me on a walk across the hills of

Barbados...The trellis was laden with passion fruit. The calabash tree was showing swellings like the womb of a pregnant woman. The River Ormond was gurgling like a newborn baby” (79). The landscape of the island emerges as a kind a character—an expectant mother, a curious child. This type of characterization echoes Tituba’s inherited animist cosmology that declares that all of nature has a soul. The trees, the fruit, and the rivers live and breathe as humans do and when Tituba thinks most about her homeland, she conjures images of sugarcane and trellis trees “laden with passion fruit” (79). Her deepest connection to Barbados is through nature.

Tituba’s enduring relationship with nature juxtaposes the transient, often disappointing bonds she forms with people. Betsey Parris, the daughter of Tituba’s owner, initially croons over Tituba who shares some of her special knowledge with the young girl. Tituba gives the girl a “magic bath” and feels a sense of renewal from the caring relationship that develops. Tituba observes, “These same hands that not long ago had dealt death were now giving life, and I was purifying myself of the murder of my child” (63). The bond offers redemption for Tituba; however, Betsey eventually warps all of the secret knowledge Tituba shares with her and condemns her to the other townspeople as a witch. When Tituba confronts Betsey and tells her she was only doing good by her, “[Betsey’s] upper lip curled into an ugly pout, revealing her sick gums. ‘You, do good? You’re a Negress, Tituba! You can only do evil. You are evil itself’ (77). Betsey’s sick gums and ugly pout suggest an infection of the body and an overtaking of the soul by the poisonous vitriol of her environment. The conflation of Tituba’s race with evil point to a major theme of the novel and one of Condé reasons for writing the story.

Condé admits that the novel provided her with an occasion to offer commentary on the current state of racial affairs: “Writing *Tituba* was an opportunity to express my feelings about present-day America...Every black person living in America will tell you that racism still exists” (203). Condé locates a racialized history as inspiration for her stories: “Being a black person, having a certain past, having a certain history behind me, I want to explore that realm and of course do it with my imagination and with my intuition” (201). Condé writes about racism through a historical lens, and, like Toni Morrison, her stories come from a haunting, particularly, a haunting that makes it possible “for people to testify to the effects of un-witnessed events or to understand themselves as subject to social and historical forces otherwise unnamed in a larger scene” (Parham 3).

In *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies*, Ann Breslaw writes an entirely different account of Tituba’s life. Hayden White characterizes historians like Breslaw as people “buried in the archives hoping, by what they call a ‘sifting of the facts’ or ‘the manipulation of the data,’ to find the form of the reality that will serve as the object of representation in the account that they will write ‘when all the facts are known’ and they have finally ‘got the story straight’” (125). White cautions against privileging the archive as a repository of facts or as a surrogate for the actual past, agreeing with Ann Stoler who notes in *Along the Archival Grain* that the archives are locations of knowledge production, where, if anything, objects of representation become reality. The historian is complicit in this exercise when she pieces together fragments from the archives to construct a “true” account. The veracity of any historical writing based on archival material must be interrogated against this tendency to position the

archive as a substitute for the past. I propose reading Breslaw's version of Tituba's life with the same consideration for narrative structure observed in the reading of Condé's historical fiction.

According to historian Elaine Breslaw, Tituba was not African, but rather, an Arawak Indian. Most likely, she was captured from South America and brought to Barbados in 1674 in the *Sanoy*, captained by Peter Wroth. In addition to other material indicators, Breslaw observes the etymological roots of Tituba's name in order to buttress her claim. According to Breslaw, the name Tituba bears the mark of Spanish influence, which would have been possible considering that Spaniards first explored and colonized South America. The name is also significant because a branch of Arawaks living in the area in which Tituba was captured were known as the Tetebatana – “the name Tituba is most likely a Spanish derivative of that Arawak name” (13). Breslaw explores how naming functioned within slave society. For those of indigenous heritage, names usually served as racial tags. The name Tituba would have been easily identifiable by planters as belonging to an Arawak Indian.

Although Breslaw spends many pages establishing Tituba's Arawak heritage, she does not dismiss the extent to which the cosmology of other cultures might have influenced her belief system. During the time of enslavement in Barbados, Tituba would have been exposed to the culture of the enslaved Africans she encountered. She would have learned the animistic cosmology of obeah men and women. When she became a member of the Thompson household, she was in close contact with her mistress who instructed her in both Anglican beliefs and traditional English witchcraft practices.

Indeed, in her documented court testimony, Tituba claimed to have learned how to make a witch-cake from her former mistress.

Although her body did not identify her as having an imbedded African heritage like the Tituba of Condé's novel, the historical Tituba that Breslaw constructs was nonetheless culturally syncretic, drawing on a multiplicity of belief systems in order to articulate a certain kind of worldview before her court audience when she was accused of practicing witchcraft. In this manner, Breslaw paints an image of Tituba that is not so dissimilar from the one etched by Condé. If one understands culture as not biologically defined then an Arawak Tituba could be just as African as a Tituba with an Ashanti mother. According to Breslaw, Tituba's cultural syncretism allowed her to fashion a story both familiar and unfamiliar to her Puritan audience. Through her detailed description of the devil, she allowed the Puritans to see evil as existing outside of themselves, as unleashed by "devilish" Indian women.

Breslaw constructs Tituba; Condé invents her through counter-memory. Counter-memory does not depend on facts to substantiate itself. In a dream world, Condé locates her ideas for her story: "It was only when I started asking people and historians around me, and did not discover anything factual about her, that I decided I was going to write her story out of my own dreams" (199). The primary purpose of counter-memory is to provide a subject testimony where none existed before. Because narrative can only imitate, veracity can never be certain. A true representation of a person's life can never be certain. Counter-memory creates a person where only the shadow of a person existed. In other words, the writing of Condé attempts to fill in the elliptical spaces left by other writers in order to address "exclusions and invisibilities" (Gordon 17). However, by

filling in the absence of Tituba, Condé risks creating a hollowed-out subject, another absence: “Literature and the archive seem complicit in that they are both a cross-hatching of condensations, a traffic in telescoped symbols, that can only too easily be read as each other’s reposition-with-a-displacement” (Spivak 205).

The novel frequently and directly remarks on the violence associated with this kind of misrepresentation: After Tituba is first accused of practicing witchcraft and subsequently sent to Ipswich to be jailed, she observes, “As I stumbled forward, I was racked by a violent feeling of pain and terror. It seemed that I was gradually being forgotten. I felt that I would only be mentioned in passing in these Salem witchcraft trials about which so much would be written later. . . . There would be mention here and there of ‘a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing hoodoo’” (110). In this case, the injustice of being forgotten, being rent from history, is the injury that needs the suturing techniques of a writer able to weave a rich and coherent tapestry from loose threads, some from the archives, some from dreams.

Tituba’s name does not reflect ownership of her body by another person but rather the same creative impulse that drives Condé’s own relationship with Tituba—invention. The violence and aggression that marks Tituba’s conception are transformed by her naming: “It was [Yao] who gave me my name: Tituba. TI-TU-BA. It’s not an Ashanti name. Yao probably invented it to prove that I was the daughter of his will and imagination. Daughter of his love” (6). In the world of the novel, love is often a feature of invention. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy notes how black people in western society use naming in order to deal with pain: “Being in pain encompasses both a radical, personalized en-registration of time and diachronic understanding of language whose

most enduring effects are the ways black people in all western cultures play with names and naming” (Gilroy 203). Naming implies belonging within a community—a community with a distinct culture and history.

By participating in a conversation with Tituba and allowing Tituba authorial input, Condé inserts herself as a member of this community. Just as Condé herself fosters a relationship with Tituba, the novel itself also explores what it might mean for a living person to have a healthy relationship with ancestral spirits—to commune with them in spaces of love and attentiveness. This is not the same as conjuring, or calling out spirits in order to exorcise them. The story opens with Tituba explaining how she came to be in the world. Born in Barbados to an enslaved Ashanti woman named Abena who was raped by an English sailor, the violence and aggression that marks Tituba’s conception inform the earthly bond she has with her mother. Abena rejects the affections of her daughter because she reminds her too much of the aggressive English sailor. On the dynamics of this mother-daughter relationship, Tituba remarks: “Whenever I used to cuddle up to her, as children are wont to do, she would inevitably push me away” (6). The material world destroyed the mother-daughter bond, but the spiritual relationship that results after Abena dies and visits Tituba is one of recovery and renewal. Tituba describes her first encounter with her spirit-mother: “She came and took me in her arms. God! How sweet her lips were! ‘Forgive me for thinking I didn’t love you. Now I know I’ll never leave you,’ she said” (9). In this relationship, Abena loves Tituba and protects her fiercely.

This affective bond between Tituba and her mother is not co-option. Can the relationship between Tituba and Condé be described in similarly loving terms, as co-

creative and not co-optive? Some historical writing is co-option. Still more historical writing leaves ellipses, or collapses certain moments with non-committal words like perhaps. Does this type of writing regenerate loss? More importantly, do writers once again turn people into objects because they have no concern for the ethics of representation? If so, these writers could be seen as people who traffic in untold stories—dead bodies that are enlivened, made marketable, by their prose. This could be called a liquidation of invisible spirits.

Condé needed to return to a historical flashpoint that continues to affect contemporary life in order to write her novel. In her novel, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison also turns to a historical flashpoint and in the process communes with the dead. Does her prose honor those who have passed or does it ventriloquize the dead? We can only consider intention, a sense of responsibility to ancestors that Morrison makes clear: “I think Afro-Americans in rushing away from slavery, which was important to do—it meant rushing out of bondage into freedom—also rushed away from the slaves because it was painful to dwell there, and they may have abandoned some responsibilities in doing so” (Taylor-Guthrie 247). Morrison writes for the dead in order to repossess a responsibility that others have abandoned. Like Condé, Morrison allows her characters to choose their names, a reflection of personhood, of community formation, that seems contrary to ventriloquizing.

One example of this is the character Baby Suggs. Emancipated towards the end of her life, Baby Suggs chooses to call herself this name instead of Jenny, the name under which she was purchased as a slave, because “Baby Suggs was all she had left of the ‘husband’ she claimed...how could he find or hear tell of her if she was calling herself

some bill-of-sale name?" (Morrison 150). Her name reflects a desire to connect her family. The centrality of family is a theme explored in the novel.

What Don't Stay Dead: Writing *Beloved*

Morrison and Condé both take responsibility for the dead. The extent to which this responsibility is willing or coerced is debatable. How the past can claim ownership over the present is a theme that Morrison explores in her novel *Beloved*. When the influence of the past is so strong that the responsibility felt by the living is a result of coercion, individuals can be arrested in a state that does not allow them to plan their futures. This section of the paper looks at how the presence of the ghost in *Beloved* is a symptom of grief, of unhealthy remembering that the characters of the novel must exorcise and move beyond.

In her own essay, written for an anthology of criticism on *Beloved*, Toni Morrison comments on her choice for the opening sentences: “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom.” The house is purposely not named as grand estates or plantations are named. The numbers de-personalize it: “Numbers have no adjectives, no posture of coziness or grandeur or the haughty yearning of arrivistes and estate builders” (91). The house is stripped down, bare. Even though numbers can have no modifiers, she gives it one—spiteful: “The address is therefore personalized, but personalized by its own activity, not the pasted on desire for personality” (91). What we first learn of 124 is that it is haunted. The baby’s venom that fills it is a persistent, invisible presence that causes much to go awry—“another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill” (2). What is absent—the physical form of the baby who haunts—is made visible by her activity. This type of absence that demands to be known, to be made present is suggested by the first sentence. In the

sequence of numbers, three is glaringly missing. Like the number three, the baby is there and not there, like the “dearly” on the baby’s headstone, which is missing because Sethe, her mother, could not afford the other letters. The rest of the paragraph confirms that within 124 other things are missing—“The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away” (2).

The haunting of 124 is not ancillary; it is a central part of the story, a product of Morrison’s own understanding of ghosts. In a conversation with Gail Caldwell, Morrison says, “As a child everybody knew there were ghosts. You didn’t put your hand under the bed when you slept at night. It that’s place that you go to [in *Beloved*], right away... a shared human response to the world” (242). Ghosts are part of her cultural heritage: “My own use of enchantment simply comes because that’s the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew... there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities” (Davis 226). This orientation towards the ghostly is an Africanist cultural heritage that allows descendants of enslaved persons to understand the material history of slavery through a spiritual lens.

Morrison imbues her characters with this same cosmology. Sethe’s pragmatism is not diluted by her knowledge that her house is haunted by the ghost of the baby she killed. For Sethe, hauntings are everywhere. She describes her memories in terms of haunting—invasive, unbidden, capable of taking hold. She tells her daughter, Denver: “Someday you be walking down the road you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (37).

It is this worldview that keeps Sethe from allowing Denver to return to the place called Sweet Home, the plantation in which she was enslaved. Sethe says, “You can’t never go there. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what” (39). Getting her children out, no matter what, is not an idle comment; Sethe took this declaration to the extreme by attempting to kill all of her children rather than have them captured and sold back into slavery. Other characters reflect on the consequences of loving too much, something lost on Sethe. Paul D refers to her love as risky and “too thick” (173), he prefers “to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have little love left over for the next one” (48).

The consequences of her decision—a decision so beyond the capacity for others of her community to understand and forgive—are that she becomes isolated and metaphorically trapped in the shed where she killed her daughter, forced to remember and relive the past she desperately wants to escape. Even when given the opportunity to become reintegrated in her community, Sethe chooses alienation by refusing to humble herself before her neighbors: “Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably” (160).

Every day Sethe struggles to escape memories that haunt her: “To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The ‘better life’ she believed she and Denver were living was simply not the other one” (45). As the novel progresses, we come to learn of the futility of Sethe’s struggle. When Paul D, a fellow former fugitive of Sweet Home, comes to 124, he brings his own memories of slavery and voices them to

Sethe. To the thought pictures she already had springing before her eyes, unbidden, he adds “Halle’s face smeared with butter and the clabber too; his own mouth jammed full of iron” (101).

Like Sethe, Paul D attempts to suppress and escape his own memories. Although Paul D acknowledges painful stories from his past, he does not emotionally connect to them because he has replaced his emotional center with a “tobacco tin lodged in his chest” (119). When the girl without memory, without lines in her palms comes to 124, calling herself Beloved, she changes Paul D. She comes to him in the place where he sleeps, saying, “I want you to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name” (123). When he reaches the inside part of her, she touches the deepest part of him and his tin heart begins to open, exposing the feelings he had tried for so long to keep at bay. For him, it is unexpected, “She moved closer with a footfall he didn’t hear and he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn’t know it” (123). He responds by repeating “red heart” and allowing himself to be washed over with emotion.

What the characters try to avoid, Morrison wants her readers to experience – the haunting effect of language, the materiality of “thought pictures” that have the ability to grab ahold of our psyches. During an interview with Morrison, Marsha Darling recalls how the characters of *Beloved* would inhabit her dreams: “Beloved and Sethe would enter my dreams and I knew that part of the reason was that I was being so in earnest about the book, reading it at such close attention...But I also thought that it had to do with the clarity and intensity of how I could experience them as characters” (253). Morrison admits that she wants her readers to be possessed by her characters, to understand them as

real people.

When Beloved haunts, it is a transgression. It blurs personal lines, it merges multiple discrete beings, and it overcomes political circumstances that relegated the life and death of black bodies to scribbles in a registry. It is a haunting that Parham articulates as a struggle and a “disintegration of boundaries between the personal and political” (6).

This blurring of personal boundaries occurs in the text when Beloved and Sethe seem to become one person: “She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed through her nose, held her head...It was difficult for Denver to tell who was who” (253). This is a transgression because it drains Sethe; she loses herself in loving Beloved. While Beloved consumes Sethe and gets plumper by the day, Sethe begins to vanish: “The flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk and there wasn’t a piece of clothing in the house that didn’t sag on her” (251). Denver understands these circumstances as the revenge of a bereaved dead girl. Beloved’s position as both in pain and causing pain recalls an earlier line spoken by Amy as she rubbed Sethe’s feet, “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (32). It is not clear where to locate the hurt. Is the process of coming back to life painful or is it pain that causes the dead to come back to life?

Beloved is a baby who died but would not go to the grave quietly, which is consistent with the cosmology of the characters of the novel—“People who died bad don’t stay in the ground” (197). A baby’s life snuffed out with a shovel to the head—her last sight was the hand of her mother raised against her. This is not the story of a woman,

near psychosis, who murdered her children in a fit of insanity. This is the story of maternal love so boundless it attempted to preserve what slavery had the capacity to destroy—the innocence of childhood. Before slavery could steal her daughter’s life, the real life Margaret Garner, whom Sethe’s character is based on, sent her to an early grave. The baby would not settle there—her business in the world was not finished. She emerged as all ghosts do, from a state of unresolved affairs.

According to Toni Morrison, the ghost of Margaret Garner’s baby entered her life, not as a mere thought, but as an apparition upon the water: “She walked out of the water, climbed the rocks, and leaned against the gazebo. Nice hat” (8). Morrison had come face-to-face with what Derrida describes as “the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh” (7). Morrison could see the ghost because she believed and because she already knew the contours of the ghost’s emotion—the weight she carried with every step, the loss of her childhood. She had read the old newspaper clippings about a slave woman’s desperate act of murder. Because of the trans-temporal nature of trauma and its ghostly manifestations, Morrison is able to engage in a particular mode of historiography that does not recognize the boundaries of time and space; she states: “The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It’s bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one’s ever assumed responsibility for” (Darling 247). She had thought of the baby, chewed over the facts, imagined the unwritten details, and, ultimately, Morrison understood her role: “An artist is a politician...he bears witness” (Childress 4). By basing her novel on the life of Margaret Garner, she bears witness to the lives torn apart by slavery and represents infanticide in a way that “can be digested, in a

manner in which the memory is not destructive” (Darling 248). The novel *Beloved* does not recreate horrors or collapse humanity so that there is a singular villain or hero.

Morrison did not envision her role as cross-temporal judge, meting out punishment to those who had passed; instead, she tells Thomas LeClair of *New Republic*, “I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured” (121).

By receiving the story, the reader also plays a role in bearing witness. The disembodied dialogues and abstract, lyrical prose make it difficult for readers to easily absorb the novel. This is indicative of Morrison’s desire to have her readers feel the story in a visceral way and understand the characters as complex people. In the end, Morrison asserts that this is not a story to be passed on. That assertion holds the possibility of moving from grief to grievance. In other words, the statement could be interpreted as passing down the story but not the grief attached to it. This type of remembering honors the dead without resurrecting and reliving their burdens and traumas.

Morrison makes it clear that she is writing a family history for black people. Her novel resurrects stories that have been forgotten or misremembered; in particular, the familial roles of black people who were turned into commodities through chattel slavery. An effort she describes in an interview with Christina Davis, “There’s a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours” (224). What is rendered invisible becomes a “furtive and ungraspable visibility” (Derrida 7)—a ghost that is both there and not there simultaneously. This language of absence and presence is echoed in the foreword to *Beloved*, where Morrison describes the

moment she first saw the ghost: “The instant awareness of possibility, the loud heart kicking, the solitude, the danger. And the girl with the nice hat. Then the focus” (14). Where there was nothing, an erasure, suddenly an apparition appeared. Where there was a dead, lifeless body, an annihilated history, Morrison heard a heartbeat and with it all of the potential of a life deferred. Forgotten, emaciated Beloved came to Morrison to have her place, to be remembered, to “[insert] herself into the text” (Darling 248).

In the text, Beloved’s presence is an insertion, a found heartbeat. She gives life to the story Sethe won’t complete for Denver: “Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat” (82). Denver’s ability to embellish the story for which she only had “scraps” only occurs through Beloved’s presence. Beloved facilitates the giving of blood, the finding of a heartbeat. She also opens a space for Sethe where unspeakable things can be spoken: “Every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver’s inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries...But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure” (62). Beloved’s greed for stories began with a thirst for water: “Four days she slept, waking and sitting up only for water” (57), calling attention to another function of the novel.

Morrison's novel is not only an effort of reanimation it is also one of sustenance. It provides nourishment to readers and to the ghost. The novel attends to the needs of both the living and the dead; it is a meeting ground where the past and present converge. Like a bowl of water or a basket of fruit set out for ancestral spirits to come and have their fill, Morrison offers her prose for the sixty million and more who died on cargo ships en route to the Americas. In *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, Sterling Stuckey observes how African traditions served as a "lingering memory in the minds of American slaves" (3). For enslaved Africans, it was essential to remain on good terms with ancestral spirits (Stuckey 43). Morrison invigorates this long-held tradition by regarding, with great respect and veneration, her ancestors, saying, "They were so responsible for us, and we have to responsible to them" (Essence 238). The we in statement refers to those who recognize an African ancestry.

Because the novel deals with what is in excess of history, what spills over into the present—grief—it also offers a space where descendants can "look upon the sculpted shape of their own sorrow" (Rody 25). *Beloved* is a burial ground; a resting place for the "unceremoniously buried," Morrison tells Gloria Naylor (209). Because mourning "consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains by localizing the dead," *Beloved* is an incomplete mourning site (Derrida 9). The body is not buried within the text and cannot be made present through the language. This incompleteness of the burial ground signals that the past can never be completely reconciled with the present.

Despite the efforts of the writer, sometimes the trauma remains unresolved. The novel is not a place to ceaselessly return in remembrance of the dead. *Beloved* cannot

remain a lingering, ghostly presence, in the lives of the readers, in the text itself: “Beloved has to exorcised—spat out—into the epilogue precisely because of the intolerable nature of her claim on the living” (Durrant 91). By the end of the novel, Beloved disappears: “Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who wanted to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy the chewing laughter to swallow her all away” (323). Within the story, Beloved bursts into nothingness. The ending circles to the beginning and Morrison’s initial encounter with the ghost. Wearing a nice hat, stepping on water, she came to the writer to be birthed, to insert herself into language. By the end of the novel, she is once again only a sketchy silhouette, a disappearing, shapeless apparition. She is dead. The story of Beloved, of a mother killing her baby, can never truly be represented. Like Theresa Stitson, Beloved could never know a full life. Avery Gordon attributes this to a “difficulty of representing what seems unrepresentable, if not unthinkable, a difficulty that tosses the writer between paralyzing silence and dead, cold language” (70). The one-sentence paragraphs that mark the last chapter of the novel leave the page with so much blank space—so many silences.

In *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, Sam Durrant offers a reason why this narrative cannot offer closure: “Because the injustices of slavery and its aftermath can never be fully worked through, because racial oppression remains a contemporary reality, because the cycle of (self-)abuse and violation is still playing itself

out in black communities across the United States” (83). Communities of people whose bodies and cultures were taken over by another group can be referred to as colonial. For such communities, trauma continues to be passed on generationally; this provokes a certain kind of postcolonial discourse that offers no balm or resolution for the ills of racism. This discourse recognizes the existence of inequality, of inherited racism, and grasps for the language to heave the experience into coherence. This is precisely why ghosts are often a feature of postcolonial discourse. They signal an unresolved past, a trauma that persists through re-memory, through haunting.

No mourning site can be complete—*Beloved* is not an example of how to remember the past in a healthy way. The characters are almost literally eaten alive by their histories. A more effective way to engage with the past involves moving private grief to public grievance. In response to the notion that the millions of causalities of slavery ought to be remembered, the Toni Morrison Society created an outdoor memorial on Sullivan’s Island. The society erected a bench that faces the Atlantic with Africa behind it. In the consecration ceremony Morrison stated: “It’s never too late to honor the dead.” When we recall the lines of her story, we know that this honoring, this remembering, must be done with caution because remembering can take its toll. Morrison admits that this story beat her up, that sometimes, while composing, she would “write a sentence and...jump up and run outside or something” (Morrison “Site” 122). The fact that the memorial is outside allows griever to do just that—feel the pain and then move on. The bench is the marker of the move from grief to grievance. The bench is not a place to stay, as in “not a story to pass on.” One can bear witness without being consumed by the past.

Private Memories, Public Voices: Grievance in *Corregidora*

The novel, *Corregidora*, by Gayl Jones explores another way that descendants of enslaved persons remember the past—actively telling and retelling the horrors of enslavement instead of trying to keep the memories at bay. Stories function in the same manner as the Toni Morrison Society’s public memorial—they are meant to serve as potential court testimonies. The responsibility of carrying individual, private memories meant for a public arena forces the characters to negotiate the boundaries between the public and private self.

The protagonist of the novel is Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer who is the fourth generation of women with the same surname. Corregidora is the Portuguese seaman who, in turns, fathered and fucked the women he enslaved. In addition to continuing to carry the surname, every woman of the Corregidora line must repeat the stories of enslavement and the relations of violence, subjugation, and incest that Corregidora formed with Ursa’s mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. Corregidora is the ghost that haunts this narrative; his presence is made visible by the photograph, the face of evil, as Great Gram calls it, which is handed down through the generations. In flashbacks that occur throughout the novel, Ursa recalls being told: “The important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can’t burn conscious, Ursa. And that what makes the evidence. And that’s what makes the verdict” (22). The text does not designate a speaker; indeed, the words could be spoken by any of the Corregidora women. The manner in which the individual stories of Gram, Great Gram and Mama become infused as one collective memory does not go unnoticed by Ursa. On

her mother's ability to share a particular memory, she states, "It was as if she had *more* than learned it off by heart, though. It was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora women, was her memory too, as strong with her as her own private memory, or almost as strong" (129). The last lines, almost as strong, are significant. Private, individual memory outweighs the collective consciousness. The desire for Mama and Ursa, the last members of the Corregidora line, to maintain an identity outside of the patriarchal, master-slave dynamic that Gram and Great Gram rehash and rehearse, emerges in the text as ambivalence and omission. Exorcising the ghost in this context is a complicated balance of accepting that one's body and will is subject to another, Corregidora and then Corregidora's memory, all the while disavowing the making generations imperative.

When we first encounter Ursa, she recounts the moment that led to her miscarriage and hysterectomy: a fight between her and her husband, Mutt Thomas, that led to her falling or being thrown down a flight a stairs. Subsequent retellings of the event do not elucidate what really happened: did Ursa throw herself down the stairs, fall by accident, or did Mutt push her? In *Monstrous Intimacies*, Christina Sharpe remarks, "The gaps in the narrative itself and in reproduction with which the text begins, position Ursa from the outset as unable or unwilling to fulfill the Corregidora women's demand to carry their history into the future" (30). Because the incident leads to a miscarriage and hysterectomy, resulting in Ursa's inability to fulfill the familial duty of making generations, questions surrounding culpability are crucial. They point to Ursa's own reproductive agency. At times she expresses discomfort and anxiety over childbirth; other times she seems to lament her loss of a womb: "What's bothering me? Great Gram,

because I can't make generations. I remember everything you told me, Great Gram and Gram too and" (41). The sentence ends abruptly, refusing to complete itself with the expected "and Mama." This rupture mimics the way that Ursa's inability to bear children has abruptly severed the Corregidora lineage.

If Ursa purposefully ended her pregnancy, even if only subconsciously, her desire to break the Corregidora line and establish her own identity could be the reason. She tells her mother: "I have to make my own kind of life. I have to make some kind of life for myself" (111). What Ursa and her mother are able to vocalize to each other about this desire for separation and distinction comes in the form of a question: "Corregidora has never been enough for you, has it?" (111). Knowledge about her father becomes the topic of the remainder of their conversation. Having relations with a man was not something that Mama wanted; however, the desires of her body overtook her: "It was like something had got into me. Like my body or something knew what it wanted even if I didn't want no man. Cause I knew I wasn't lookin for none. But it was like it knew it wanted you. It was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you'd be a girl" (114). By not having a baby by Corregidora, by not allowing him to be both father and lover, Mama has already distinguished herself from her heritage, which is the horror of being a chattel prostitute, of having no reproductive rights. This legacy is made visible and relived by the mark that is Mama's complexion and by her ritualized retelling of stories. By having a baby with a dark-skinned man, Mama refuses to recreate Corregidora in the same way her own mother and grandmother do. In order to break the cycle of haunting, Mama and Ursa make decisions that complicate and/or sever the Corregidora line; still they both place control over their

reproduction outside of themselves—in doctors who perform hysterectomies, in a body that makes decisions for the mind. What is different about this kind of embodiment? The degree to which the subconscious is operating, deciding to fall so a pregnancy will end, is obfuscated by vacillating desires of wanting and not wanting intimacy and childbirth.

Great Gram also holds private memories that are omitted from the collective retelling of Corregidora's dominion. She tells Ursa: "They burned all the documents but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood" (72). The memory that is burned out, left to silences, is what Great Gram did to Corregidora to make him want to kill her. We never find out what she did, but it was enough to cause her to flee for her life and leave her daughter behind. Sharpe has her own way of reading this omission, focusing not on what Great Gram did but what Corregidora has done: "What more has Corregidora done that Great Gram cannot bear? What if Corregidora's fucking Gram is not the consequence of Great Gram's departure but its cause?...Perhaps what Great Gram cannot bear and can never avow is the intimate trauma of being the favorite, Dorita, and having her own emancipated child fucked by her/their father" (43). Whether it is jealousy at having her position usurped or anger that even in freedom, she cannot protect her child, the reasons why Great Gram did something to Corregidora to make him want to kill her do not answer the question of why she refuses to speak about it later on in life. At the end of the novel, Ursa believes she has discovered the truth of Great Gram's secret—she almost killed Corregidora during a moment "right before

sexlessness” when she had his genitals in her mouth and could have bitten them off completely.

The reason for retelling the stories of their enslavement is so that the women can have evidence in court. What at first is literal becomes symbolic. When Ursa questions her great grandmother about the veracity of her story, she is slapped and told: “When I’m telling you something don’t you ever ask if I’m lying. Because they didn’t want to leave no evidence against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That’s why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn’t be no evidence to hold up against them” (14). Great Gram’s silence could be calculated so that in a case for reparations she will always be perceived as a victim and never an aggressor.

Sharpe argues that this retelling does not release the women from their former lives as chattel but rather causes them to relive the trauma, re-inscribe the original inscription, and perpetuate the laws of slavery that made their bodies, their wombs, not their own. They are still bound by the legal system that does not recognize their pain because “in this case, the demands of the formerly enslave on their descendants [have] become congruent with the law of the (slave) master” (32). The women wait for a redress, to testify in court, but that will never happen; just as slave law did not recognize their pain, neither will the current law. If *Beloved* is about grief then *Corregidora* is about the movement beyond that, or, at least, an incomplete attempt.

In their article “Fugitive Justice,” Stephen Best and Saadiyah Hartman ask the question, “How does one compensate for centuries of violence that have as their

consequence the impossibility of restoring a prior existence, of giving back what was taken, of repairing what was broken?” (2). There is no easy answer; the issue with reparations is that most cases that went to court could not fully account for the scope of what enslavement destroyed for black people. Six ex-slave pension bills in total went before Congress between 1890 and 1903, and all of them focused on recovering money for unpaid labor. What injuries go unaddressed when the experience of enslavement is whittled down to unpaid labor? In any case, sovereign immunity “protected the government from all charges of culpability as regards to the institution of slavery” (6). What is lost in this legal framework, Best and Hartman call black grief: “The shuttling between grief and grievance has been lost in pursuit of what is possible within a liberal legal conception of law and property. What is sacrificed in this approach, what cannot be heard, is the black noise...Black noise represents the kinds of political aspirations that are inaudible and illegible within the prevailing formulas of political rationality; these yearnings are illegible because they are so wildly utopian and derelict to capitalism” (9).

The efforts of the Corregidora women to redress their pained bodies by speaking about the wrongs committed against them overshadow their desires to reclaim the self, free from the scourges of the past. Any effort at reclamation is continually re-inscribed in terms of powerlessness and danger. Like the ex-slave pension bills that went before Congress, their stories exist within a framework that can only allow for intimacy to be dangerous, if not unwanted, and Corregidora to be evil and hated. The black noise of Jones’s text are the feelings for Corregidora that are unspoken and the desire for intimacy that exists outside of the Corregidora line.

The black noise that cannot be spoken, or understood, is stored in the body. Ursa recalls her grandmother's sweaty palms: "Great Gram sat in the rocker. I was on her lap. She told the same story over and over again. She had her hands around my waist, and I had my back to her. While she talked, I'd stare down at her hands. She would fold them and then unfold them. She didn't need her hands around me to keep me in her lap, and sometimes I'd see the sweat in her palms" (11). She opens and closes her hands as if her palms were a book containing her memories. What the lines cannot map out, what language cannot express, becomes a physical thing in her hands—sweat. She works out this excess, which is the stuff of perspiration, tears, and semen—salt and bodily fluid—by rubbing Ursa's thighs: "Her hands had lines all over them...Once when she was talking, she started rubbing my thighs with her hands, and I could feel the sweat on my legs. Then she caught herself, and stopped, and held my waist again" (11). The catching of herself, the realization that something she wants to remain hidden, has slipped out, ensures that illegible desire is never given any more language than what the body can speak.

Ursa is rarely, if ever, able to express what she wants, what might be contained in her own sweaty hands; still, by the end of the novel, she is able to tell Mutt what she does not want and he, in turn, tells her he does not want the same thing:

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you," he said.

"Then you don't want me."

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you."

"Then you don't want me."

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you."

"Then you don't want me."

He shook me till I fell against him crying. “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither,” I said.

What is significant about this exchange is that it is unclear whether the woman Mutt is referring to is actually Ursa. He could be speaking of Ursa’s ancestors and so the “you” refers to Ursa herself. If this is the case, this moment in the text is not only an acknowledgment that what Great Gram, Gram and Mama carried, in their hands and in their mouths, and passed down to Ursa, rubbing on her thighs, whispering in her ear, was hurtful but also an acknowledgement that Mutt no longer wants to recreate that pain. If this is progress, it is slight because the roughness with which Mutt handles Ursa before she falls against him bears the shadow of their former abusive relationship and the relationship that Corregidora had with Ursa’s grandmother and great grandmother. It is even slighter still because Ursa still wraps her identity up in those women with her statement, “then you don’t want me.” Like the other women in her family, she is still a hurt woman who hurts. Still, she knows that she doesn’t want a man to hurt her, not Mutt, not Corregidora. Though minimal, this is progress. This is Mutt and Ursa attempting to step out of the long shadow cast by the inherited trauma of slavery.

Public Mourning in *Praisesong for the Widow*

Corregidora deals with how unutterable experiences are stored in the body. The body speaks its knowledge through movement, through sweat. The body as a repository of memory is also a feature of *Beloved*. In *Corregidora*, the body makes itself legible, however, in *Beloved*, the language of the body needs an interpreter to give it meaning. Sethe knows her mother because of a mark on her skin. A mark that would otherwise be insignificant if it were not one of the few things that Sethe remembers about the woman; she recalls, “She never fixed my hair nor nothing...One thing she did do. She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin” (65). What both of these novels point to is the physicality of memory, which has been remarked upon in this paper as a way to understand and define rememory. Memory can be tied to the body as well as geographic sites, like in *I, Tituba* when Tituba sees Barbados in her mind’s eye as she touches water, as if touching the sea that surrounds her homeland.

Memory is a salient feature in *Praisesong for the Widow* by Paule Marshall. The main character, Avey Gordon, shuttles back and forth between the present and the past, and sensory experience often evokes her memories. Her memories are associated with geographic locations—Tatem Island, a sea island off the South Carolina coast, where she spent summers with her great aunt Cuney, and New York, where she spent her married life with Jerome. These memories are psychic landscapes long forgotten, and exterior

stimuli serve as the catalyst for a profound interior journey of remembering and reclamation.

When the novel opens we find Avey aboard a Caribbean cruise, ready to abandon the trip during its stop in Grenada. She has recently had a disturbing dream, precipitated by hearing people speak Patois: “But reaching her clearly now was the flood of unintelligible words and the peculiar cadence and lilt of the Patois she had heard for the first time in Martinique three days ago. She had heard it that first time and it had fleetingly called to mind the way people spoke in Tatem long ago. There had been the same vivid, slightly atonal music underscoring the words. She had heard it and that night from out of nowhere her great-aunt had stood waiting in her sleep” (67).

The sound of Patois triggers a recollection of Tatem Island and the woman she spent her summers with there. In her dream, she traces the old places she and her great aunt would frequent. Even though her great aunt was banned from attending church services, she and Avey would stand a little distance away from church gatherings and observe the prayer circles: “Some nights, though, when they held the Shouts she go to stand, un-reconciled but nostalgic, on the darkened road across from the church, taking Avey with her if it was August...It wasn't supposed to be dancing, yet to Avey, standing beside the old woman, it held something of the look, and it felt like dancing in her blood, so that under cover of the darkness she performed in place the little rhythmic trudge” (34). The “dancing in her blood” signals a heritage that is transmitted through rhythm—the rhythm of music and of storytelling. Avey also receives cultural artifacts through an oral story of slave rebellion. Great aunt Cuney tells Avey about how when enslaved Ibos first arrived in the Americas, they took one look at what their new life would be and then

decided to walk back to Africa via the Atlantic Ocean. Passing down the story is an imperative Avey must fulfill: "Moreover, in instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill. It had taken her years to rid herself of the notion" (42).

Great aunt Cuney appears in Avey's dream as a ghostly figure that represents all that Avey has been isolated and cut-off from—her ancestry, her heritage, and her purpose. Cuney and Avey become locked in a battle: "Wildly she aimed the blows on her face, her neck, her shoulder and her great fallen breasts—striking flesh that had been too awesome for her to even touch as a child. Her great aunt did not hesitate to hit her back, and with the same if not greater force" (44). The combat that Avey and Cuney engage in reflects not only the antagonism with which Avey receives her but also her inability to integrate her past with her present experiences. Even in waking hours, she is haunted by the violent confrontation that marked her dream—this haunting manifests itself as hallucinations that mimic the encounter. On the deck of the cruise ship she sees “as if her eyes were playing tricks on her, the numerous shuffleboard games... turn for an instant into a spectacular brawl, with the players flailing away at each other with their cue sticks" (56).

Although Avey recognizes that “there was a hole the size of a crater where her life of the past three decades had been,” she cannot fully reintegrate the memories she has lost. Avey's antagonistic relationship to her memories and her heritage is a vestige from her marriage to Jerome. The shame, disavowal, and internalized racism that marked the last half of their marriage, before his death, is best characterized by his letting go of their small rituals in order to focus on material progress. Their rituals consisted of reading

Langston Hughes poems, listening to jazz and blues music, and turning their living room into a private dance floor. Like the rhythm associated with her trips to Tatem Island, the musicality of her rituals with Jerome connected both of them to an ancient ancestry:

“Something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connection, heard in the music and in the praise songs of a Sunday: ‘...I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were/young...,’ had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power” (137). Avey associates those “small rites” with the house on Halsey street where “when she would put on the records after coming in from work, the hardwood floor, reverberating with the music, used to feel like rich and solid ground under her. She had felt centered and sustained then...restored to her proper axis” (254). When Jerome and Avey left that house, that pulsed with music, Jerome took “with him the little private rituals and pleasures, the playfulness and wit of those early years, the host of feelings and passions that had defined them in a special way back then, and the music which had been their nourishment” (136).

Avey recalls this loss she endured, this loss of the man who would come to be replaced with a social climber who chastised other black people, saying, “The trouble with half these Negroes out here is that they spend all their time blaming the white man for everything...That’s what most of these Negroes out here still haven’t gotten through their heads. Instead of marching and protesting and running around burning down everything in the hope of a handout, we need to work and build our own, to have our own” (135). She mourns her husband’s spiritual death and reflects on what they could have done to stay connected to their heritage despite having entered a world of middle

class privilege: “It would have taken strength on their part, and the will and even cunning necessary to withstand the glitter and the excess. To take only what was needed and to run. And distance. Above all, a certain distance of the mind and heart had been absolutely essential” (139). This distance of mind and heart was something that her great-great grandmother had mastered, as Cuney used to tell Avey, “Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem, but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos...” (139).

Praisesong for the Widow is a return-to-roots narrative. By the end of the novel, Avey learns to be like her great-great grandmother, to spiritually be in West Africa although her body is physically somewhere else. Unable to repress the memories of her great aunt and her husband that continually pierce her consciousness, she must “retrieve and reorder them in a purposeful way” (Memory and Cultural Politics 107). This involves connecting her name to her purpose; she is named after her great-great grandmother and like her she must act as a conveyor of a powerful myth, the story of the Ibos. This is similar to the “making generations” imperative of Corregidora; however, this myth is generative, not repressive. It sparks within Avey a desire to proselytize and rebuild.

Avey’s ability to receive her memories with clarity and purpose occurs after she is purged during her journey from Grenada to Carricau, a trip that residents of Grenada take annually in order to honor ancestors and connect with family. After leaving her cruise line and making her way to the airport to catch a flight back home, she meets a man named Lebert Joseph who convinces her to come with him to Carricau. She undertakes a perilous sea passage that makes her physically ill so that upon arriving in Carricau she feels, “Flat, numb, emptied-out, it had been the same as her mind when she awoke

yesterday morning, unable to recognize anything and with the sense of a yawning hole where her heart had once been” (214). The space that is emptied out is replaced by affirming memories. She moves from a state of rigidity and isolation, violently rejecting her heritage, to a state of warmth, arousal and connection. This transformation is dramatically enacted when Lebert Joseph’s daughter bathes her. At first, “Avey Johnson tried protesting being given the bath. There was no need, she could do it herself, she no longer felt weak--speaking out of her obsessive privacy and the helpless aversion to being touched she had come to feel over the years” (219). By the end of the session, she “became aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that's fallen asleep once it's roused, and a warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a standstill, but was now tentatively getting under way again” (223). The sensation continues until it reaches her heart and “struck a powerful chord, and the reverberation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body” (224).

With a renewed body and spirit, Avey participates in the ceremonial dancing that celebrates the out-islanders return to Carricau. The drumming that ushers in the dancers connects participants to their gods and ancestors. The interconnectedness of bodies and spirits is not marked by the dead attempting to speak through the living of press their desires or needs on the living. The ceremony is one of confraternity and harmony. Avey remarks on how the dances unfold in a set pattern, “One or two or sometimes three old souls whose nation it was would sing their way into the circle and there dance to the extent of their strength. Saluting their nations. Summoning the Old Parent. Inviting them to join them in the circle. And invariably they came. A small land crab might suddenly scuttle past the feet of one of the dancers. A hard-back beetle would be seen zooming

drunkenly (from all the Jack Iron imbibed earlier) around their heads. Sometimes it was nothing more than a moth, a fly, a mosquito” (238). Kin from all generations, living and dead, enter the space together. This space is one of celebration and also of mourning; Avey notices, “For a fraction of a second the note hung in the yard, knifing through the revelry to speak to everyone there. To remind them of the true and solemn business of the fete. Then it was gone” (245). This mourning is not stagnant, as it is in *Beloved*, where mourners are held hostage to a draining emotion. This type of mourning is fleeting and takes place in collective, open space, not the sealed-off home of 124. It is a type of purging, an emptying out, that is immediately filled, much like what Avey experiences on her journey to Carricau.

Avey is so moved by witnessing the ritual that she joins in the dance, seeing the faces of the women and men of Tatem in the people of Carricau: “She had finally after all these decades made it across. The elderly Shouters in the person of the out-islanders had reached out their arms like one great arm and drawn her into their midst” (249). Avey is finally in the circle—something that she had not fully experienced with her great aunt because they always watched the ring shout from the periphery, and something that with her husband she was cut off from because he developed a disdain for the percussion sound, saying, “If it was left to me I’d close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum!” (247). While in the circle, Avey is able to reclaim her name: “And as a mystified Avey Johnson gave her name, she suddenly remembered her great-aunt Cuney’s admonition long ago. The old woman used to insist, on pain of a switching, that whenever anyone in Tatem, even another child, asked her name she was not to say simply ‘Avey,’ or even ‘Avey Williams.’ But always ‘Avey, short for Avatara’” (251).

This claiming of her name is much like her eventual claiming of a nation. Lebert tells her that she is probably from the Arada nation, something which “could only be of his imagining” (253). Indeed, once Avey leaves Carricau, her whole journey seems to her to be one that sprang from her imagination: “Everything fleeting and ephemeral. The island more a mirage rather than an actual place. Something conjured up perhaps to satisfy a longing and need” (254). Feeling that the journey was conjured up emphasizes its spiritual aspects. Ultimately, the need for her trip was to reconnect to her purpose. On her way back to New York, she makes up her mind to rebuild the house her great aunt Cuney left for her and to take her two grandsons there during the summers. Most importantly, she vows to keep alive the story of the Ibos: “And at least twice a week in the late afternoon, when the juniper trees around Tatem began sending out their cool and stately shadows, she would lead them, grandchildren and visitors alike, in a troop over to the Landing” (256). The juniper trees symbolize the ongoing presence of her great aunt, who “resembled the trees in her straight, large-boned mass and height” (32). As Avey lives out the rest of her life, she still carries her ancestors with her; however, because she has been able to integrate her past memories with her present purpose, she no longer feels combative and paranoid about this presence.

Conclusion: Fictionalizing Slavery

Interventions of writers like Morrison opened space for conversations about grief and grievance in the context of slavery in the Americas; the question remains whether or not such interventions are currently necessary. It could be argued that the popular landscape of film and literature is oversaturated with material about slavery. The film *Django Unchained*, written, directed and produced by Quentin Tarantino, is one recent example. Is this film pastiche or does it do the same kind of work as writers like Morrison, moving the pain and horror of slavery from grief to grievance?

Set in the Deep South, circa 1858, *Django Unchained* opens with a group of chained slaves being driven through Texas when they are halted by a German bounty hunter named Dr. King Schultz. Schultz inquires about a member of the group—a slave named Django who can identify several of Schultz’s current bounty. Django and Schultz become partners in pursuit of not only the bounty that Django can identify but also a host of notorious criminals throughout the West. After a winter season of gunning down criminals, Schultz agrees to help Django find his wife, Broomhilda, who has been sold downriver. They eventually find her at Candyland, the plantation of Calvin J. Candie, an enthusiast of “Mandingo fighting” between slaves. Schultz and Django gain access to Candyland by posing as Mandingo experts, but their plans to buy Broomhilda’s freedom are foiled by Candie's butler Stephen who discovers their farce. A shootout ensues, leaving Schultz and Candie dead and Django in chains again. Django negotiates his way from his chains and returns to Candyland, killing Stephen and his remaining white masters, and leaving with Broomhilda.

Violence is the most salient feature of the film. Realistic violence meant to depict the horrors of slavery collapse under the weight of a stylized, cartoonish climax and too-easy character development. Django emerges from debased slave to heroic avenger in a matter of seconds; his sharp-shooting skills materialize from thin air. This film is more about Tarantino's interest in homage to spaghetti westerns than about historical engagement. The brutal Mandingo fighting did not even exist during slavery, yet it takes front and center of the plot, and the actual horrors of sexual violence and exploitation are only hinted at (Douthat). It's a wonder that in Tarantino's world, an institution of racial exploitation could be maintained considering that most of the white characters are buffoons, typified by the scene in which a pre-Klan group of masked racist riders argue about the uselessness of their sack hoods.

Considering the otherworldly elements and ahistorical details of the literature observed in this paper, one could argue that any engagement with history really isn't about the past. Even for writers who claim to witness ghosts, their material could be more about their own interests, and the ghost serves as a convenient archetype for establishing credibility. How can we know how our ancestors want to be remembered?

This paper sought the ghosts of 20th century African American texts. Not the obvious ghosts who proclaim their presences with howling and shrieking and much rattling of furniture; these ghosts make for good television. Rather, the ghosts who move with subtlety, whose presences are memories of meetings – episodes that occur when a writer taps into the beyond long before putting pen to paper, long before the book goes to print. More than ghosts, I found writers grappling with memories, some inherited, some from their own lives.

I would like to end this paper at the beginning. My motivation for pursuing this topic—a conversation with my grandmother in which she told me, “Muffie, you have to write a poem for me when I’m dead.” I was unprepared for her request. My response was hurried: “Don’t talk like that, grandma.” Her words lingered with me, recalling within me an Africanist cosmology that served as the backdrop for my investigation. What happens when we write for the dead? The type of writing that recognizes the dead as listening and speaking subjects. This connection to the spirit world resists an impulse to always frame writing within market logic of material use and exchange. It radically alters the relationship between writer and consuming audience. After all, spirits cannot purchase books. Still, writers understand the necessity of engaging a living audience. Even as they write to and for the dead, the needs of the living remain at the forefront.

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