

FROM DESTRUCTIVE TO CONSTRUCTIVE HAUNTING IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

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The way in which Toni Morrison has responded to the traumas of African American history has placed her fiction at the centre of discussions about mourning. Critics including Teresa Heffernan and Phillip Novak have praised Morrison's novels for redefining the practice of private and public bereavement: the conception of mourning cultivated in her fiction challenges the aim of closure and forgetting, and establishes a productive form of limitless sorrow and painful remembrance. This necessity to recognize loss and sustain grief derives from the materiality of African American histories. While Morrison uses her fiction to recover black histories ignored by dominant Western traditions, she also manages to emphasize what has been irretrievably lost – those personal memories, communal traditions, and unrealized possibilities that have disappeared without benefit of permanent documentation. By taking shape around such absences, Morrison's narratives not only unfold in the form of a haunting; they also suggest how these lost aspects of black cultural experience can be conveyed only in terms of endless mourning, in a textual form capable of acknowledging the ghosts that continue to haunt the contemporary psychic and cultural landscape. Morrison understands that the return of a ghostly past can destructively haunt the subject's lived experience, but she also recognizes that such haunting has the power to productively restructure the self in the present social moment. It is by enacting and directing this haunting that *Paradise*, Morrison's latest novel, offers a model of therapeutic narration based less on exorcizing and more on learning how to live in the uncanny presence of ghosts that can as easily enrich as traumatize our social "paradise."

The association *Paradise* draws between a new practice of ongoing grief and a positive sense of haunting invites a reading of the novel with insights drawn

from Derrida's work on mourning. Whether articulating a theory of interminable grieving in "By Force of Mourning," a transcription of a 1993 lecture given in memory of cultural critic Louis Marin, or expounding a notion of "hauntology" in *Specters of Marx*, his 1994 study of the "spectral" status of Marx's work in a purportedly post-communist world, Derrida addresses issues of division and disunity. What the lost other and the historical past have in common is the quality of radical otherness, an alterity that resists assimilation by either the mourning subject or social present. To recognize alterity, at least in a certain sense, can appear as a dangerous and disruptive force lodged within the self and the subject's experience of the social. But Derrida opposes what he terms "impossible" mourning to traditional notions of grieving equated with complete detachment; he pits hauntology against the ontology of metaphysical presence, thus demonstrating how multiple revenants may serve to reorganize the subject and society along operative lines of difference.

In Derrida's account, mourning on the personal plane effectively displaces the illusion of a strongly bounded subject, a subject that reconsolidates its identity in the wake of shattering loss through interiorizing strategies theorized by psychoanalysis ("By Force" 187). From Freud's concept of identification to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's notion of introjection, interiorization has named a process of creating a figure for the lost other and assimilating this figure in the very structure of the self. Taking issue with the submission of psychoanalysis to the paradigm of the subject, Derrida argues that such conceptions of interiorization not only reduce the lost other to an object for the mourner but also assume that the bonds of attachment can and should be fully dissolved. In contrast, he suggests that experiences of loss compel us to relinquish the wish for narcissistic selfhood, accept the "being-in-us" of the lost other which violates any pretense to self-sufficiency, and welcome our own decentring as the very condition of "hospitality, love or friendship" ("By Force" 188). Similarly, Derrida's account of spectral history insists that the past cannot simply be absorbed or surpassed by the present (*Specters* 37). We have not buried Marxism, to stay with

Derrida's example, because it continues to stand for more than one thing. The specters of Marx, which he defines as "something that one does not know ... not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge" (6), indicate a complex temporality structured by creative processes of repetition. History, including the history of Marxism, emerges not as a recollection of a singular event informed by a one-directional temporality, but as a belated construction wherein the repetition of past material in the present produces something unpredictably new. By endorsing the impossibility of fully working through personal or historical loss, Derrida raises the figure of haunting as an unequivocal affirmation of alterity. He appeals to us, finally, to accept political and ethical responsibility for preserving the absolute difference of the human and historical other, an uncanny otherness that prevents the closure of any totalizing construction of subjectivity or homogeneous social organizations.

Like Derrida, Morrison charts the positive effects of ghostly forces inhabiting the internal and external lives of her characters. The ghosts she raises in *Paradise* enable her to recover a largely neglected communal history and to prevent the inheritors of this history from denying the existence of plural spectres in the name of a repressive social unity. But Morrison also moves beyond what Martin Jay has identified as the deconstructive valorization of the uncanny "and the power of haunting per se" (162). Rather than endorse all returns of the repressed because they disrupt the homogenization of the human project, as Jay claims of Derrida, Morrison attends to issues of personal and social reconstruction. Morrison's writing, in other words, does not tell ghost stories, at least not primarily, as a means of critiquing illusory notions of self-wholeness and social unity; the novel engages multiple figures of haunting as a work of rebuilding interior and exterior dwelling places worthy of human habitation.

Paradise identifies the need to reconstruct black communal identity by showing how the values that hold together the town of Ruby, Oklahoma, no

longer serve but restrain its inhabitants. Set in 1976, the novel traces the source of these values back to the 1870s, when nine newly freed slaves from Mississippi and Louisiana gathered their families and some friends, and journeyed westward. The wagons carrying 158 people reach the town of Fairly, but the residents refuse the group's entry, claiming that a lack of financial resources would erode local prosperity. However, the leading male members of the group attribute the exclusion to their own racial purity, believing that Fairly's light-skinned blacks have adopted the dominant white prejudice against dark-skinned African Americans. Becoming "a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them" (189), the group moves on and founds Haven, an Oklahoma town that flourishes for decades until many residents seek more prosperous urban lives after World War II. But the Disallowing, as the social exclusion at Fairly comes to be called, continues a century later to trouble the memory of the male descendants of Haven's founders, fomenting their hatred of whites and suspicion of other blacks. When Haven disintegrates in the late 1940s, these descendants cling to values inherited at the Disallowing, the values derived from strong communal identification. They believe that only a radically unified community sustained by the same lineage, same experience, and same ways of thinking can protect them from the psychic and physical violence of future social injustice. Consequently, Haven's dissolution prompts the male descendants to repeat their ancestral history. Rather than resettle in racially mixed or pre-existing black communities, they establish Ruby, a geographically isolated and self-sufficient town, and insist on maintaining strict social homogeneity by excluding everything perceived to be different, unsettling, and contaminating from their new social haven.

In Morrison's depiction, the Disallowing emerges as a central traumatic event around which Ruby's thwarted development endlessly circulates. As the narrator remarks, "everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many" (189). In foregrounding the lasting effects wrought by this moment of historical rupture,

the novel demonstrates the extent to which the characters' lives have been determined in advance by a destructive form of haunting. When the people of Ruby recall their self-defining narrative of origins, they remember the strength derived from communal unity and courage from religious conviction that their ancestors mustered in founding Haven. They take pride in knowing, moreover, that their forefathers turned a scene of victimization into a victory, bequeathing to them an unparalleled pride in their racial purity. However, Morrison also suggests what Ruby's inhabitants, especially its ruling men, do not allow themselves to recognize about the Disallowing: that it was marked by and as loss – by the loss of meaningful relations to those different from themselves and as the more enigmatic loss of the passing of time that is characteristic of traumatic experience. Having based their prosperous lives on a strict observance of the old ways, Ruby's male leaders hold the town together insofar as they continue to avoid this initial loss.

Morrison traces the accumulating effects of this denied loss, showing how an inability to recognize what was lost at the Disallowing shapes the lives of her characters, many of whom experience subsequent loss only as a reiteration of this foundational absence. Stewart Morgan, one of the most powerful and rigidly conservative members of the ruling group, appears unable to express grief. His wife, Dovey Morgan, however, clearly sees him “in terms of what he lost” since “the more Stewart acquired, the more visible his losses” (82). Stewart's response to a host of personal losses – the financial slippages that cancel earlier gains, the defeat in a Church election, the lost appetite after his memory of home cooking during World War II outrivalled actual food, and his incapacity to bear children with his wife – follows a similar pattern: it invariably solidifies his commitment to the virtues of continuity and sameness.

Beyond the plight of an individual, Morrison locates this avoidance of loss and mourning at the very foundation of a community proudly bolstered in knowing that “nobody in Ruby has ever died” (199). The inhabitants redeemed the single death acknowledged within its borders by naming the town Ruby, after Stewart's

sister, who died as a result of refused medical treatment at an all-white hospital. Since 1953, however, Rubyites who passed away did so outside of town, either on European and Asian battlefields or while journeying away. In a place without a cemetery, the leaders see themselves as a people chosen by God, an elect group exempt from death and the scattering of nations recorded in the biblical Zechariah story. They believe this privilege has been bestowed upon them as a result of their faithful observance of the past. The continuation of this unspoken “claim to immortality” (199), the men believe, rests on maintaining their connection to Haven’s nine founding families, an insistence on preserving their racial purity that Morrison exposes as a commendable but dangerously outmoded denial of human difference, including the ultimate human difference: death.

In a recent interview, Toni Morrison said of Ruby’s ruling clan, “these people have an extraordinary history, and they were sound people, moral people, generous people. Yet when their earlier settlement collapsed, and they tried to repeat it in Ruby ... well the modern generation simply couldn’t sustain what the Old Fathers had created, because of the ways in which the world had changed” (Marcus n.p.). Morrison presents the gruesome effects of this repetition at the novel’s outset, when nine leaders storm an old mansion known as the Convent and wage a murderous assault on the women living there. The attack on the Convent, an old mansion located outside town where nine racially diverse women take shelter in the wake of their own traumatic experiences, appears in Morrison’s novel as a strategy of denial. That is, the violent rampage provides a means by which the ruling men deny their fear about absence, death, and internal dissolution. The men blame a group of socially marginalized women for an accumulation of losses they cannot bear to recognize in themselves or their community.

Of particular relevance in understanding how Ruby’s ancestral history returns in the form of a violent attack is Kathleen Brogan’s *Cultural Haunting*, an impressive study of the figure of ghosts in contemporary American multi-ethnic literature that signals a recovery of histories threatened by erasure or fragmentation. The writing of Marshall, Kingston, Morrison, and many others

“defines historical consciousness as a good form of haunting, in which the denied ghosts of the American past are finally integrated into America’s national identity” (8). This integration, Brogan continues, does not suggest that cultural haunting has strictly ended, but that previously unacknowledged ghosts have been “transformed into memories that usefully guide, rather than overwhelm, the present” (19). Brogan juxtaposes this constructive haunting with the notion of traumatic possession, where “one is locked into repetition, doomed to reenact the past without relevance to present realities” (10). Possession characterizes the relation Ruby’s leaders have to their heritage, for in attacking the Convent they act as if past and present occupied the same temporal location, coming perilously close to being eclipsed by the history they seek to preserve. The continuity these men imagine having with the past, a continuity in which nothing about their spectral history has been recognized as lost, erupts in a predatory act that allows the men to defer reckoning with loss. Ruby’s leaders, staunchly patriarchal in their thinking, regard the Convent women as sexually licentious and deceitful, as “throwaway people” who “managed to call into question the value of almost every woman” living in Ruby (*Paradise* 8). By categorically rejecting these women as “black Eves unredeemed by Mary” (18), the men attempt to fortify Ruby against the incursion of alien otherness, and ensure that “nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain” (5).

The Convent attack provides a defensive strategy by which Ruby’s leaders refuse to recognize that the efficacy of the old ways has already been lost. This is made clear by Morrison’s description of dissension and disagreement within Ruby. First, the town’s teenagers challenge the insularity of their communal identity. The young demand a radical rethinking of race relations and support the Black Power Movement in the world outside Ruby. Secondly, the female inhabitants of Ruby express discontent regarding their restrictive domestic roles in a variety of subtle and not so subtle ways, including fantasizing adulteries and aborting pregnancies. Most significantly, Patricia Best, the local genealogist, discloses the taboo underside of Ruby’s pride in racial purity. She not only

experiences local prejudice because her father violated the “blood rules” in marrying her mother, a woman born of “racial tampering” who could pass as white (197). Patricia also uncovers in the town’s unofficial marriages and couplings a tendency toward distant but undeniable incestuous relations, such that one woman was “wife to her own great-uncle” and another man’s father was also his great-granduncle (196). Morrison, in describing internal pressures that promise to explode in a small town bent on keeping outsiders away, demonstrates the extent to which Ruby’s leaders are demonically possessed by their history. Rather than confront their conflicts of interest, the men attack the Convent as a means of projecting onto the outside the differences that threaten to internally divide them.

The issue of possession, a destructive form of haunting, also characterizes the Convent women, whose stories turn on themes of loss denied and mourning refused. For all that separates the Convent and the town, the women share with Ruby’s leaders a fixation on the past, an inability to confront their losses. Mavis is the first to make her way to the dilapidated mansion after the death of her twin infants, who suffocated when she left them in a hot car to buy dinner for her demanding husband. Gigi stumbles upon the place in the course of a failed journey to find a rock formation resembling lovers and erase the memory of police brutality against blacks during a Civil Rights demonstration. Seneca arrives after a history of childhood abandonment and exploitation as a sex worker. Pallas, a high-school-age girl, finds the Convent after discovering her boyfriend in bed with her mother (who is outrageously named Divine Truelove).

Morrison follows these episodes with a chapter about Consolata, a central figure who guides the women’s confrontation with their destructive haunting. Consolata came to the Convent decades earlier, when Mary Magna, one in a group of Catholic nuns, rescued her as a young child from a squalid life in Portugal and gave her a home in the mansion that the nuns converted into a school for Indian girls. She became sole proprietor of the house at the age of fifty-four when Mary Magna died, a loss Morrison describes as riddled with ambivalence because Mary’s teachings of spiritual love were partly to blame for

the failure of Consolata's single passionate relationship. Along with an unnamed white girl whose story is never revealed, the Convent women find in Consolata a caring mother figure. At first Consolata acts as a passive presence in the house, providing a shelter for the women as they retreat from the external world. But as a woman who had once been "in love with the cemetery" (222), Consolata knows from her own experience how the unacknowledged complexities of loss can exert a stranglehold on the present. Challenging the ancient wisdom that counsels *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, the prohibition against speaking badly of the dead, she raises grievances with the lost Mary, affirming for herself that erotic attachments to the body do not betray spiritual attachments to God. This recognition of her own bereaved anger causes Consolata to grow increasingly impatient when the Convent women refuse to confront the ambivalence of their own losses. She even displays outright anger when the women indulge "foolish babygirl wishes" that substitute for mourning the past: Mavis clings to the ghosts of her twins that literally haunt the Convent and dreams of making money by opening an orphanage; Gigi imagines finding a treasure chest; Seneca sees herself as the "queen of scars" and practices self-mutilation; and Pallas wants a cabaret life where she can sing "sorrow-filled songs with her eyes closed" (222). To undo this entrapment, Consolata determines to take an active role in the women's healing, directing a mourning ritual that encourages the women to acknowledge loss and recreate themselves in light of their haunted lives.

In one of the novel's central scenes, Consolata instructs the women to undress and lie down on the cold floor. She then paints an outline of each woman's body, and recounts her difficulty of coming to terms with Mary's death. The women follow her example, testifying to their own experiences of traumatic loss. They go even further, drawing pictures and attaching memorabilia to the templates of their bodies, a means by which they externalize and confront their deepest psychic wounds. The experience of literally being beside themselves with their losses, an experience rendered safe by Consolata's guidance and one another's company, allows the women to move from destructive to constructive

experiences of haunting. The ritual dramatizes what Morrison in *Beloved* famously calls “rememory,” a concept of memory that has a physical existence beyond the individual who remembers.

Just as the Convent women derive comfort from living in a house that Morrison’s narrator describes as haunted (by the historical traces of having been first an embezzler’s mansion, then a religious convent and school for the assimilation of American Indian girls, and finally a shelter for these besieged women), they learn to own their own absences insofar as they inhabit one another’s traumatic memories. “And it was never important to know,” remarks the narrator of this ritual of rememory, “who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer’s tale” (264). As they engage in this ritual work, the women piece together narratives about their loss, narratives that contain a sense of both the known and unknown about their suffering. This constructing and sharing of their suffering has the power to effect healing in ways articulated by Dori Laub. In his work on Holocaust survivor testimonies, Laub points out that testimony, “a process of facing loss,” takes place in the presence of listeners who act as “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time,” and who come to share responsibility for the past through the act of bearing witness (204). The bereavement ritual in *Paradise* not only teaches the Convent women that nothing can bring back the dead, undo the violence, erase the disappointment, or re-establish untroubled relationships; it also enables them to begin mourning, an interminable process through which they embody their ghosts in a new way: as an absence within the self to which they bear witness.

More is at stake, however, in the performance of mourning than the sense of private healing accomplished during Consolata’s ritual. Although the women have learned to live with absence, they have failed to appreciate the social conditions that conspired in producing it. The failure to implicate poverty, gender inequality, and racial prejudice in the stories of their loss prevents the Convent women from recognizing the present danger that awaits them in the assault waged by Ruby’s

leaders. Morrison raised this concern about the women's private healing: "It's interesting and important to me that once the women are coherent and strong and clean in their interior lives, they feel saved. They feel impenetrable. So that when they are warned of the attack on the Convent, they don't believe it" (Marcus n.p.). It is not enough, Morrison suggests, for the Convent women to feel privately healed. Like women in American culture more generally, they are especially susceptible to the violent return of unacknowledged ghosts belonging to others. Healing in the face of loss has long been understood as an endpoint, as a healthy state of body and mind arrived at once and for all. However, Morrison suggests that such a conception of healing has the tendency to overlook the social conditions involved in personal loss. The more fluid, open-ended, and interminable form of healing Morrison's novel grants to the Convent women moves in the direction of exposing rather than submitting to these conditions.

I have already discussed the murderous assault that begins *Paradise* as a destructive repetition of disavowed loss. And destruction there is, for the attack kills the unnamed white girl and Consolata, and compels the survivors to gather the bodies of their friends and flee the environs of Ruby. But this violent replaying of the past also contains the power to rescue a community "deafened by the roar of its own history" (*Paradise* 306). Repeating the past yields a kind of working-through, to use Freudian terms, insofar as the repetition highlights the unassimilable nature of what has been remembered. More specifically, the raising of ghosts made present during the murderous act reveals the temporal rupture which necessitated their appearance in the first place. This rupture creates a new awareness of the pastness of the past for many of Ruby's inhabitants, who come to evaluate the brutality perpetrated by their leaders not as a continuation but as a monstrous betrayal of their ancestral legacy. As Morrison's narrator puts it:

They think they have outfoxed the white man when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children when in fact they are maiming them. And when the

mained children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the blame. Born out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind. (306)

In contrast to Ruby's leaders who have avoided the signs of internal difference by attempting to inhabit the past, Morrison suggests that to pay tribute to the "suffering and triumph" that is their history, the inhabitants of the town must revisit the past and recognize it as different from the present. It is the recognition of this difference that brings an end to a local form of governance "ruled by men whose power to control was out of control" (308). Moreover, the laying of "connecting roads" and building of a gas station and diner serving "outsiders" who promise to travel through town confirm the end of the old ways and beginning of the new (306).

Morrison emphasizes the importance that mourning plays in the story of cultural haunting by associating the promise of an open future for the inhabitants of Ruby with the funeral that occurs near the novel's end. The death of one of Ruby's own, an infant named Save-Marie who passes away shortly after the Convent assault, compels many of the residents to abandon illusions of immortality and realize "the reaper was no longer barred entry from Ruby" (296). It is at the funeral, with the local minister Richard Misner presiding, that the inhabitants form a new community, a community of mourners gathered around an experience of "aching sadness" who "ask the questions that are really on our minds" (295). Morrison's novel invests funerary practice with an unparalleled significance, a means by which her characters acknowledge loss, recognize the absence inscribed in presence, and dissolve the fixity of the past on their present lives.

To the extent that haunting belongs not only to the novel's cataloguing of themes but also to its very structure, Morrison invites her readers to join this

community of mourners. In beginning the narrative with the attack on the Convent, Morrison imagines the town of Ruby as already lost, as having disappeared by the time we finish reading the novel's first sentence: "They shoot the white girl first" (3). Despite the demonizing of the old Ruby, she raises a distinctive lament for the passing of this all-black town whose roots reach back to Reconstruction. "Soon Ruby will be like any other country town: the young thinking of elsewhere; the old full of regret. The sermons will be eloquent but fewer will pay attention or connect them to everyday life" (306). This elegiac invocation invites us to be constructively haunted by the loss of Ruby as we set our own sights on the future.

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