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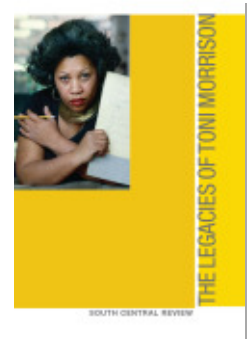
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# The Haunting Absence of Language: How Toni Morrison's Spectral Formula Unlocks Marginalized Counter-Narratives in Current Gothic American Literature

Rory Olivarez

## Abstract:

Is Toni Morrison still here? Rather than exorcising *Beloved* by ordering that her story not be passed on, it appears that the author and her shade have been embraced and remain firmly rooted in current Gothic American literature. Morrison honed the spectral, liberating undocumented Black American slave counter-narratives and exposing concealed ancestral trauma. The fecundity of her contribution is celebrated in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and Angela Flournoy's *The Turner House*, both of which employ such ghosts to engage with and enlighten their nescient descendants. In this article, I examine the gap in the scholarly conversation on the proliferation of a spectral formula established in *Beloved* that echoes through current literary works entailing a corporeal ghost, related to the living characters, haunted by a historically invalidated trauma, that is only released by reintegration rather than exorcism.

## BELOVED'S ECHO

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER ITS publication, Toni Morrison's influential Nobel-Prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987) is still taught, challenged in U.S. classrooms, available as a major motion picture, and informs hundreds of scholarly articles influencing a new generation of Black women writers. Her recent passing in 2019 set off a flurry of articles establishing her influence on current modern literature, even crediting Morrison with having "done for the modern novel what Shakespeare did for theatre."<sup>1</sup> On the issue of race and haunting, Jesmyn Ward and Angela Flournoy credit Morrison's contribution as the inspiration for the spectral characters in their award-winning novels *Sing, Unburied Sing* (2017), and *The Turner House* (2015) to inform future generations of the buried and suppressed truths of Black American history. Flournoy attributes *Beloved* for "transform[ing] the way I think,"<sup>2</sup> and Ward declares the novel left her "[. . .] blinded. Struck dumb. Dust in my lungs."<sup>3</sup> The

ripples of haunting in both novels echo *Beloved*'s call to exhume denied histories and reincorporate them into the conversation, demonstrating Morrison's particular influence upon the trope of the spectral in American Gothic literature. And yet, while critical analysis of her work abounds, there remains an elusiveness to her literary technique that has not been examined or identified, a technique that employs temporality to take the reader back to the fork in the road where a victim's trauma is never fully identified nor validated and is extracted as a counternarrative. Through *Beloved* Morrison bequeaths a distinct three-pronged spectral formula: a communally witnessed corporeal ghost, able to communicate with the living, and that instead of being exorcised, must be reincorporated marking the rightful place of the Black American stories excised from the American master narrative.

Toni Morrison redefines the function of ghosts in literature, from their conception in communal and generational trauma, to their identification as corporeal counter-narratives. Current scholars concur that in American Gothic literature ghosts haunt by exposing the fear of the racialized "other." H.L. Malchow, in his study on the role of race in British Gothic literature uncovered "a *language* of panic, of unreasoning anxiety, blind revulsion, and distancing sensationalism . . . [that] can be found throughout discourse on racial difference" (italics in original).<sup>4</sup> Ironically, in American Gothic literature, Morrison establishes it is exactly the absence of language given to the panic, anxiety, and revulsion toward otherness and race, so ingrained in America's colonial history, that has the power to resurrect the dead for the empirical evidence only their ghost can provide. Morrison identifies the moments in history where the master narrative leaves placeholding ghosts seeking dialogue with their descendants. Her technique uses the temporality of the spiritual realm to revisit the moment when the master and counternarratives diverge by acknowledging the initial trauma through language and allowing it to be reintegrated into history. *Beloved* is Morrison's masterclass in untangling the horror, fear, and denial of racial injustice, buried beneath America's constitutional principles of freedom and justice for all, by validating the denied experience of the "other," non-White, non-Western characters' experiences.

Morrison's impact in literature has been so monumental because she gives a voice to the "other," revealing an opening for the lost narratives previously denied in American literature. In fact, specific terms have been developed to address these narratives: the "master narrative," which refers to the version of U.S. history that was recorded by colonizers, and the "counter-narrative," which "refers to the narratives that arise from

the vantage point of those who have been historically marginalized.”<sup>55</sup> Toni Morrison’s contribution to the American Gothic genre uses the spectral to give first-person voices to the invalidated communal trauma suffered by marginalized Black Americans and their future generations. Today, her technique of haunting through prose to historically validate voices silenced by trauma and buried by the master narrative continues to flourish through a definable literary formula evidenced in modern American Gothic literature.

Morrison’s spectral formula, as established in *Beloved*, is a tripodal support system that exhumes generational trauma and its role in history. Her formula replicated and advanced in Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and Fournoy’s *The Turner House*, involves a ghost, corporeally observed by multiple witnesses, that exists and communicates with the living on the liminal spectrum, and must be acknowledged rather than exorcised. Morrison bequeaths her enduring spectral formula to future authors who continue to haunt through marginalized and silenced truths emanating from denied traumas.

### MORRISON’S SPECTRAL FORMULA

Morrison’s literary formula uses the spectral to expose ancestral histories and voice their reverberating traumas. Her play with the spectral reveals its duality, pursuing a visual presence through its materiality, and a narrative existence through language. Morrison’s use of this technique reveals how the untold stories of the marginalized continue to haunt, seeking clarification in the lives of the living characters and deepening the context of their modern-day existence. The ghosts in Morrison’s formula are returning from exorcism by the master narrative to give meaning to those they haunt and take their rightful place in history.

Morrison’s spectral technique accelerates this goal by allowing the author to traverse physical and temporal borders, effectively shattering the binary lens. In *Beloved*, the ghost’s physical form allows it to engage with and enlighten the living characters through stories from their own history. The ghost’s limited physicality expands the binary system of life and death, into a spectral space cohabited by ghosts and humans existing on a spectrum from invisible to fully corporeal. As Joanne Chassot, puts it, the ghost’s existence in the liminal “demands that we look again not simply in the sense we open our eyes wider, or scrutinize dark corners more carefully, but that we look beyond what we have been trained to see—and not to see.”<sup>56</sup> Chassot insists her readers progress past the binary,

of presence and absence, in search of the spaces in between containing stories excluded by the binary lens.

Initially the ghost of Beloved is invisible but able to physically alter its surroundings, such as leaving handprints in a cake or causing the floorboards of the house to shake and the house to pitch.<sup>7</sup> After years of haunting the house and its residents, the ghost appears one day in the form of a woman, fully corporeal and visible to all the house's occupants. Communication between the two becomes possible on the liminal spectrum occupied by the dead who cannot die and the living who cannot fully live. What they share is a trauma unidentified yet continuously inherited. Along the same spectrum in direct correlation lies the accessibility of language. The American Gothic haunts in this liminal space, where traumatic experiences are stored in silence only accessible through recognition. Considering the most extreme trauma one can experience is facing death, it is trauma that opens the door between the dead and the living and between absence and presence.

Current research in trauma studies finds that "a traumatic experience challenges the limits of language, fragments the psyche, and even ruptures meaning altogether."<sup>8</sup> These ruptures are the liminal spaces inhabited by literary ghosts seeking nomenclature to identify traumatic events denied from their inception. Trauma produces interruptions that are absorbed by silence, yet the silence is not empty, rather it is flooded with unspoken truth that seeks release. This is critical in the work of Morrison, an advocate for the liberation of language, who stated "language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names."<sup>9</sup> In other words language exposes the traumas buried in silence through the living whose DNA holds the vestiges of the experience which conventional language can help to disclose.

Thus, trauma disrupts life experiences storing them in a framework of denial that moves through time by inhabiting the spectral and can only be released through language. Avery Gordon locates haunting in "moment[s] when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and riggings are exposed."<sup>10</sup> These "moments" in which the present does not fully blanket the past are highlighted in novels through linguistic "hiccups" or moments when language is abbreviated, abruptly terminated, or coded to identify a past trauma. This literary technique is eloquently demonstrated in the ghost of Beloved's monologue, wherein linear temporality vanishes and instead takes on a circular format: "I AM BELOVED and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say

things that are pictures.”<sup>11</sup> In this monologue, Morrison duplicates the resurfacing fractures of trauma by fracturing the conventions of writing and removing almost all punctuation and standardized capitalization. By duplicating the shattered conventions of time through the shattered conventions of language, Morrison begins to find language with which to address “the scariness of things with no names.”<sup>12</sup> Just as the ghost is partially present, so too are the rules of grammar, as if through violations, new meaning can be reached. For example, the inconsistent and extended spaces between words mimic a speaker pausing in search of the next word. This concept is further developed through syntactical play in the monologue, such as “she opens the grass,” or “clouds in the way” which allow for a new understanding outside of the rules of grammar and mimicking the partial presence of the ghost.

Essential to Morrison’s spectral formula is that the trauma be communal, either genetically or ethnically to ground the lost history as a shared experience with societal implications. This differentiates the haunting from traumas that are privately or individually experienced. In the case of the ghost of *Beloved*, she returned in response to a trauma experienced by a family, *Beloved*’s death at Sethe’s hand, and a community, the generational trauma of their 60 million ancestors who suffered and died in the Middle Passage. This temporal positioning of the ghost allows for the resurfacing of buried counter-narratives that can now dialogue with their current social repercussions, such as in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and Angela Flournoy’s *The Turner House*, allowing the ghosts to traverse time and communicate with the living by filling in the missing pieces of their history. By absorbing and accepting their lost history, the living find meaning and completion in their own story.

## PHYSICALITY OF THE GHOST

Jesmyn Ward’s 2017 National Book Award winning novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, adapts Morrison’s formula using ghosts of the American South to address current racial injustices. The story is narrated by Jojo, a Black 13-year-old boy, his young Black mother, Leonie, and Richie, the ghost of a young boy who lost his life in prison in the 1940s, where he was imprisoned with Jojo’s grandfather. The story follows Leonie, Jojo, Kayla, his two-year old sister, and Misty, Leonie’s friend, on a road trip to Parchman State Penitentiary to pick up Jojo’s White father, Michael, upon his release. Michael and Leonie’s relationship is complicated by the fact that Leonie’s brother, Given, was murdered at age seventeen by

Michael's cousin in what was legally recognized as a hunting accident. His ghost, Given-not-Given, is mute, communicating solely through hand gestures and facial expressions, until the end of the novel.

The two ghosts in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* take on a corporeal appearance, with a transparency limiting their visibility to certain characters. Ward uses their partial presence to highlight a missing history and reflect a gap or vacancy among the living. For example, though Given-not-Given appears fully corporeal, he is only visible to his sister Leonie when she is under the influence of drugs. She states, "[h]e tried to talk but I couldn't hear him, and he just got more and more frustrated. He sat on the table in front of me, right on the mirror with the coke on it."<sup>13</sup> Given-not-Given's physical presence allows for immediate recognition by Leonie, but his reticence emphasizes the erasure of his voice from the master narrative causing frustration not only in Given but also in the reader. This "frustration" is a visual and sensory experience of "being deprived, rendered ineffectual, [and] neutralized."<sup>14</sup> So, while his personal story may have been silenced by a racially corrupt justice system, his truth is part of a larger counter-narrative, absent from the history books but ever present in the country's DNA secretly maiming future generations. His return as a ghost haunts because it carries a denied truth that once acknowledged cannot be unseen.

Given-not-Given occupies the liminal space between the living and the dead coexisting with Leonie when her drug use allows her to escape reality. In *Beloved*, characters such as Sethe, Denver, Paul D., and Baby Suggs all live a partially present life, unable to access and incorporate the denied trauma of their ancestors into their own lives. Melanie Anderson, author of *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, identifies this space as "those moments in Morrison's work where there is communication between the living and the dead and those characters who appear to be alive but may have more in common with the spirits of the story as largely silent presences."<sup>15</sup> Most often, these "living" characters inhabit the spectral space by inching towards death through either age, sickness, or mind-altering substances.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Leonie accesses the liminal space through drugs allowing her and Given-not-Given to coexist. Jojo compares Leonie's drug induced absence to life before her addiction saying "[T]hat was when there was more good than bad, when she'd push me on the swing Pop hung from one of the pecan trees [. . .] Before she was more gone than here. Before she started snorting crushed pills."<sup>16</sup> Jojo's reflection of Leonie being "more gone than here" clarifies the distance that grows between himself and Leonie once she begins to get high, causing

her to be less of a physical presence in the home. Not only is Leonie less present and aware to those around her when she is high, but she is literally physically absent from the lives of her family, transporting Leonie into the liminal space and closer to a permanent absence or death.

Leonie's drug habit aids her liminal journey allowing her to communicate with Given-not-Given. This space, particularly accessible through literature, provides access to ancestral trauma inviting the counter-narratives to rejoin the conversation and posits a correlation with the use of mind-altering substances used to escape a history of denied trauma. Leoni's drug use propels her into the liminal space allowing her to briefly coexist between the living and the dead and gaining access to universal truths, only to be spit out again once the effects wear off. Ironically, this truth-seeking approach requires authors such as Morrison, Ward, and Flournoy to negate the master narrative by decoding the language of ghosts making their work critically life affirming.

In comparison to Given, Richie is more like the ghost of Beloved from the Atlantic slave ship, acting as a bridge between Pop's past life in Parchman and the present. Pop's memories of his days with Richie in Parchman are fragmented and non-linear as described by Mam who states, "I used to have to piece [ . . . ] his paragraphs together like puzzles."<sup>17</sup> Richie exposes the missing pieces of Pop's stories about Parchman to Jojo revealing a lost counter-narrative and providing deeper context for the living. Richie was a 12-year-old Black boy who had escaped Parchman prison with Pop, Jojo's grandfather, in the 1940s and was killed by Pop to prevent a capture followed by a more horrific death. He was killed, much like Beloved, by a trusted family figure to prevent further torture. Richie's ghost communicates with Jojo and Kayla, and like Beloved he "enters, all fleshy and real, with wants, and a fierce hunger"<sup>18</sup> and with a "body [that] has skin and bones and muscle."<sup>19</sup> Just as Beloved seeks answers for her death, so Richie, killed from behind, attempts to find out how he died by returning to Parchman.

Ward's premise that a location retains its ancestral history parallels Morrison's idea that even if the plantation of Sweet Home no longer exists, the traumas that occurred there will continue to haunt. Like Sweet Home, Parchman performs as another spectral container providing space for contradictions to exist in tension and to open a dialogue between the past and present. Ward poetically emphasizes the sedimentary layers of history that settle upon their location through Richie who acknowledges "[h]ow could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky [ . . . ] [A]nd how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once?"<sup>20</sup> Richie explains that places do not mark

time in a linear fashion but instead experience all of time occurring simultaneously. For example, Richie concurrently experiences the men who “cleared the land and lay the first logs” for the prison, the “Native men [. . .] ranging over that rich earth, hunting and taking breaks to play stickball,” and Parchman in the future when men “sat for hours in small windowless rooms, staring at big black boxes that streamed dreams.”<sup>21</sup> This sedimentary stacking of time equates all stories that occurred here, acknowledging the lost layers of history. In fact, Ward’s spectral uncovering of these layers is a direct reply to Morrison’s excavation invitation.<sup>22</sup>

In comparison to *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the ghost in *The Turner House* initially behaves more like Beloved, both evolving through different states of physicality and interaction with the characters. Written by Angela Flournoy, *The Turner House* tells the story of Viola and Francis Turner and their 13 children, set alternately in Detroit in 2008 and in Arkansas in 1944, when Francis and Viola began their life together. In 2008, after Francis’ death Viola is stricken with cancer and is forced to move out of the family home. The future of their family home on Yarrow Street, in a depressed neighborhood on Detroit’s East Side, becomes an issue of debate amongst their children. The two-bedroom home, that housed a family of 15, also acts as a spectral ingress inviting the past to return and supply context for their current existence.

Yarrow Street is where the ghost initially arrives in corporeal form to the six eldest Turner children, who witness it “try to pull Cha-Cha out of the big room’s second-story window.”<sup>23</sup> However, after this sole public appearance, the haint is only seen by Cha-Cha as he grows older, and in Francis’s flashbacks as a youth alternating between a blue light and a human figure. In Francis’s experience, what began as a sighting of “a man with pale skin, hitched-up trousers, and bare feet,” which he believed to be the father he never knew, later becomes a nightly vision of something that is “sometimes just a light in the darkness of a room.”<sup>24</sup> Regardless of its form, both men believe it to be their own father and Flournoy suggests it is some iteration of both.

Crucial to Morrison’s formula is that the ghost appear to families or communities rather than to an individual. Appearing to multiple witnesses simultaneously validates and amplifies the specter’s credibility rather than limiting it to a personal experience which is easily denied or discredited. It also expands on the initial trauma the ghost is exposing by demonstrating the widespread effects of one moment on multiple lives. While Ward’s ghost exposes the drug culture that has burgeoned in response to a history of racism denied, Flournoy’s ghost examines the effects of racism on a 21<sup>st</sup> century nuclear family living on Detroit’s East

Side providing an intimate look at how the effects of racial red-lining in the housing market affects the nuclear family. Even the family's access to health services is thwarted by injustices rooted in the system. For example, Cha-Cha's ghost is easily explained away by his therapist, and many of his own family members evidencing the resolute strength of a closed master narrative that chalks alternative versions up to fantasy. Alice, Cha-Cha's therapist, says to him, "[y]ou're holding on to these visions, which are essentially hallucinations, for a specific reason," and "I think it's dangerous to keep discussing this haint as if it's real."<sup>25</sup> This quote exemplifies the impacted sediment that Morrison is inviting future authors to crack open. Flournoy identifies Morrison's formula through this interaction by incorporating society's denial of experiences outside its binary vision. Flournoy is recognizing the real but unacknowledged ripples of systemic racism that continue to inflict its victims. It is important that the ghost begins in a corporeal form because these racial undercurrents are real, yet still being denied by those in control of the master narrative. In this way, the tangibility of the ghost demands the acknowledgement of the missing counter-narratives.

### THE TEMPORALITY OF TRAUMA

In *Beloved*, the ghost haunts its family and community by voicing their history of undocumented and unidentified traumas. In the American Gothic genre, it is the reader's ability to recognize the truth of a history denied that continues to haunt. Cathy Caruth states, "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own [. . .] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas."<sup>26</sup> This trauma connection performs as a conduit through which the past can communicate with the present. For example, the ghost of *Beloved* shares Sethe's personal family history as well as numerous unrecognized tragedies that occurred as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Morrison also uses the location of past trauma as a temporal channel such as Sweet Home, which is replicated by Ward in Parchman Prison, and Flournoy on Yarrow Street, demonstrating that places retain their painful past along with the history documented by the victors.

Since this past trauma is not codified through language, and the communication between the dead and living is ambiguous at best, these ghost stories haunt through their partial presence. Joanne Chassot examines how the partial presence is identifiable through language pointing out that the ghost of *Beloved*'s monologue "is unintelligible because it retains and

collapses all times and events, offering an overwhelmingly immediate representation of experiences that are neither discrete nor situated in the past.<sup>27</sup> Hence, unjust and unacknowledged traumatic experiences leave pregnant pauses in time and language. Without direct evidence of these traumas, only literature can illuminate the circumstantial evidence by providing ancillary meanings through figures of speech, gaps in narration, and linguistic anomalies.

One example is Richie's story which is delivered piecemeal by Richie and Pop. Richie's ghost even emerges gradually as he begins to identify who and where he is until finally, "I remembered my name: Richie. I remembered the place: Parchman prison. And I remembered the man's name: River Red."<sup>28</sup> As the ghost oozes into the present he fills in the missing pieces of Pop's narrative, so beautifully explaining the present as "a moth-eaten shirt, nibbled to threads: the shape is right, but the details have been erased."<sup>29</sup> In other words it is language that vividly illuminates past experiences allowing them to be reclaimed. Richie's story brings the counter-narrative full circle, identifying and filling in the gaps and cracks in Pop's narrative by bringing language to the truth of the traumas they experienced in Parchman.

The trauma that fuels *The Turner House* ghost is more subtle, demonstrating an adaptation to Morrison's formula that exemplifies its versatility. This ghost reveals the inequities of one family's life a century after abolition and how they flow through Francis to his son Cha-Cha. Issues such as poverty, redlining, and lack of accessible health care plague this family and their community on Detroit's East Side. It is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's concept of the "weight of blackness"<sup>30</sup> or the myth of racial inferiority where, in this case, the myth becomes a conduit for the past to communicate with the present. For example, when Cha-Cha's haint finally does speak, rather than revealing long-lost facts, he revisits an episode that occurred between Francis and Cha-Cha. Early in the novel, Cha-Cha describes how his father unknowingly urinated on him while he was hiding during the Detroit riots. When the haint makes its final appearance, Cha-Cha recognizes it as his father, and they reenact the evening. The haint peers under the vacant bed in Cha-Cha's room saying, "Come on out, now [. . .] Don't you have no pride? Look at you, down there like a possum. That's what you doing, huh? Playin possum? I bet you is."<sup>31</sup> This reenactment infuses the previous silence with language providing a fuller account of the event. The ghost's reference to Cha-Cha as a possum, or a living character pretending to be dead, places both entities in the liminal spectrum asking Cha-Cha to reconsider how he may have misinterpreted the episode. The ghost's comment, "Boy,

ain't nobody thinkin bout you [. . .] Folks got their own business to tend to"<sup>32</sup> reveals how Francis was just trying to survive rather than punishing Cha-Cha. This enlightenment demonstrates how these ghosts, who give context to the present are seeking recognition and can only stop haunting by being acknowledged and accepted rather than banished by exorcism.

## THE EXORCISM OF COMMUNAL TRAUMA

In *Beloved*, Morrison models a form of exorcism that incorporates rather than expels the ghost. An exorcism is typically used to “drive away or expel” a ghost and is performed in conjunction with prayers or incantations.<sup>33</sup> The ghost of *Beloved* on the other hand lingers. Though its corporeal form disappears with the communal incantation of the women, Morrison clarifies that its presence endures in the “photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—[that] shifts, and something more familiar that the dear face itself moves there.”<sup>34</sup> Clearly, these ghosts are not gone once “exorcised” but rather are absorbed marking their rightful place in history. It is necessary in Morrison’s formula, that past histories be acknowledged and accepted rather than remain dead and buried.

The incantations used to exorcise *Beloved* are communally sung, elevating the power of song to a universal language between the living and the dead. The collection of women in *Beloved* exorcizes the ghost through a specific “combination [. . .] key [. . .] code [. . .] [and] sound that broke the back of words building voice upon voice until they found it.”<sup>35</sup> The song contains no discernable words but rather a unified tone that can transcend the living and dead as it banishes the ghost of *Beloved*. Ward emulates this technique through Kayla, a two year old with limited language, who has the ability to release the ghost of Richie and the other undead through a “song of mismatched, half-garbled words,” which the spirits recognize through a “smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease” establishing a shared and understood communication.<sup>36</sup> This formula provides an avenue of healing communication that relieves past trauma through acceptance as the ghosts are incorporated into the present and future through the universal language of song.

In fact, Ward’s references to song are the threads that bind her work, underscoring its value in communication. Jojo gives a detailed description of his happiness when the family sings “Happy Birthday” to him emphasizing how “the candles make everything look gold, and they shine in Mam’s and Pop’s faces and make them look young.”<sup>37</sup> The song weaves

together the joy of a family through its timelessness with his grandparents' young faces gleaming, creating a feeling of unity for Jojo. The dream-like quality the scene builds with language like "make everything look gold," and light that "shine[s] in Mam's and Pop's faces" in a way that makes them "look young" moves this scene into the liminal, timeless, hazy, nonlinear space inhabited by ghosts. In addition, the imagery of his grandparents looking young underscores the temporality of the scene, as if the glow cast over the scene has the power to turn back time. Equating the "Happy Birthday" episode with the liminal space where ghosts exist, suggests the lingering past is ever present.

Mam solidifies the song's connection to all beings through its connection to the unborn. She often refers to her midwife mentor Marie-Therese, who had the power to tap into this shared song, saying that "Marie-Therese herself could hear. Could look at a woman and hear singing: If she was pregnant, could tell her when she going to have a baby, what sex the baby going to be."<sup>38</sup> Mam suggests that the unborn baby could be heard singing if only one had the ability to hear, and when Leonie decides to confide in her mother about her pregnancy Mam acknowledges she heard him "singing for weeks."<sup>39</sup> This demonstrates that song binds the living to the unborn as well as the dead. In literature, the form of song more closely resembles poetry than prose with missing written and spoken conventions and fragmented thoughts giving their communication a lyrical quality more closely resembling song.

Singing plays an essential role in Given-not-Given's exorcism as he provides a bridge for Mam to cross from the living to the dead. Less like an exorcism and more like a dance, with Given leading Mam to the spirit world, this event, like Beloved's, takes a community. Kayla participates through song which is unintelligible but continuous wherein Kayla "is [. . .] still except for the song she is singing," whose "little song sinks," and "who whispers her song and waggles her finger."<sup>40</sup> For a child who has not yet mastered language, she is the most fluent in universal communication, arguably because as a two-year-old, she is the closest in time to the song she knew in utero. Given, who Leonie hears for the first time, is shouting in short, punctuated words to someone Leonie does not see (but the reader believes is the ghost of Richie) screaming "Not." "Your." "Mother."<sup>41</sup> The fact that the spirit of Given is now going by his first name only increases his presence and clarifies his purpose of transporting his mother through death. Leonie adds to the chorus, performing the death chant of Grande Brigitte<sup>42</sup> through a combination of speaking and crying in fits and starts. As Given communes with Mam, Leonie finishes the prayer, saying "Enter. Dance with us" and Mam takes her final breath

as Leonie remarks “[t]ime floods the room in a storm surge. I wail.”<sup>43</sup> Once again, this momentary coexistence of the living and dead that exists outside ordinary time transpires through a shared language.

Leonie’s wail punctuates the song. Like Kayla’s song of unintelligible words, and the “chord” achieved by the women in *Beloved*, the term “wail” suggests a sound that transcends the language of the living. Since wailing is often identified as a sign of grief,<sup>44</sup> it opens the liminal space between living and dead. The song promotes death as a coexistence, rather than a loss, accessible through song like the chord used by the women of *Beloved* to expel the ghost. If grief is the space in which the living and the dead can coexist, then the wail is a language through which they can communicate. The fact that a wail can also be a musical descriptor when referring to an instrumental sound adds to its lyricism.<sup>45</sup> The wail is a song of grief and a song that can be used to communicate with the dead, as connoted by the title: *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

## PRESENT-DAY POLTERGEISTS

Flournoy and Ward advance Morrison’s spectral formula by addressing how the traumas of slavery influence current race issues in the United States. Ward suggests that ghosts, like Given, will continue to return if the master narrative denies their connection to modern institutionalized slavery such as Parchman Prison. Flournoy, on the other hand, suggests that exposure to sustained trauma over decades of redlining and segregation have impacted the nuclear family and continue to haunt modern day society. Regardless, the master narrative will remain faulty and incomplete unless and until lost counter-narratives are restored, reinforcing Morrison’s concept that dead stories are not gone.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* Given-not-Given’s appearance to Leonie when she is high speaks to how modern society is currently haunted by contemporary issues such as the opioid crisis. Given is only visible to Leonie when her own faculties are diminished through drugs, allowing them to communicate in the space of the liminal spectrum. His multiple appearances during her drug use when she is with friends, or during a police stop with her children in the car, highlight how compromised her parenting has become, as she abandons her children placing them in increasingly risky situations. Leonie’s drug-induced partial absence from her family parallels the partial presence of ghosts such as Given who remain unseen by others suggesting they overlap in this space of seeking completion. Even Given’s partial name, Given-not-Given, and

Leonie's partial presence, through drugs, evidences a type of searching during an altered state that lends itself to a story seeking completion.

Ward's ghost Richie establishes how the unrecorded and buried horrors of a single penal institution, Parchman, continue to haunt today. Jojo describes how acquiring knowledge of his own missing history provides comfort and resolution. Ward states this beautifully when Jojo equates the sound of his grandfather's voice while telling his story to "a hand he's reached out to me."<sup>46</sup> This amplifies the idea that absence of language has the power to haunt, while truth and communication, regardless of the horrors they hold, can set a listener free. Ward uncovers a counter-narrative's ability to build familial and communal identity previously fractured by the master narrative. This imagery is duplicated by Pop's fragmented memories of Parchman established through interrupted and broken dialogue corresponding to the way trauma is absorbed by the victim. The full story exposes Parchman as a loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment allowing prisons to continue the plantation system under the guise of criminal correction. The continued operation of Parchman, and housing of Leonie's current husband Michael, Pop, and Richie, reveal it as a conduit for trauma to pass from one generation to the next.

*The Turner House* ghost examines more intimate familial traumas resulting from systemically racialized institutions such as the Detroit housing industry in the 1950s and '60s when racism and redlining changed the demographics of the city. For instance, Cha-cha tells the story of the day he went to check on the house and the entire garage had been stolen, suggesting that an entire aluminum-sided structure could be dismantled and removed without a call from a neighbor, or a response by the police.<sup>47</sup> Or, the night of the riots in 1967, when Cha-Cha described how a burning building went from a "tragic occurrence" to "an olfactory norm akin to skunk spray; as long as the source of the odor wasn't too close, you eventually ignored it."<sup>48</sup> This differentiates the long term slow trauma of poverty and racism from the type occurring during a specific event such as the murder of Beloved or Given. In this case, the victim is overexposed to daily trauma until it becomes unnoticeable. Like a skunk spray that is initially offensive and upsetting but endures as a permanent presence that one can eventually "ignore."

While Morrison identifies the traumas of slavery as a trove of untold stories, Flournoy examines the societal tension that continues to exist among Black residents living in a depressed area of Chicago after the financial crisis. Flournoy asks how day-to-day living in distressed and dilapidated conditions induces trauma. David, a Turner family neighbor, describes their neighborhood block as such a space, saying that:

“Words like *ghetto*, *dilapidated*, and *run-down* were inadequate to describe this portion of the city [. . .] [T]his isn’t postindustrial, post-White-flight, or post-automobile-boom [. . .] [I]t’s like, post-zombie-fucking-apocalypse [. . .] after the zombies have turned everyone they could find, and then burn down all the buildings to run out the survivors.”<sup>49</sup>

In essence, the ghosts of today are born from the repetitive effects of poverty and injustices that cycle through communities such as Detroit in 2008, which continues to experience the effects of the Detroit riots of 1967. This trauma is so pervasive that it remains unspoken and unrecognized being minimized over time devaluing its impact on future generations.

Morrison’s enduring spectral legacy re-envision historical counter-narratives. These fragmented histories duplicate the splintered memories from which they were born. Stories such as *Beloved* fill in the gaps and give meaning to cultural and political systems that remain broken today. Contemporary authors such as Jesmyn Ward and Angela Flournoy have continued in this American Gothic tradition, suggesting what most haunts U.S. history are the violations of its own ideals of equality, freedom, and democracy and a master narrative that denies citizen experiences based on race and creates lasting effects on communities through broken penal systems, drug epidemics, and systemically prejudiced housing bureaucracy. It is through literature that language chilled by trauma can be mined, and through revolutionaries such as Morrison that the tools necessary to preserve lost stories can be passed on through generations.

## NOTES

1. Carla Kaplan is quoted as saying “She [Morrison] has done for the modern novel what Shakespeare did for theatre [. . .] Almost no one rises to her stature, her work is in a world of its own. Toni Morrison’s particular genius about history, large and small, is unmatched” in Molly Callahan, “Toni Morrison ‘has done for the modern novel what Shakespeare did for theater,’” *Northeast Global News*, Northeastern University, 6 Aug., 2019. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2019/08/06/toni-morrison-has-done-for-the-modern-novel-what-shakespeare-did-for-theater/>

2. Erica Schwiegershausen, “Angela Flournoy on the Book That Changed Her.” *The Cut*, 24 Aug. 2017. <https://www.thecut.com/2017/08/angela-flournoy-on-beloved-by-toni-morrison.html>.

3. Jesmyn Ward, “I Was Wandering. Toni Morrison Found Me.” *The New York Times*, 9 Aug. 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/opinion/sunday/i-was-wandering-toni-morrison-found-me.html>.

4. Howard L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Stanford University Press, 1996), 5.

5. Raoul Alberto Mora, "Counter-Narrative." *Key Concepts in Intercultural Dialogue*, no. 36 (2014). <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/key-concept-counter-narrative.pdf>.
6. Joanne Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory, and Identity* (Dartmouth College Press, 2018), 17.
7. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage Books, 1987), 21.
8. Nasrullah Mambrol, "Trauma Studies." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 19 Dec. 2018, <https://literariness.org/2018/12/19/trauma-studies/>.
9. Morrison, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 1993." *NobelPrize.org*, 7 Dec. 1993, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>
10. Avery Gordon, "not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there." In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvi.
11. Morrison, *Beloved*, 248.
12. Morrison, "The Nobel Prize."
13. Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 51.
14. *OED.com*, "frustrate," accessed 16 January 2024, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/frustrate\\_v?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#3507578](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/frustrate_v?tab=meaning_and_use#3507578).
15. Melanie Anderson, *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (University of Tennessee Press, 2013) 9.
16. Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 7.
17. *Ibid.*, 67.
18. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 139.
19. Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 182.
20. *Ibid.*, 186.
21. *Ibid.*, 187.
22. Morrison constantly hinted it was the author's duty to excavate these stories from the irony in the thrice repeated statement on the last page of *Beloved* that "This is not a story to pass on" (290), to her oft repeated quote "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it," from a 1981 speech to the Ohio Arts Council. See <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-cincinnati-enquirer-tonimorrison/21863475/>.
23. Angela Flournoy, *The Turner House* (Reprint, Mariner Books, 2016) 1.
24. *Ibid.*, 323.
25. *Ibid.*, 147–148.
26. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 24.
27. Joanne Chassot, "Tracing the Ghost," in *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory, & Identity* (University Press of New England, 2018), 21.
28. Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 136.
29. *Ibid.*, 137.
30. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (Grove Press, 1958) 150.
31. Flournoy, *The Turner House*, 318.
32. *Ibid.*, 319.
33. *OED.com*, "exorcism," accessed 8 March, 2023, <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00080231;jsessionid=45745C2FE539A24FD7B78EEDF98D00C4>.
34. Morrison, *Beloved*, 324.
35. *Ibid.*, 326.

36. Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 284–285.

37. *Ibid.*, 27–28.

38. *Ibid.*, 41.

39. *Ibid.*, 156.

40. *Ibid.*, 264–266.

41. *Ibid.*, 266.

42. Grande Brigitte is a Haitian deity from the Guede family of deities that reign over fertility and death. It is her role to either heal you or guide you to death. The fact that she is intimately connected with the Irish Catholic Saint of St. Brigid represents a syncretization of cultures, accentuating the idea of a universal language. See “Celebrate Maman Brigitte,” *New York Latin Culture Magazine*, 31 Dec. 2023, <https://www.newyorklatiniculture.com/maman-brigitte-female-loa-of-life-and-death/>.

43. Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 269.

44. OED.com, s.v. “wail” is the “expression of pain or grief by prolonged vocal sound,” accessed 16 Jan. 2024, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/wail\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#15209485](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/wail_n?tab=meaning_and_use#15209485).

45. OED.com, “wail,” as in “music, etc.: To sound like a wail,” accessed 16 Jan. 2024, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/wail\\_v?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#15209857](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/wail_v?tab=meaning_and_use#15209857).

46. Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 17.

47. Flournoy, *The Turner House*, 34–5.

48. *Ibid.*, 89.

49. *Ibid.*, 183.