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童妮·摩里森《摯愛》和潔思敏·沃德《黑鳥不哭》中
黑人的悲痛、失落與鬼魅纏繞

Black Grief, Loss, and Haunting in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*
and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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Unburied, Sing*

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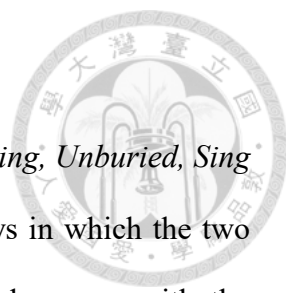
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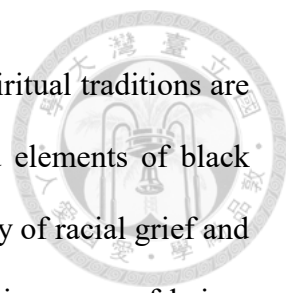
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Abstract



This thesis reads Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as black variations on the Southern Gothic and investigates the ways in which the two novels address the historically marginalized black experiences and engage with the politics of loss, grief, and melancholia. The Southern Gothic is a literary mode that traditionally works to express anxiety, guilt, and fear of the white southerners. *Beloved* and *Sing*, alternatively, rework the Southern Gothic to delineate the repressed historical realities of racial oppressions and the ongoing and shifting cultural wounds of racism and unresolved grief that haunt black people. Drawing on Southern Gothic aesthetics, Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, and the post-Freudian theories of loss and melancholia formulated by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, Judith Butler, and Anne Anlin Cheng as a critical framework, this thesis seeks to analyze not only the ways in which the Gothic works as a historical mode for black American writers to tell the story of the unspeakable history, but how Morrison and Ward enact hauntology to illuminate the implications of loss and unresolved grief for black history, politics, and racial identity formation and reimagine possibilities of agency and resilience for marginalized black people.

Chapter One looks into the ways in which Morrison engages with the Southern Gothic to depict the haunted realities of black lives and the impacts of personal and historical loss on black people in *Beloved*. I argue that Morrison, through enacting hauntology and creating a Gothic narrative where repressed historical horrors and unresolved black grief entangle, not only performs an act of critical memory, but reframes black melancholia as a critical condition for interrogating antiblackness and a driving force behind the traumatized black subject's resistance to historical erasure and reclamation of black subjectivity. Chapter Two probes into the ways in which Ward presents horrors of racial violence and explores potentials of black resilience and agency

The logo of National Taiwan University (NTU) is located in the upper right quadrant of the page. It is a circular emblem with the university's name in Chinese characters around the perimeter and a central design featuring a bell and other symbols.

through a haunted narrative where the Southern Gothic and black spiritual traditions are fused. I contend that through invoking the haunting of ghosts and elements of black spiritual practices and beliefs, Ward not only discloses the complexity of racial grief and melancholia but suggests that black heritage could provide alternative ways of being, feeling, and thinking for black people to resist antiblackness and salvage their futurity amidst loss and grief. Through taking a closer look at the haunting of loss, grief, and melancholia in Morrison's *Beloved* and Ward's *Sing*, I show that under the condition that antiblackness in U.S. society recognizes only certain human lives as *life* and some losses as *grievable*, black melancholia morphs into a gesture of resistance, an ethical act of remembrance, and a dynamic process of constant negotiation between loss and recollection.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Jesmyn Ward, Southern Gothic, hauntology, loss, racial grief, melancholia

摘要

本論文將童妮·摩里森的《摯愛》和潔思敏·沃德的《黑鳥不哭》視為非裔美國作家的南方志異作品，並企圖剖析這兩本小說如何揭露黑人從古至今被邊緣化的生命經歷，以及其所涉及的失落、悲痛與憂鬱政治。傳統上，南方志異是表達南方白人焦慮、愧疚和恐懼的一種文學形式；《摯愛》和《黑鳥不哭》則相反地重新運用南方志異文學傳統，勾勒出種族壓迫的歷史現實和持續纏繞著黑人的文化創傷與無以釋然的悲痛。本文藉由採用南方志異美學、雅克·德希達所提出之鬼魅纏繞的概念，以及大衛·恩和大衛·卡薩吉昂、朱迪斯·巴特勒與鄭安玲諸位當代理論家提出之後佛洛伊德的失落與憂鬱理論作為批判框架，企圖分析志異敘事如何作為美國黑人作家講述不可言說的歷史的文學形式，以及摩里森和沃德如何運用鬼魅纏繞的概念來闡明失落和無以釋然的悲痛之於黑人歷史、政治和種族身份形塑的意涵，並重新想像黑人能動性和韌性的可能。

第一章聚焦於分析摩里森如何在《摯愛》中以南方志異書寫描繪黑人被鬼魅糾纏的日常，以及個人和歷史失落對黑人的影響。我主張，摩里森運用鬼魅纏繞創造出一個被壓抑的歷史恐怖和難以釋懷的黑人悲痛相互交織的志異敘事，這不僅進行了批判性的記憶，另外還重塑黑人憂鬱為審視反黑種族主義的關鍵條件及創傷黑人主體抵抗歷史抹殺和重拾黑人主體性背後的驅力。第二章探究沃德呈現種族暴力恐怖的方式，並解析她如何結合美國黑人靈性傳統於南方志異的鬼魅敘事，探索黑人韌性和能動性的潛力。我認為，沃德使用鬼魂和黑人靈性傳統習俗與信仰中的元素，揭示種族悲痛和憂鬱的複雜性，並且凸顯黑人文化遺產能提供黑人另一種存在、感受和思考的方式來應對反黑情結，且能在遭遇失落和無法釋然的悲痛時，尋回被奪走的未來性。透過分析摩里森的《摯愛》和潔思敏·沃德的《黑鳥不哭》中的失落、悲痛和憂鬱的再現，我凸顯在反黑情結導致美國社會中僅有某些生命被認可為「人命」、某些生命的逝去是「值得為其悲傷、哀痛」的情況下，黑人的憂鬱成為了一種抵抗姿態、記憶的倫理行為，以及在失落和回憶之間持續協商的動態

過程。

關鍵字：童妮·摩里森，潔思敏·沃德，南方志異，鬼魅纏繞，失落，種族悲
痛，憂鬱



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Introduction

Black Grief, Loss, and Haunting



Black grief, both living and dead, haunts the United States. Black Americans live and die, but in a society rife with racism, neither black life nor black death matters. In the U.S., the history of the Middle Passage, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow laws, along with the de facto segregation, judicial injustice, and police brutality of the present-day South, unceasingly inform black Americans that black life means nothing. As the process of racialization in U.S. society renders only some human lives as “life” and only certain losses as “grievable,”¹ black grief, left unrecognized and foreclosed from dominant discourse, accumulates and lingers in shadowy places of the country, begging for attention. Toni Morrison and Jesmyn Ward are two contemporary American writers who perceptively attend to buried grief that lingers in black American lives and haunts the U.S. history. As black writers, both Morrison and Ward urge American people to confront unspeakable historical horrors, unrecognized loss, and silenced grief that lie at the heart of the nation’s history.² To make the silence speak, both writers translate unspoken histories of loss and grief into narratives of Gothic haunting. Through their literary imagination, black grief that has been buried dead is brought back to life: In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison resurrects a baby ghost to give voice to grief of enslaved Africans and explore the horrors of black Southern life in the era of slavery, the Civil War years, and

¹ See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, especially the preface and the chapter, “Violence, Mourning, and Politics,” for more discussion on the conception of “livable life” and “ungrievable loss.”

² In “The Site of Memory,” Morrison makes it clear that instead of avoiding things “too terrible to relate,” she is interested in diving into historical horrors to explore truths about black lives (110). While Morrison shows concern over the lack of details about the interior lives of black people in American literary imagination, Ward is concerned about the silence over the legacy of slavery in the dominant discourse in the U.S. In a 2018 interview with Lisa Allardice, Ward points out that “[t]hose in power in the US are ‘invested in sanitising and erasing the past,’ denying its impact on the present.” She explains that black writers feel the need to revisit the muted past of racial violence, especially slavery, because they “want to push back against that narrative” that serves for those in power to stay blind to the historical and structural causes of racial inequality and injustice.

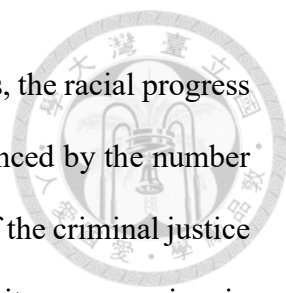
their aftermath; in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), Ward summons a number of ghosts who died from racial violence to address the haunting legacies of racism and unresolved grief that fracture an impoverished black family in the contemporary U.S. South.

Grief, in both *Beloved* and *Sing*, is the condition of black life. Such condition is a result of unrelenting antiblack violence against black Americans. In the U.S., black people have been afflicted by multiple forms of violence: material, ontological, discursive, and epistemic. The long history of antiblackness in the U.S. can be traced back to the early colonial era—a dark time when Africans were brought to the Americas and forced into slavery. The forced voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, as Ramesh Mallipeddi describes, was a “deadly enterprise” (236). As disease and death marked the lives of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage, slave ships were frequently referred to as “floating coffins” (Mallipeddi 236). The untraceable number of African captives who died during the crossing and under slavery has been estimated at various figures, among which Morrison finds sixty million the smallest one. In a 1989 interview by Bonnie Angel, she explains:

Some historians told me 200 million died. The smallest number I got from anybody was 60 million. There were travel accounts of people who were in the Congo—that’s a wide river—saying, “We could not get the boat through the river, it was choked with bodies.” That’s like a logjam. A lot of people died. Half of them died in those ships. (Morrison 257)

Through the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery, the mass anonymous deaths became the ground on which Western modernity and economy were built.

Even though slavery seems like a long gone practice from the past, its legacies and the ongoing and shifting cultural wounds of antiblack racism haunt black people today. Certainly, in the post-slavery era, the U.S. has implemented reforms to redress racial



inequality and improve the circumstances of black lives. Nevertheless, the racial progress is consistently undermined by racial conflicts and violence, as evidenced by the number of unarmed black Americans killed by police brutality, the injustice of the criminal justice system, the growth of racist organizations, and the resurgence of white supremacy in the so-called “post-racial” era heralded by Barack Obama’s election in 2008.

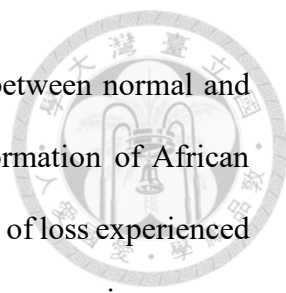
As the specter of death continues to prey on black people, racial grief keeps unfolding. In contemporary U.S., death and loss, as Dagmawi Woubshet notes in *The Calendar of Loss*, “punctuate black life routinely and proleptically” (19). Likewise, Claudia Rankine finds that black Americans suffer from a natural fear of death and a sense of anticipatory loss caused by antiblack racism in their everyday life. In her essay, “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning,” Rankine writes:

We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here. Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police or warehoused in prisons: Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against. (147)

Provoked by the murder of George Floyd in 2020, Rankine traces the unending repetition of antiblack violence in the past and present. Moving back and forth in time, she concludes that under the threat of antiblackness, the condition of black life is “one of mourning” (145).

At the core of black mourning, I contend, is unresolvable and unresolved grief that blurs the binary distinction between normal mourning and pathological melancholia.³ In

³ By “unresolvable,” I mean the characteristic of racial grief as ever-present and a condition of black life in a world structured by antiblackness; by “unresolved,” I intend to underscore specifically individual racial grief that presses for confrontation.

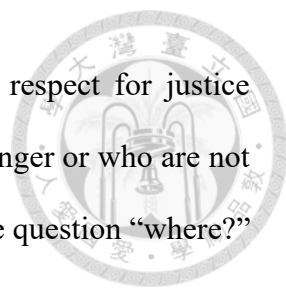


his study of black mourning, Woubshet notes that the “opposition between normal and pathological mourning has never been a meaningful one in the formation of African American mourning” (18). In Woubshet’s view, the ever-present sense of loss experienced by black mourners troubles Freud’s “temporal assumptions of the mourning-versus-melancholia model of grief and, by extension, the binary configuration of loss as either normal or pathological” (18). As grief engendered by antiblack racism at both personal and sociohistorical levels defies the temporal logic of mourning and melancholia, the black subject suffering loss ends up “suspended within the boundary between mourning and melancholia” (Singleton 57).

In the U.S., a nation whose history is imbued with racial grief generated by antiblackness that operates as a structural violence which uncannily repeats itself across time and space, blackness is consistently reduced to the abject condition of *nothing* and the position of *nonbeing*. As black lives continue to be imperiled and devalued by the force of antiblackness, the “story of *blackness*,” according to Kashif Jerome Powell, becomes one of “subjectivities birthed in the liminal depths between life and death; a story buried in the flesh of bodies consumed by the aftermath of that conception; a ghost story narrated by muted voices” (254).

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida coined the term “hauntology” to describe the return of the ghost, at once singular and repetitive, to haunt as the absent presence of the past. By disrupting chronological time, the spectral presence demands a re-evaluation of its relevance in the present and for the possibility of alternative futures. For Derrida, haunting is of both ethical and political significance. As haunting points forward to the future, Derrida contends:

It is necessary to speak *of the ghost*, indeed *to the ghost* and *with it*, . . . Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which



secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are not there, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question “where?” “where tomorrow?” “whither?” (xviii)

The ghost is conceptualized by Derrida as “always both revenant (invoking what was) and arrivant (announcing what will come)” (Blanco and Peeren 13). Accordingly, for Derrida, recognizing and learning to live with specter is “not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (xviii).

Morrison’s *Beloved* and Ward’s *Sing*, as variants of the Southern Gothic, both enact hauntology to engage critically with the intersection of the politics of race with that of memory, loss, and grief. Derrida’s concept of hauntology offers the ghost as a trope for disclosing how the past governs the present and gives rise to or precludes future possibilities. Through engaging with hauntology, both Morrison and Ward reveal that being and living while black is inseparable from acknowledging and confronting the dead. Moreover, both Morrison’s and Ward’s haunted narratives engage with loss, grief, and remembering to reframe black melancholia as a constant negotiation between loss and recollection. In this thesis, by drawing on Derrida’s concept of hauntology, Southern Gothic aesthetics, and post-Freudian theories of loss, racial grief, and melancholia as a critical framework, I seek to explore the ways in which Morrison and Ward construct counter-narratives to resist antiblackness that persists and insists on reducing black subjects to nothing, and how their Gothic texts illuminate the implications of loss, racial grief, and melancholy for black history, politics, and racial subject formation and reimagine possibilities of agency and resilience for marginalized black people.

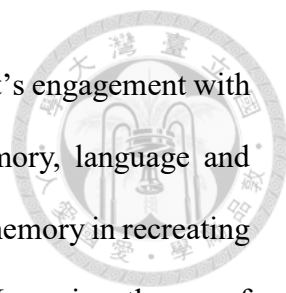
Literature Review

Toni Morrison's Beloved

Morrison's *Beloved* concerns the horrors of slavery and their lingering impacts on freed slaves and their descendants at both individual and communal levels. Set in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873 during the Reconstruction era, *Beloved* tells the story of the ex-slave Sethe who lives with her only living daughter Denver at 124 Bluestone Road. 124 is a spiteful house haunted by a baby ghost who is not evil but angry and sad. The ghost, at the personal level, appears to be Beloved, the two-year-old daughter who was murdered eighteen years ago by her mother, Sethe, with a handsaw to save her from being returned to slavery. The ethically unthinkable murder is based on an actual historical incident of infanticide committed by Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave mother who slit her two-year-old daughter's throat with a butcher knife in 1856. At the collective level, the ghost in *Beloved* represents the "Sixty Million and more" who failed to survive the Middle Passage and the atrocities of slavery. The disavowed history, together with Sethe's infanticide, form the unspeakable core of the novel.

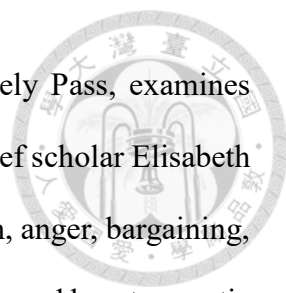
In *Beloved*, Morrison explores the unspeakable trauma and historical injustices through the Gothic trope of haunting. In Gothic conventions, the spectral entity, as Andrew Smith notes, is not only an "absent presence, a liminal being that inhabits and gives shape to many of the figurations of trauma" but a "strangely historical entity that is haunted by the culture which produced it" (147). Morrison's ghost resonates with such convention. Through Gothic haunting, Morrison's *Beloved*, as Teresa A. Goddu remarks, "pictures American history as a haunted house, from which slavery's legacy of grief and horror cannot be exorcised" ("American Gothic" 63).

Beloved, widely regarded as Morrison's masterpiece and one of the great American novels, has received ample critical scrutiny. Since *Beloved* features a cryptic text structured by unspeakable traumas caused by slavery, in the rich body of existing



scholarship, a significant part of criticism has been devoted to the text's engagement with trauma and recovery, mourning and melancholia, history and memory, language and identity. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, for instance, investigates the role of memory in recreating personal and communal identity through attachment theory and Lacanian theory of trauma; Roger Luckhurst examines the impossibility of mourning in *Beloved* in light of Derrida's theoretical formulation of the ethics of mourning; Linda Krumholz adopts Freudian psychoanalysis to read *Beloved* as a "ritual of healing" and analyze the transformative power of Afro-American rituals for both personal and historical recovery from the trauma of slavery (397); Kristin Boudreau draws on Elaine Scarry's formulation of the incommunicability of pain to explore the role of ineffable pain in the making and unmaking of self, language, and memory in *Beloved*; Jean Wyatt explores Sethe's subjectivity as a mother to revise Lacan's theory of the subject's relation to the symbolic order.

Critics of *Beloved*, with their respective thematic foci and theoretical approaches, have not only enriched and diversified our understanding of the psychic impacts of slavery on freed slaves and their descendants but advanced theoretical discourse on trauma, mourning, and black subjectivity. Nevertheless, in the existing scholarship, the dynamics of racial grief and melancholia have not yet been thoroughly scrutinized. Certainly, some scholars have drawn attention to the role of grief in *Beloved*. Caroline Rody, for example, reads *Beloved* as a historical novel in which the obsessive mother-daughter relationship represents Morrison's "authorial desire/grief for a lost mother-of-history" (110). While Rody provides a new insight into the relation between the ghost and Morrison's "mother-quest for an African-American feminist 'herstory'" (105), the psychic and political issues involved in loss and unresolved grief in relation to the formation of black subjectivity and the generative potentials of melancholia for black



history have not been fully explored. Another critic, Olivia McNeely Pass, examines *Beloved* as Sethe's journey of grieving through pain in light of the grief scholar Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's formulation of five stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Pass's analysis of Sethe's inner turmoil caused by a traumatic loss sheds light on the parallel between the structure of the novel and the process of grieving. However, by generalizing Sethe as a case study of grieving, she forecloses the discussion of the ways in which the politics of race complicates *Beloved*'s engagement with grief and loss.

To read *Beloved* as a psychological novel of grieving like Pass would miss the work's rich cultural and historical implications, especially its political engagement with antiblack racism. To further the ongoing critical investigation of *Beloved*'s representation of black American experiences of loss and grief, I would not only investigate the ways in which Morrison engage with the Southern Gothic to explore traumatic loss and unresolved grief caused by institutionalized slavery but draw on contemporary theories of racial melancholia and grief to analyze the intersection of the politics of race and literary melancholia in *Beloved*. More often than not, melancholia is considered an individual pathology and paralyzing morbidity. Nonetheless, for racialized subjects whose agency and subjectivity are denied, melancholia is much more complex. In the existing scholarship of *Beloved*, melancholia's negative role has not escaped critical attention. Luckhurst, for instance, reads the haunting of the baby ghost Beloved as a "trope for melancholic blockage" and a "sign of a *blockage* of story" (247-48). Such reading, however, overlooks the implication of melancholia as a dynamic process where the oppressed black subject negotiates loss and recollection. To enrich the ongoing discourse on black melancholia and its political values, I would delve into the complexity of melancholia in *Beloved* and tease out alternatively the generative potentials and

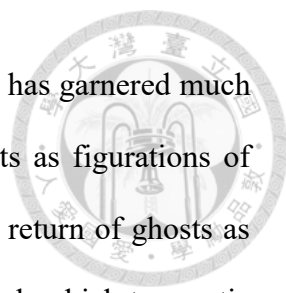
political implications of loss and melancholia of black people.



Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing

Ward's *Sing*, in line with Morrison's *Beloved*, sets out to unearth buried past loss and give form to wordless grief that haunts black people, but its setting shifts to the U.S. South in the aftermath of Katrina. Set in Bois Sauvage, a fictional rural town in Mississippi modeled on Ward's hometown DeLisle, *Sing* tells the story of Jojo, a thirteen-year-old mixed-raced boy from a poor family who lives with his black grandparents, Pop and Mam, his drug-addicted black mother Leonie, and his three-year-old sister Kayla. Jojo and Kayla are raised primarily by Pop and Mam because Jojo's white father, Michael, is incarcerated for drug trafficking and Leonie, overtaken by grief over the death of her brother Given and the separation from Michael, relies on drug to cope with the trauma of loss, seldom returning home.

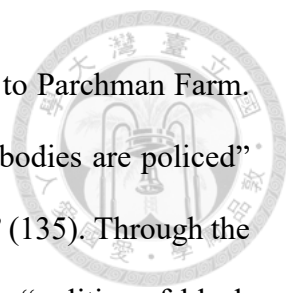
Jojo's family is fractured by racial wounds and haunted by the untimely deaths of two boys, Given and Richie. Given was shot dead by Michael's cousin when he was a high school student. His murder, unfortunately, was covered up by Jojo's white grandfather as a hunting accident. The other boy, Richie, was a twelve-year-old boy who befriended Pop when they were unjustly imprisoned in Parchman Farm. Richie was killed by Pop who, in order to protect him from being lynched, stabbed him in the neck and let dogs tear his body apart. After their own deaths, both Given and Richie return as ghosts of unresolved trauma and grief. Through deploying the trope of ghosts, Ward makes visible the poignant hold of the past on the present and addresses the inevitable need for black Americans to learn to live with grief and irrecoverable loss as antiblack sentiment is rampant in the U.S. South.



Sing, as Ward's second National Book Award-winning fiction,⁴ has garnered much critical attention, most of which centers on the invocation of ghosts as figurations of trauma and historical entities. Chiara Patrizi, for example, reads the return of ghosts as the haunting of buried trauma and analyzes Jojo as the vehicle through which traumatic communal memory can be translated into the present. Another critic, Yesmina Khedhir reads the ghost of Richie as a cultural and political tool for recovering history. By analyzing the function of the ghost through Kathleen Brogan's theory of "cultural haunting," Khedhir contends that Ward's haunting tale revisits erased history of racial violence to "challenge oblivion and forgetfulness" and restore, through remembering, black American cultural identity (20). While Patrizi's and Khedhir's analyses concentrate on the need to remember history, Patrycja Antoszek draws attention to the inaccessibility of trauma and employs Nicolas Abraham's and Maria Torok's theory of transgenerational haunting to analyze Ward's invocation of ghosts. In Antoszek's view, the ghost Richie embodies the phantom of transgenerational trauma which disrupts the Symbolic with its absent presence. Such disruption points to the unspeakableness of traumatic experiences that, Antoszek maintains, can only be addressed through bodily affects and pre-Symbolic forms of expression.

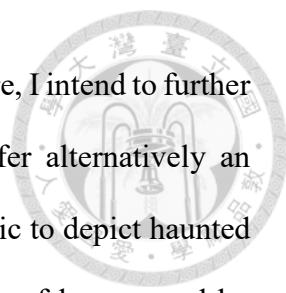
While the invocation of ghosts as the figuration of trauma in *Sing* has inspired much critical attention, Ward's haunted narrative contains rich cultural and political significances that invite critics to explore more different ways in which the text addresses the politics of race through the trope of haunting. Nicole Dib, for instance, draws attention to Ward's use of the road-trip narrative and examines the limits of black automobility and

⁴ Ward is the first black woman writer ever to win the National Book Award twice. Her novel, *Salvage the Bones*, won the 2011 National Book Award for Fiction, and *Sing* won the 2017 National Book Award for Fiction. As Ward concentrates on exploring what it means to be poor and black and Southern in the contemporary U.S., she establishes her name not only as one of the most significant and powerful voice in twentieth-first century American literature but as an heir of William Faulkner after winning two National Book Awards for Fiction.



autonomy revealed by Ward's depiction of a hauntological road trip to Parchman Farm. Dib argues that in *Sing*, the road is a "contested space where black bodies are policed" and a "space of violent memories that find expressive form in ghosts" (135). Through the two facets of the road, Ward's novel, Dib suggests, illuminates the "politics of black mobility as a 'nowhere at all'" (135). Like Dib, Marco Petrelli directs his critical attention to the haunted quality of southern space in *Sing*. While Dib focuses on analyzing Ward's depiction of haunted roadsides in the rural Mississippi, Petrelli, by probing into the intrinsic spatial value possessed by ghosts that return to haunt, explores Ward's representation of the Mississippi landscape as one in which characters and places are "connected by a 'hauntology,'" a concept that designates a "spectral spatial-ontological dislocation" engendered by the "returning traces of the past" (287). By disrupting the sense of time and space with ghosts, Ward, Petrelli contends, constructs a haunting narrative to counter the "traditional chronotope of the Old South (that is, the white, genteel South)" (286).

Along similar lines, I am interested in Ward's aesthetic use of haunting and her involvement with the politics of memory and history in *Sing*. In this thesis, I intend to direct my critical investigation of *Sing* towards Ward's representation of irrecoverable loss, haunting grief, racial melancholia, and black cultural heritage. Ward, like Morrison, deploys the trope of Gothic haunting to delineate in her novel a haunted landscape where grief is visceral and omnipresent. In the existing scholarship on *Sing*, Petrelli is one of the few who has commented on grief in *Sing*. Petrelli notes that Ward's writing is "steeped in grief" (280), and that the Deep South depicted by Ward reflects Patricia Yaeger's view of the southern soil as one "loaded with trauma unspoken, with bodies unhealed or uncared for, with racial melancholia" (qtd. in Petrelli 286). Petrelli's study, however, does not explore in depth the implications of racial grief and melancholia. Taking the analysis of

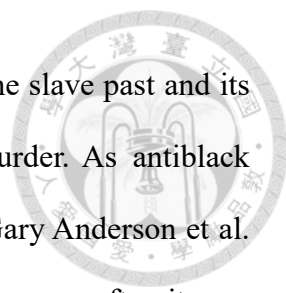


loss, grief, and racial melancholia in *Sing* as a critical point of departure, I intend to further existing studies on Ward's poetics of southern haunting and proffer alternatively an insight into the ways in which Ward engages with the Southern Gothic to depict haunted realities of the contemporary U.S. South and psychological impacts of loss caused by ongoing antiblack racism and how she reimagines black heritage as a source of resilience for marginalized black people.

The Gothic and the U.S. South

Morrison's *Beloved* and Ward's *Sing* represent black American variations on the Southern Gothic. Both novels participate in Southern Gothic tradition to present the burdens of the southern past, but they shift the focus from the fears and anxieties of white subjects to the terrors and complexities of black lived experiences that have been underrepresented. In their novels, Morrison and Ward explore the repressed historical realities of racial oppressions in the South to disclose "the ghostly origins of the nation" as arising from the "oppressive social structure of slavery" (Goddu 63). Moreover, through raising the dead, both writers engage with the Southern Gothic's concern with the "tensions between a culturally sanctioned progressive optimism and an actual dark legacy" (Lloyd-Smith 118) and explores what it means for black Americans that the past, to borrow Faulkner's renowned lines, is "never dead. It's not even past" (85).

For black American southerners, it comes as no surprise that the land of the South is, as Richard Gray describes, "partly material and partly spectral" (27). In the U.S., the dead victims of racial violence refuse to stay dead. As homeless specters, the still-living dead wander in the harrowed land, sick for their lost home. In Morrison's *Beloved*, when Sethe suggests to Baby Suggs that they could move house to get rid of the baby ghost, Baby Suggs bluntly replies, "[n]ot a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with

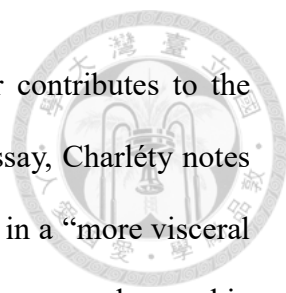


some dead Negro's grief" (6). The circumstances of black lives in the slave past and its aftermath were replete with shootings, beatings, lynching, and murder. As antiblack sentiment never ends, the "peculiar institution" of slavery, as Eric Gary Anderson et al. note, remains a "tragically powerful presence" in the U.S. South even after it was abolished (2).

Historically scarred by institutional slavery, racial antagonism, and racist violence, the U.S. South has been a gothicized region par excellence in the U.S. In *Gothic America* (1997), Teresa Goddu remarks that "[i]dentified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other'" (3). In a similar vein, Christopher Lloyd notes that "[a]s a site of everything that the United States wants to disavow—slavery, violence, abjection, backwardness, and so on—the South becomes charged as a gothic Other" (79). In literary discourses, the Deep South, as the nation's gothic Other, provides raw materials of historical injustices, social damages, and psychological injuries for American literary minds to challenge the nation's moral imagination, as bespoken by the fact that various forms of southern horrors and haunting have consistently found their expression in morbid stories of the macabre, the grotesque, the supernatural, the uncanny, and the unfathomable. In this sense, the violence and horrors of history of the South, as Elsa Charléty discerns, "feed[s] a cosmogony [of] terror" in American literature (112).

As American southern landscape is riven by racial tension and traumatic history, a gothic literature of the South emerges from the gaps where meaning collapses. In Southern Gothic tradition, Faulkner, as David Punter and Glennis Byron notes, is

often considered the progenitor of a subgenre called Southern Gothic, which appropriates elements of the traditional Gothic, combines them with the particular concerns of the American South, and is characterized by an emphasis on the grotesque, the macabre and, very often, the violent. (116)



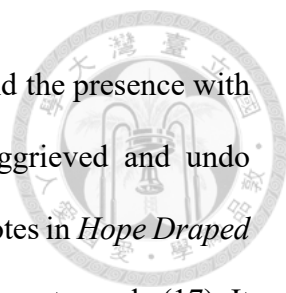
As one of the most influential figures of the genre, Faulkner contributes to the development of Southern Gothic aesthetics (Charl ty 113). In her essay, Charl ty notes that Southern Gothic fiction tackles horrors, fear, and social tensions in a “more visceral and carnal way” (112). In works by Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, for example, graphic violence and abject or grotesque representation of bodies are often used to ground horror in crude reality (Charl ty 114). In addition, Faulkner and Caldwell often express buried secrets, traumas, and the silenced past through excessive materiality (Charl ty 119).⁵ By excessive materiality, Charl ty means descriptions of bodies and organic materiality (119). In Charl ty’s view, bodies in early Southern Gothic fiction speak where words fail: bodies “act as vessels through which the violence of history is materialized. They are catalyzers for the underlying and unspoken issues characters cannot deal with” (119). Through materiality and bodies, buried secrets and repressed memory “come back to haunt the living as traces, signs, fragments of memories” (Charl ty 121). In this sense, the language of the Southern Gothic is a spectralized one where the past return to haunt (Charl ty 114).

Like their predecessors, Morrison and Ward are attentive to the expressive potentials of bodies and different forms of haunting. Drawing on Charl ty’s formulation of the Southern Gothic aesthetic, I would explore not only the ways in which *Beloved* and *Sing* are part of the dynamic literary tradition, but how Morrison and Ward add to it a black difference through their representation of the historical realities of the U.S. South and antiblack racism.

Racial Grief and Melancholic Agency

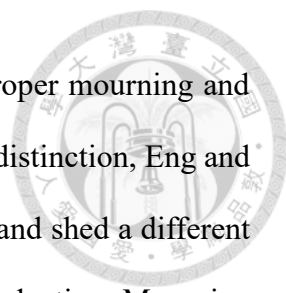
Both Morrison’s *Beloved* and Ward’s *Sing* tell stories about the lingering effects of loss and unresolved grief on black individuals and family. In the two haunted narratives,

⁵ According to Charl ty, the emphasis of Southern Gothic writers of early 1930s on crude reality and materiality is intended to challenge the nostalgic representation of the romantic Old South (113).



grief aligns the living with the deceased, the present with the past, and the presence with absence. Grief, too immense and devastating, could numb the aggrieved and undo language, resulting in a melancholic state that, as Joseph R. Winters notes in *Hope Draped in Black*, “invokes images of depression, pathology, and despair” for most people (17). It appears reasonable to assume that interminable grief is a negative and passive condition, for it impairs the futurity of the grief-stricken subject, trapping it in irrecoverable loss. In this thesis, however, I argue that grief unresolved is not simply paralyzing and pathological but has multiple dimensions. Apart from being debilitating and deadening, grief is a dynamic that entails transformative and generative potentials. To explore black characters haunted by loss and grief in *Beloved* and *Sing* as fractured yet resistant and/or resilient subjects, I would draw on the revised understanding of Sigmund Freud’s theory of mourning and melancholia by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, Judith Butler, and Anne Anlin Cheng as the theoretical framework.

Traditionally, mourning and melancholia represent two distinct responses to loss. In his essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud formulates mourning as a process through which the ego slowly detaches its libido from its investment in the object lost (Freud 244). Through proper mourning, the ego is able to let go of the lost object. Melancholia, in contrast, is understood as a failure of mourning. While proper mourning enables the ego to relinquish the lost object and attach its libido to a new object-choice, in melancholia, the ego, lingering in grief, clings to the lost object and establishes an ambivalent identification with it (Freud 249). Since mourning is a process that has a finite duration, it is perceived as a normal and more desirable response to loss. By contrast, melancholia is regarded as pathological and negative because it is potentially infinite in duration. The melancholic’s inability to get over the loss results in interminable grief, and this can lead to negative consequences such as stagnation, depression, and even suicide.



Freud's formulation establishes a binary opposition between proper mourning and pathological melancholia. However, rather than accepting such easy distinction, Eng and Kazanjian draw on Freud's theory of ego constitution to complicate and shed a different light on the relation between loss, melancholia, and the ego. In "Introduction: Mourning Remains," Eng and Kazanjian note that in Freud's book, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), melancholia is the "precondition for both the ego and the work of mourning" (4). Based on this notion, Eng and Kazanjian contend that melancholic attachments to loss is not solely "pathological" and "antithetical to the ego's well-being" (3). In their view, melancholia, as a "confrontation with loss through the adamant refusal of closure," is paradoxically a condition of possibility for subjectivity (Eng and Kazanjia 3).

By looking at Freud's initial conception of mourning and melancholia in a new light, Eng and Kazanjian suggest that the past in normal mourning is "declared resolved, finished, and dead," whereas in melancholia the past "remains steadfastly alive in the present" (4). In other words, melancholic attachments to loss, different from our common understanding, allow for an "ongoing and open relationship with the past—bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present" (Eng and Kazanjian 4). By depathologizing melancholia, Eng and Kazanjian endorse that melancholic attachments to loss could be "productive for history and for politics" (5).

In line with Eng and Kazanjian, Butler rejects the strict binary distinction between mourning and melancholia and affirms the generative role of loss for history and politics. In "Afterword: After Loss, What Then?" Butler contends that loss, unspeakable and irrecoverable, allows for a "spectral agency, one for whom a full 'recovery' is impossible, one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency" (467-73). By spectral agency, Butler means a "melancholic agency" that arises from the locus of traumatic loss (468). Through a spectral (or melancholic) agency, one

engages with the impossibility not to seek for a redemption of the past but to “bear the trace of loss” (Butler 468).

Eng and Kazanjia’s and Butler’s reformulations of loss, melancholy, and agency proffer a new route to consider the role of loss, unresolvable and unresolved grief, and racial melancholia in Morrison’s *Beloved* and Ward’s *Sing*. In this thesis, I would employ their theoretical conceptions as a critical framework to explore the ways in which Morrison and Ward manage to bear the traces of unspeakable and irrecuperable loss and reimagine black agency and potentials of resilience for black people struggling with loss and its attendant grief.

In addition, I would look into the relation between melancholia and racial formation in Ward’s *Sing* through Cheng’s conception of racial grief and melancholia. In her book, *The Melancholy of Race*, Cheng notes that the U.S. is a nation “at ease with grievance but not with grief” (x). In Cheng’s view, redressing grief through grievance, however, has a limit. She contends that there are some aspects of grief “that speak in a different language” which the social articulation of grievance cannot address (Cheng x). To study the “interior patterns of grief” that has not been acknowledged and the role of grief in racial subject formation (x), Cheng revises Freud’s formulation of melancholia and conceives racial grief not merely as a “symptom but as an analytical paradigm responsive to the material and imaginative realities of racial dynamics” (xi).

According to Cheng’s theoretical model, racial grief is a dynamic process in which racial others respond to white supremacy, racial subjugation, and antiblack violence as both a melancholic object—the lost object disavowed by the white imaginary—and a melancholic subject whose “racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual’s sense of his or her own subjectivity” (xi). Drawing on Cheng’s theory of

racial grief and melancholia, I would look into black subjects' experiences of unresolved grief in Ward's *Sing* and examine how grief and loss condition life of the racial others "not just as a symptom but also as a dynamic process with both coercive and transformative potentials for political imagination" (xi).

Chapter Design

The Southern Gothic is a literary mode that traditionally works to express anxiety, guilt, and fear through the discourses of Otherness in service of the construction of white identity. Black Southern Gothic texts like *Beloved* and *Sing*, alternatively, rework the Gothic to narrativize the Gothicism of black existence, racial grief, and the horrors of the southern lives that have long been overlooked, excluded, or flatten in the official historical record, yet deeply embedded in the private dramas of black families and their domestic space. By reading Morrison's *Beloved* and Ward's *Sing* as variations on the Southern Gothic, I investigate the ways in which the two novels address the historically marginalized black experiences and engage with the politics of loss, grief, and melancholia.

Chapter One begins with an exploration of Morrison's Gothic representation of the haunting of the past and the impacts of personal and historical losses on black people in *Beloved*. In the novel, the title character returns to haunt as an excess of loss and unresolved grief. Her return forces Sethe, Denver, and Paul D to confront the repressive burdens of the past—a task that is fraught with difficulty but necessary for the reclamation of lost futurity. Through enacting hauntology and creating a Gothic narrative where repressed historical horrors and unresolved black grief entangle, Morrison, I argue, enacts a critical remembering and reframes black melancholia as a condition for investigating the impacts of the dehumanizing violence of slavery and, paradoxically, as a driving force

for the traumatized black subject to resist historical erasure and reclaim black subjectivity denied by antiblack racism.

Chapter Two probes into the ways in which Ward presents horrors of racial violence and explores potentials of black resilience and political agency in experiences of traumatic loss and unresolved grief through a haunted narrative where the Southern Gothic and black American spiritual traditions are fused. In *Sing*, the return of the two ghosts, Richie and Given-not-Given, like that of *Beloved*, signifies the living blacks' ambivalent and unresolved relation with past losses. I contend that through invoking the haunting of ghosts, Ward not only underscores the interconnections between the past, present and future but discloses the complexity of racial grief and melancholia. Finally, I show how Ward engages with black American spiritual traditions to unearth black resilience. I maintain that Ward's incorporation of black spiritualism suggests that black heritage could provide alternative ways of being, feeling, and thinking to resist antiblackness, salvage black futurity, and unite black people fractured by loss and grief.

Through looking in-depth into the representation of loss, grief, and melancholia in Morrison's *Beloved* and Ward's *Sing*, I conclude that through their gothic sensibility, both Morrison and Ward animate historical losses and ruptures to craft a haunted narrative that aesthetically bear witness to the unspeakable history of antiblack racism. Moreover, they generate a complex view on the psychic and political issues involved in loss and unresolved grief and show that black melancholia should be understood in terms of its ethical and political dimensions in the context of antiblack racism.

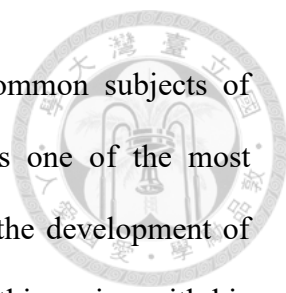
Chapter One

Loss, Melancholia, and Agency in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*



In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison reworks the Southern Gothic and deploys the figure of the ghost to explore black experiences of loss and grief under slavery and in its aftermath. As a Gothic work that sets out to recuperate the missed chapter of American history about slavery and its aftermath from a black perspective, *Beloved* is an uncanny text that features a mix of the realistic and the supernatural. The Gothic, as a literary mode that explores fears and taboos, is often referred to as a literature of terror and horror. In *Beloved*, however, the Gothic is not only terrible but melancholy. I argue that by constructing a haunted narrative where the horrors of history and black grief are intertwined, Morrison revitalizes Southern Gothic traditions to foreground the marginalized experiences of black people and perform an act of critical memory that both deconstructs the myth of the southern plantation as sweet home and reframes melancholia as a strategic gesture of resistance for marginalized black subjects. By probing into Morrison's critical engagement with the politics of history, memory, and grief, this chapter illuminates the ways in which Morrison invokes the Southern Gothic to enact hauntology and constructs a melancholic counter-narrative to resist the erasure of black voices in American historiography, restore wounded black subjects with political agency, and reunite the black community.

Southern Gothic is a literary tradition that grew prominent in the early nineteenth-century. Arising from the area's often violent and traumatic history, the genre typically concerns the dark underbelly of southern lives, including the macabre lurking beneath everyday reality, racial and economic anxieties, and the tensions between progressive optimism and its dark legacy. Since race, "through slavery, is intertwined with the history



of the South,” race relations and racial identity formation are common subjects of Southern Gothic texts (Crow and Street 2). William Faulkner, as one of the most influential writers of Southern Gothic, contributed significantly to the development of Southern Gothic aesthetics and the image of the U.S. South as a Gothic region with his Yoknapatawpha County fiction which deals with social, racial, and economic anxieties resulting from the changing world order and the difficult relationship of black and white Southerners. In addition, as a modernist writer, Faulkner often combined dark themes with an experimental style, using unreliable narrators, fragmented chronology, and the stream of consciousness to explore the burden of Southern history and the southerners’ struggle to negotiate the region’s often agonistic transition from antebellum slavery to industrial modernity.⁶

Morrison, having written her M.A. thesis at Cornell on Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, was particularly intrigued by Faulkner’s way of representing the past. At the 1985 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, after reading from *Beloved*, a work that was still in progress then, she explained:

My reasons, I think, for being interested and deeply moved by all his subjects had something to do with my desire to find out something about this country and that artistic articulation of its past that was not available in history, which is what art and fiction can do but sometimes history refuses to do. (“Faulkner and Women” 296)

While Morrison publicly acknowledged that Faulkner, “in a very personal way as a reader . . . had an enormous effect on [her], an enormous effect,” when it comes to her writing, she profoundly resisted any Faulknerian influence, claiming that she did not “really find strong connections between [her] work and Faulkner’s” (296-97). Morrison’s

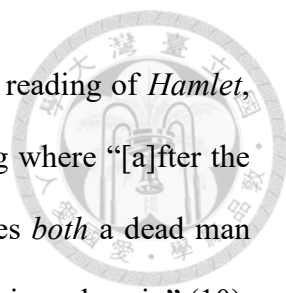
⁶ For more discussion on Faulkner’s evocation of Southern Gothic, see Elizabeth Kerr’s *William Faulkner’s Gothic Domain* and Charles L. Crow’s “American Gothic and Modernism.”

attitude manifests her political awareness of her position as a black American writer who, as John N. Duvall notes, writes “the specificity of African-American experience” (6).

Morrison’s black sensibility and self-positioning lead her to devote herself to exploring unrepresented facets of black lives and lost history. In Morrison’s oeuvre, *Beloved* stands out as a work where the unspeakable history and Gothic themes such as the irrepressibility of the past and the rupture of contemporary reality by the return of the buried secret receive their most sophisticated treatment. While I position *Beloved* within the Southern Gothic context, I do not intend to reduce her work to a part of Faulknerian heritage. Instead, I contend that reading *Beloved* as part of the Southern Gothic tradition enables us to gain insights into how Morrison’s black sensibility challenges white Southern Gothic’s limitations and how her appropriation of the Southern Gothic adds depth to the genre’s representation of the South and the dark legacies of slavery.

In *Beloved*, the Southern Gothic works as a historical mode for Morrison to tell the unspeakable stories of black people who survived or died in the Middle Passage and under the peculiar institution of slavery. *Beloved* details the life of Sethe, a slave woman who runs away from Kentucky to Cincinnati, and who, as she and her children are found by her new white master, the schoolteacher, and his companions, kills her still-crawling baby to spare her from being returned to slavery. The dead daughter returns to haunt 124, the house where Sethe and her living daughter Denver live. As the ghost haunts the family, the novel simultaneously explores the collective loss of black history. The ghost, in other words, represents not just the specific loss of a baby girl murdered by her mother, but the loss of enslaved Africans under slavery and the absence of the historical accounts about loss on the collective level.

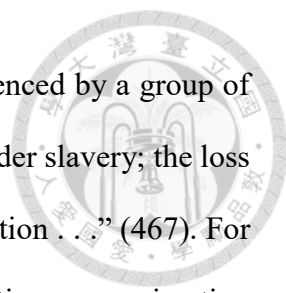
In *The Specter of Marx*, Jacques Derrida reflects on spectrality and its ethico-political implications, which suggests a productive and responsible way of engaging with



unresolved historical legacies of racial and ethnic oppression. In his reading of *Hamlet*, Derrida uses the term “hauntology” to theorize the logic of haunting where “[a]fter the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back* [revenant], it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again” (10). The haunting, Derrida contends, calls for an ethico-political engagement with the afterlife of history. Drawing on the Derridean concept of “hauntology,” I read Morrison’s *Beloved* as a Southern Gothic text that deploys the trope of Gothic haunting to represent historical loss as a remainder, a representation that, in conversing with the ghosts of the past, opens up a melancholy space of remembrance where historical injustices, injuries, and grief, previously ignored and disremembered, are made visible.

Morrison’s poetics of Gothic haunting features an innovative depiction of the ghost of the past. In the novel, the ghost appears first as an unearthly spectral remnant and next as a flesh-and-blood person. In Southern Gothic fiction, buried past often comes back to haunt through extreme materiality (Charléty 122). According to Charléty, the hyperpresence of materiality serves to “[ground] the fictional discourse in prosaic, crude reality” (113). Morrison’s use of bodily incarnation works for the same effect. In a 1988 interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison explains that her “purpose of making [Beloved] real is making history possible, making memory real” (249). By strategically blending the spectral form of haunting with a fleshy embodiment, Morrison gives the unfathomable historical realities a body and a face, which grounds the Gothic in a more realistic form.

Beloved, as Morrison’s artistic response to the haunting absence of black voices in official history, shows the generative potentials of irrecoverable loss for black history and politics. In “Afterward: After Loss, What Then?” Judith Butler investigates loss not as a psychological state, but as a social, political, and aesthetic condition to tease out its generative potentials. According to Butler, loss has various connotations. In her essay, the

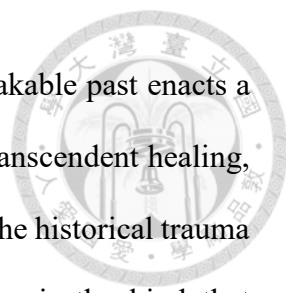


specific loss Butler concentrates on are the collective trauma experienced by a group of people, including “the losses of genocide, the loss of ‘humanness’ under slavery; the loss that is undergone with exile; the loss that is effaced through colonization . . .” (467). For Butler, loss that is irrecoverable and impossible to get over could function as an animating absence, through which a spectral agency, could emerge:⁷

 somewhere, sometime, something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it; a fractured horizon looms in which to make one’s way as a spectral agency, one for whom a full “recovery” is impossible, one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency. (467)

The devastating losses that one cannot work through, Butler notes, are the ones resulting from “the deliberate act of violence against a collectivity, humans who have been rendered anonymous for violence and whose death recapitulates an anonymity for memory” (468). Black Americans are the people who suffer from such unfathomable violence and attendant losses of history. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman comments that for black people, [t]he status of the past . . . is experienced most significantly on terms of loss and discontinuity. This past cannot be recovered, yet the history of the captive emerges precisely at this site of loss and rupture” (74). While the lost parts of black American history cannot be fully recovered, Morrison’s *Beloved* turns the losses into an animating absence that prompts a collective confrontation with unthinkable violence and lost history of slavery. In this sense, Morrison’s artistic materialization of the irrecoverable losses through speculative memory demonstrates the working of a spectral agency and the generative potentials of loss for black history and politics.

⁷ In “Afterward: After Loss, What Then?” the term “spectral agency” is also referred to by Butler as “melancholic agency” (468).

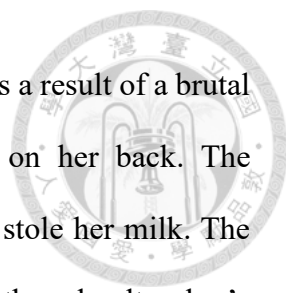


Morrison's engagement with losses and fragments of the unspeakable past enacts a critical remembering that does not aim for a full recuperation or a transcendent healing, but for a reconfiguration of the collective through bearing witness to the historical trauma of loss. The historical antiblack violence inflicted on black bodies is the kind that "constitutes an assault on thinking, negat[ing] thinking in the mode of recollection and recovery" (Butler 468). The unthinkable history of slavery is one neither whites nor blacks would like to explore in any depth, even if only in speculation. For Morrison, it is also a painful era that "[she] didn't want to get into—going back into and through grief" ("It's OK" 45). To resist willful forgetting, however, Morrison insists on reimagining the past to tell stories about the unspeakable history. Caroline Rody notes that *Beloved* serves as a memorial especially for black Americans:

Like all memorials, *Beloved* is not a "place" of the dead but a place where survivors can go to "summon" and "recollect," to look upon the sculpted shape of their own sorrow. *Beloved* cannot recover the "interior life" of slaves, but by dramatizing the psychological legacy of slavery, it portrays that "interior" place in the African-American psyche where a slave's face still haunts. (98)

Through speculating the irrecoverable, *Beloved* transforms collective historical loss into a site for memorializing blackness and shows that history is an unclosed closure.

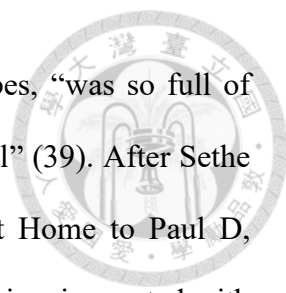
To give voice to the particular experiences of black lives and bodies, Morrison evokes the Southern Gothic to address the horrors of racial violence in the southern plantation and the physical and psychological wounds of enslaved Africans that are underrepresented in traditional white Gothic texts. In Southern Gothic aesthetics, the body is often used to represent the violence of history that cannot be put into words (Charl  y 119). In *Beloved*, Morrison depicts racial wounds and injustices Sethe suffers in corporeal form to show that the body of the slave is a vessel through which the



unspeakable horrors, pains, and grief are materialized. To illustrate, as a result of a brutal whipping by the schoolteacher, Sethe bears a tree-not-tree scar on her back. The schoolteacher whips Sethe for telling Mrs. Garner that his nephews stole her milk. The punishment that impairs Sethe's motherhood and subjectivity. While the schoolteacher's brutal whipping is meant to beat Sethe into silence, the violent silencing leaves a permanent trace on Sethe's flesh that channels disarticulated violence and ineffable pain she suffers. The grotesque scar, as the traces of the inhuman violence of slavery, registers intolerable memories of racial subjugation and exposes that the South is a nightmarish terrain rather an idyllic place as the name of the plantation Sweet Home suggests.

In addition to corporeal marks, Morrison deploys the figure of the ghost to explore the traumatic effects of slavery on freed slaves. In the novel, the ghost Beloved returns as an embodiment of the repressed past and unresolved grief. At 124, the haunting of Beloved implies Sethe's unhealed wound of being deprived of milk. As chattel slavery violently ripped away her motherhood, Sethe, in a desperate attempt to resist dehumanization and reclaim her maternal subjectivity, kills Beloved. Sethe's infanticide, as Jean Wyatt notes, is an extension of "her rights over her own body" to her children that are "parts of her" (476). Through such a radical act, Sethe at once preserves and destroys her motherhood and the mother-daughter bond.

As the site of Sethe's infanticide, 124 Bluestone Road exists as a maternal space of unresolved grief where Beloved haunts as a melancholic remainder. In the novel, the arrival of Paul D ruptures the melancholic maternal space and facilitates a temporary change. As the last of the Sweet Home men, Paul D effectuates a sharing of the past that hardly bear remembering. Through sharing Sethe's grief, Paul D makes an attempt to orient Sethe from a stagnant and atemporal space to a lively present where the past loss and grief can be left behind. For Sethe, prior to Paul D's arrival, 124 is a colorless and



barren house. Replete with black grief, the house, as Sethe describes, “was so full of strong feeling perhaps she was oblivious to the loss of anything at all” (39). After Sethe discloses her hidden wound and humiliating experiences in Sweet Home to Paul D, Sethe’s sense of self and awareness of the present are rekindled. 124 is rejuvenated with colors and signs of life. As Sethe describes, “Emotions sped to the surface in his company. Things became what they were: drabness looked drab; heat was hot. Windows suddenly had view” (*Beloved* 48).

While Paul D’s arrival induces a positive change, the change he brings has limitations. Through Paul D’s limitation as a catalyst of remembrance and reclamation of futurity, Morrison problematizes the presumption that the future arrives through the linear logic of temporality. To illustrate, the presence of Paul D elicits Sethe’s disclosure of the whites’ violation of her body and deprivation of her milk in the past, but Paul D does not fully understand how profound Sethe’s trauma is. The limitation of his perspective is evident in his response to Sethe’s account of how her milk is stolen and why she gets an indelible tree-like scar on her back after that. In their conversation, Paul D only cares about the brutal abuse Sethe suffers, whereas the violation of her maternal responsibility exemplified by the stealing of her milk concerns Sethe:

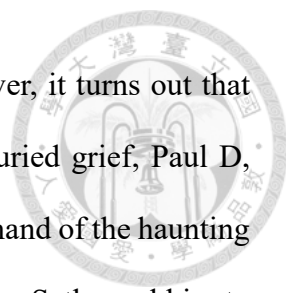
“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (*Beloved* 20)

The gender difference between the two prevents Paul D from fully understanding the pain of her loss and the significance of the mother-daughter bond to her. What is more, to make room for futurity, he chases the ghost *Beloved* away. Sethe, after Paul D’s arrival, once ponders whether she can “[t]rust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet



Home men was there to catch her if she sank” (*Beloved* 21); however, it turns out that instead of assisting Sethe to confront the tormented past and her buried grief, Paul D, governed by a desire for a future cut off from the past, ignores the demand of the haunting grief and loss for a home and unwittingly forecloses the possibility for Sethe and him to hail a future.

Beloved, after being chased away by Paul D, stubbornly returns. Her second return exposes that black grief and loss haunt in ways that one cannot control. What is more, *Beloved*’s return in human form as Sethe’s daughter shows the political meanings of black melancholia concerning the deprivation of black motherhood and the resulting distortion of the mother-daughter relationship. In the novel, *Beloved*, as Sethe’s dead daughter, is a ghost who returns as a melancholic subject hungry for maternal love. Sethe, the mother, is also a melancholic subject who lingers in grief over the loss of her daughter and the mother-daughter bond. As the two characters’ melancholia is engendered by institutionalized slavery, their melancholia can be viewed not simply as an individual pathology but as a response to antiblack racism. From such a perspective, black melancholia is less the sign of the failure of the subject to cope with loss than black victims’ gesture of resistance to dehumanization under chattel slavery.

Sethe’s psychic hold on loss, rather than being purely negative, can be understood as a militant act of the dehumanized subject to reclaim her deprived motherhood and preserve her lost daughter in light of David Eng and Shinhee Han’s theory of racial melancholia. According to Eng and Han, racial melancholia is “one way in which socially disparaged objects—racially and sexually deprived others—live on in the psychic realm” (364). Drawing on Freud’s view that melancholia “proceeds from an attitude of ‘revolt’ on the part of the ego” (365), Eng and Han suggest that for racially marginalized subjects, melancholic refusal to relinquish the lost object can be viewed as a militant

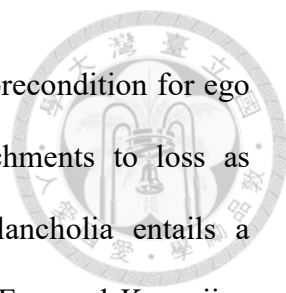
protest against white supremacy and an ethical and political response to loss.

At 124, after Sethe identifies Beloved as her crawling-already baby, she actively reclaims her lost daughter and maternal rights. After Paul D, unable to accept Sethe's infanticide, leaves Sethe, motherhood becomes the "exclusive sign of [Sethe's] identity" (Durrant 95). Sethe manages to live with Denver and Beloved on their own, leading a life where they can hold each other when no body see them falling (*Beloved* 205). With Beloved absorbing most of her attention, Sethe becomes uninterested in the rest of the world. As she muses:

Paul D convinced me there was a world out there and that I could live in it.
Should have known better. *Did* know better. Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be. (*Beloved* 215)

Durrant suggests that Sethe's "movement away from the social" locks 124 into "the claustrophobic and seemingly self-sufficient space-time of the womb" (95). I would argue that although Sethe's melancholic attachment to her lost daughter and Beloved's desire for love turn 124 into an enclosed space, their melancholia is political in that it paradoxically empowers black victims as subjects whose refusal to lose their loved objects and their rights as human functions as a way of resisting the negation of black motherhood and subjectivity under chattel slavery.

In *Beloved*, melancholia functions as a critical condition for investigating not only the psychic impacts of slavery, but a dynamic setting in motion a revisionary engagement with one's repressed past. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian's counterintuitive understanding of melancholia proves illuminating for such a reading. In "Introduction: Mourning Remains," Eng and Kazanjian draw on Walter Benjamin's historical materialism, Sigmund Freud's revised understanding of melancholia as essential to the

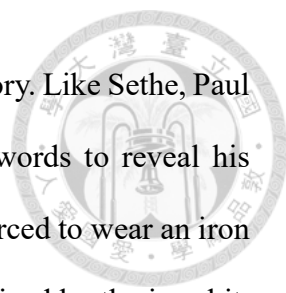


work of mourning, and Butler's formulation of melancholia as the precondition for ego formation to propose a new understanding of melancholic attachments to loss as productive for one to come to terms with one's past. As melancholia entails a "confrontation with loss through the adamant refusal of closure," Eng and Kazanjian contend that melancholia is not simply a static state but a dynamic process where the absent and lost object is kept present and, therefore, a dialogic relationship between the present and the past is maintained (3).

In *Beloved*, the titular character's return in human form shows the generative aspect of melancholia in that she enables Sethe, the melancholic subject, to reengage with her unbearable past. At 124, *Beloved*'s hunger for stories prompts Sethe to revisit and share racial memories that are too painful to be put into words. Prior to *Beloved*'s arrival, Sethe prefers to keep her past experiences in the southern plantation to herself because "every mention of her past life hurt" (*Beloved* 69).⁸ However, with *Beloved*'s presence, Sethe finds an "unexpected pleasure" in talking about her past (69). In addition to prompting Sethe to share what she knows, *Beloved* helps Sethe to remember "something she had forgotten she knew," that is, her repressed childhood trauma and shame (73).

In Sethe's childhood, slavery deprives her of her mother and maternal care. The untimely loss and its attendant grief have a lasting impact on Sethe: it unconsciously shapes Sethe's way of mothering. To ensure her children receive sufficient love and care, Sethe devotes herself wholeheartedly to fulfilling her maternal duties and maintaining her bond with them as possible as she can. In this regard, her insistence that "Thin love ain't love at all" is also a melancholy response to the dehumanizing violence of slavery (*Beloved* 194).

⁸ Paul D's arrival also prompts Sethe to share her past, but his role as a catalyst of remembering, as I have pointed out, has limitations. Another difference between Paul D and *Beloved* as a catalyst is that with Paul D, remembering and sharing the past is not an easy task, while with *Beloved*, revisiting the past, serving as a means to satisfy the lost object's demand, becomes a pleasant experience.

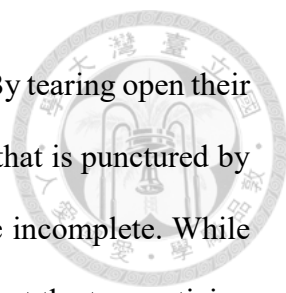


Beloved also provokes Paul D to reengage with his personal history. Like Sethe, Paul D is traumatized by racial subjugation and unable to find proper words to reveal his shameful experience of being dehumanized. At Sweet Home, he is forced to wear an iron bit in his mouth, an experience that shatters his sense of self. Animalized by the iron bit, Paul D loses his manhood, an awareness heightened by the gaze of his uncanny double—a rooster named Mister:

Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub. (*Beloved* 86)

The process of racial animalization Paul D undergoes exposes that the manhood his master, Mr. Garner, makes him believe he possesses is a fiction. Subject to an onto-epistemological order that denies slaves manhood, Paul D envies Mister who looks “. . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher” (*Beloved* 86). With no authority over definition of self and manhood, Paul D is ensnared by a sense of loss which generates in him a melancholic longing for wholeness and masculinity defined by the definers, that is, the white slave owners.

In *Beloved*, Morrison suggests that the healing of racial wounds requires a confrontation with the shameful and traumatic past—a process that is fraught with tensions and ambivalence. Before Paul D comes to 124, he prefers to keep the past to himself. Like Sethe, Paul D relies on burying the past as the coping mechanism to secure a sense of wholeness. With *Beloved*'s presence at 124, however, both Sethe and Paul D start to confront their hidden grief and unspeakable loss together. As *Beloved* solicits rememory, storytelling, as Rody notes, “becomes the text's self-conscious task; many

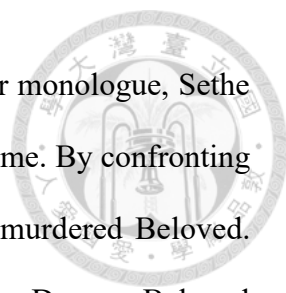


scenes present a character narrating his or her life to a listener” (99). By tearing open their buried wounds, Beloved facilitates a remembering of the buried past that is punctured by trauma and shame, but both Sethe’s and Paul D’s self-revelation are incomplete. While Sethe is unable to reveal her infanticide, Paul D, in his disclosure about the traumatizing gaze of Mister, he chooses to reserve the rest of unspeakable memories for himself:

Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him. And it would hurt her to know that there was no red heart bright as Mister’s comb beating in him. (*Beloved* 86)

For Paul D and Sethe, building a future together is a difficult task. At 124, Paul D’s presence continues to conflict with Beloved’s. Under the sway of Beloved, Paul D moves out to the shed. Beloved’s deprivation of Paul D’s authority and will-power repeats his traumatic experiences of emasculation as a slave in Sweet Home and a prisoner in Georgia. While the unspeakable shame causes Paul D to feel uneasy about his relationship with Sethe, what eventually causes the collapse of their relationship is not Paul D’s unspeakable trauma but Sethe’s infanticide. Her infanticide is an act that both Paul D and the black community cannot accept because it attests to the racist assumption that black people are less-than-human animals. Unable to accept Sethe’s infanticide, Paul D moves out, leaving 124 as a maternal space where Sethe is melancholically attached to the loss of the mother-daughter bond.

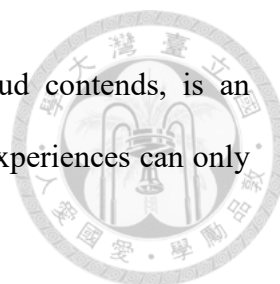
With Beloved’s powerful presence and Paul D’s absence, 124 becomes as a site where the mother and her daughters express their melancholic desires through revisiting their traumatic experiences and hidden thoughts. In the enclosed space, unspeakable



thoughts of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved find their articulation. In her monologue, Sethe claims Beloved as her daughter and recalls her suffering at Sweet Home. By confronting her traumatic past, Sethe expresses her desire to explain why she murdered Beloved. Denver, like Sethe, attempts to claim Beloved in her monologue. For Denver, Beloved gives her a melancholy hope that a future without fear will come. As a daughter who once swallowed Sethe's milk with Beloved's blood, Denver is haunted by a fear of her mother's "monstrous" love. Denver's fear of her mother is provoked by Nelson Lord, a boy in Lady Jones's school who questions her about her mother's infanticide. In the school, Nelson asks Denver, "'Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?'" (*Beloved* 123). These questions unlock Denver's memory of her mother's crime and their time together in prison and traumatize her.

Unable to confront the unspeakable truth about her mother's infanticide, Denver refuses to go to school and becomes deaf. Ultimately, after two years, her self-imposed deafness as a traumatized subject is ended by the sound made by Beloved when she tries to climb the stairs in 124. For Denver, Beloved is her secret companion who empowers her to beat her secret fear of her mother's thick love and live with the absence of her father. Through claiming her dead sister Beloved, Denver constructs her own identity as a sister who manages to protect Beloved. In this respect, her attachment to her ghostly sister, rather than diminishing her ego, proffers her an agency to endure the haunting of past generation's racial grief.

Beloved's monologue is a passage where the personal and collective trauma is intertwined as the personal melancholic desire for maternal love and recognition is mixed with the rememory of the collective trauma of the Middle Passage. As Beloved represents the unclaimed and forgotten victims of the Middle Passage and slavery, Beloved's account of the Middle Passage gives voice to the black collective suppressed by white



hegemony. “Motherless, fatherless,” Beloved, as Claudine Raynaud contends, is an “orphan of history” (72), a lost black daughter whose unspeakable experiences can only find articulation through a ghostly and fragmented voice.

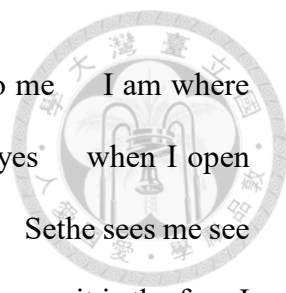
In her monologue, Beloved describes her fragmented memory of the Middle Passage, a disoriented experience in which the slave is “dispossessed from the self” and rendered “temporally homeless” (Warren 61). On the slave ship, the slaves possess neither the self nor time, as Beloved’s words suggest:

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not
crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always
crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth
smells sweet but his eyes are locked (*Beloved* 248).

The fragments of the death-in-life experience on the ship are enclosed by Beloved’s articulation of her desire for an identity, maternal love, and a new life. In her monologue, Beloved identifies herself as Beloved and claims Sethe as her lost mother. Beloved’s traumatic loss of her mother, as Kristen Lillvis notes, results in “the loss of her own identity” (20). Her melancholic desire for the lost mother and identity is the motivating force of her return. Her desire for a mother-daughter reunion is evident at the very beginning of her monologue: “I AM BELOVED and she is mine . . . I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing” (*Beloved* 248).

Towards the end of the monologue, Morrison closes Beloved’s rememory of her Middle Passage experiences with her reiteration of a strong desire for life:

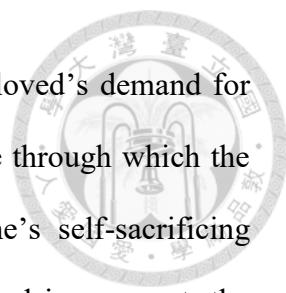
I come out of blue water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from
me I come up I need to find a place to be the air is heavy I am not dead



I am not there is a house there is what she whispered to me I am where
 she told me I am not dead I sit the sun closes my eyes when I open
 them I see the face I lost Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see
 her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I
 lost she is my face smiling at me doing it at last a hot thing now we
 can join a hot thing (*Beloved* 252)

Through a circular narrative progression, *Beloved*'s monologue, as Kristen Lillvis points out, reinforces "the existence of circular or liminal temporalities" and allows readers to "bear witness to the movement of the past into the present and future (and vice versa) through *Beloved*'s descriptions of the mother's return to the daughter and the daughter's return to the mother during the Middle Passage" (19).

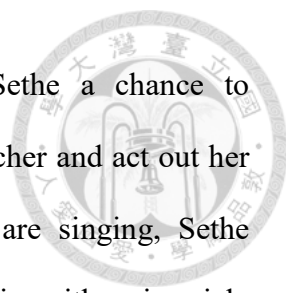
At 124, *Beloved* transforms past hurt and grief into an opportunity for family bonding. After Sethe sees *Beloved*'s scar, she grows completely obsessed with the task of satisfying *Beloved*'s demand for love. The scar, as a bodily inscription of unspeakable trauma of infanticide, generates interminable grief. As a mother, Sethe is willing to "[g]ive up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of *Beloved*'s tears" (*Beloved* 284). Many critics note that *Beloved*'s grip of Sethe leads to the impoverishment of her ego and the erasure of her individual subjectivity. Durrant, for instance, points out that in "attempting to meet *Beloved*'s insatiable demand, Sethe almost turns herself into a ghost" (91); Aida Levy-Hussen notes that *Beloved* "threatens to consume Sethe, to overwhelm her day-to-day life with impossible, too-late demands to be remembered, loved, and saved in time" (198); Barbara A. Schapiro draws attention to the negative effects of emotional hunger on both the mother and the daughter and contends that Sethe and *Beloved* are "caught up in a mutually destructive, frighteningly boundless narcissism" (203). While *Beloved*'s insatiable demand wears Sethe out, Sethe's melancholic devotion constitutes



a political and psychological paradox in that her submission to Beloved's demand for recognition and love is less a narcissistic act than an ethical gesture through which the subjectivity of the lost beloved is made possible. Through Sethe's self-sacrificing melancholic devotion, Beloved grows bigger and bigger. As Beloved is pregnant, the growth of her body suggests the growing of a new life and an unknown futurity.

As a traumatic loss at the collective level, however, Beloved is a specter whom 124 cannot accommodate. Since Beloved is not just Sethe's crawling-already baby but *something more*, the situation at 124 is not simply a dead daughter haunting the mother as personal grief but an excess of historical loss and grief that returns to haunt. As the anonymous black collective lost to the Middle Passage and slavery, Beloved haunts 124 as a ghost with a vampiric appetite for love. By depicting Sethe as a victim of Beloved's consuming appetite, Morrison draws attention to both the need for communal participation to acknowledge unrecognized black grief and the community's responsibility to Sethe's melancholic attachment to loss. As Beloved's insatiable demand drains Sethe and eventually threatens Sethe's life, Denver decides to go seek help from the community. The community, failing to warn Sethe about the arrival of white men who came to recapture her and her children eighteen years ago, is partly responsible for the death of Beloved. However, instead of acknowledging their complicity, they alienate Sethe who commits the infanticide, leaving the grief of Sethe unacknowledged.

Sethe's grief demands the community's recognition. By choosing to save Sethe from the haunting of Beloved, the group of thirty women led by Ella make amends to the community's complicity in Sethe's plight. As the group sing to exorcize Beloved who is and is not Sethe's daughter Beloved, Denver and the community of women, as Lillvis suggests, become Sethe's "othermothers" who provide Sethe with "care she desired from her biological mother and which she provides for her children" (26). In addition, the

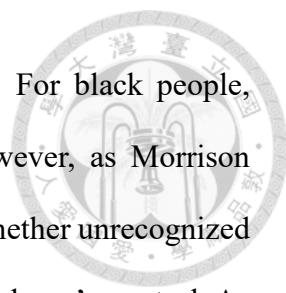


gathering of the neighborhood women outside 124 provides Sethe a chance to reexperience the traumatic moment of being found by the schoolteacher and act out her desire to make a different choice. When the group of women are singing, Sethe misrecognizes Mr. Bodwin as the schoolteacher and rushes towards him with an ice pick. Through making an attempt to rewrite the past in the present, Sethe releases her hold of Beloved's hand and, by extension, her guilt over killing her.

After the community's exorcism of Beloved, Sethe remains in a state of grief. The absence of Beloved afflicts Sethe; however, the absence is where a melancholy hope for a livable future takes shape. After Beloved is driven away, Paul D returns to 124. His offer to bathe Sethe prompts her to share her unspoken grief and accumulated losses "that time didn't stay put; that she called, but Howard and Buglar walked on down the railroad track and couldn't hear her; that Amy was scared to stay with her because her feet were ugly and her back looked so bad; that her ma'am had hurt her feelings and she couldn't find her hat anywhere," and most importantly, that Beloved leaves her (*Beloved* 321). Through bathing Sethe and sharing her grief, Paul D, as Wyatt argues, serves as the "restorative maternal role" who is able to provide care and self-love as Baby Sugg once did (484).

By tending the parts of Sethe's suffering body, Paul D assists her to recollect her fragmented sense of self and restore her subjectivity. Meanwhile, with Sethe's companionship, Paul D finds that he is able to bear with shameful memories of his enslavement in the South. Through their exchange, both learn to live with the tormented past and traumatic loss without foreclosing "some kind of tomorrow" (*Beloved* 322). Certainly, as the conversation between Paul D and Sethe reaches its end, individual racial wounds are not yet healed, the past still hurts, and the future has not yet been found, but it is not without hope that a livable future for them will come.

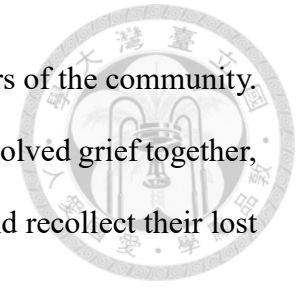
At the end of the novel, Beloved is forgotten like a bad dream. "Disremembered and



unaccounted for,” her absence haunts the epilogue (*Beloved* 323). For black people, remembering the slave past “seem[s] unwise” (*Beloved* 324); however, as Morrison discloses in *Beloved*, past losses engendered by racial subjugation, whether unrecognized or deliberately forgotten, have their ways of haunting that are beyond one’s control. As the specter of the slave past never dies, it challenges black people to confront intolerable memories of racial violence and devastating losses. Such confrontation is fraught with horrors, pains, and grief; however, as the present and the future to come are continuously informed by the past, the confrontation allows for a rewriting of the past, the present, and the future.

In *Beloved*, Morrison engages with the Southern Gothic and foregrounds the resurrection of the still-living dead in both spectral and corporeal forms as a means to reclaim the lost history and address the psychological, cultural, and historical wounds that mark black subjectivity. By crafting a haunted narrative where untold horrors of slavery and black melancholia are intertwined, Morrison discloses that melancholia, as an ethical response to irrecoverable losses, could be generative for black history and politics. As melancholic attachments animate an “ongoing and open relationship with the past” (Eng and Kazanjian 4), black melancholia functions as a shaping force for a reengagement of the traumatic past. In addition, as melancholic attachments express a militant refusal to lose what is not simply lost, but, rather, violently stripped away by institutional slavery, black melancholia functions as a resistance to the dehumanizing racial violence and the slave’s ontological state as an object rather than a human subject. While *Beloved* sheds light on the political implications of black melancholia, its dangerous effects as an excess of historical loss and grief on the black individual are certainly not overlooked. Through depicting *Beloved* as a ghost with a vampiric appetite, Morrison shows that as the personal trauma caused by institutional slavery and the collective one are intertwined, the

emotional recovery requires the intervention and help of the members of the community. By confronting the irrecoverable loss, unspeakable trauma, and unresolved grief together, the survivors of slavery can live as wounded yet resilient subjects and recollect their lost futurity to move on.



Chapter Two

Southern Haunting and Black Resilience in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*



With her Gothic masterpiece, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison carves out a space in literature for black writers to engage with hauntology and explore the repressive burdens of the past. In line with Morrison, Jesmyn Ward is concerned with the haunting absence of black voices in American historiography and the need to reclaim black American history through confronting unacknowledged losses and grief. Grounding her aesthetic production in the acknowledgement of the past, Ward, like Morrison, reworks the Southern Gothic and enacts hauntology to delineate the melancholic haunting of the buried history and black individual struggles with personal losses and unresolved grief. While Morrison explores the daily struggle of slaves with traumatic memories and losses in the aftermath of slavery and reframes melancholia as the slave's resistance to dehumanization in *Beloved*, Ward delves into the tormented history of the U.S. South in the post-slavery era and delineates black experiences of losses and grief in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to complicate unresolved grief as a constant negotiation with antiblack racism and investigate not only potentials of resistance amidst loss and grief but black cultural heritage as a resource for resiliency.

In *Sing*, Ward explores black experiences of losses and grief and the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow that continue to plague black American southerners in the twentieth-first century. For black American southerners, their homeland is haunted by the specter of antiblackness and ghosts of black victims who died from racial violence. Growing up in the rural Mississippi, Ward is acutely aware of the haunted quality of the Southern region. In her memoir, *Men We Reaped*, Ward discloses that in her hometown DeLisle, the houses of the townspeople are “seemingly more populated by ghosts than by

the living, with the old dead and the new” (67-68).

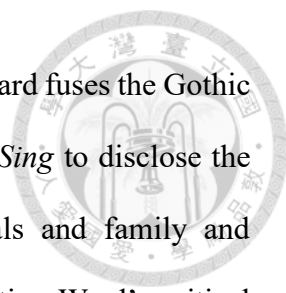
In the rural South, as the specter of antiblackness consistently preys on black people and causes untimely losses, unresolved grief thickens. In *Men*, Ward reveals that her own life is punctuated by a heart-wrenching list of untimely losses. From 2000 to 2004, she was caught off guard by five deaths, including that of her younger brother Joshua.⁹ The unforeseen losses threw Ward into overwhelming grief which silenced her for a long time. In Ward’s hometown, however, the five deaths are only a fraction of the growing number of the untimely deaths of young black Americans. Although the accumulated losses appear contingent and unrelated, Ward acutely notes that together they speak to a disheartening truth hidden in plain sight—“at the confluence of history, of racism, of poverty, and economic power, this is what [black] lives are worth: nothing” (*Men* 237).

As a black American southerner, Ward sets out to interrogate antiblack racism and delineate the struggle of marginalized black southerners that has been underexplored. Noticing that stories about black life and concerns have often been dismissed and marginalized, Ward has made it clear in her 2011 acceptance speech for her first National Book Award that she is committed to writing about disadvantaged black people in the rural South “so that the culture that marginalized us for so long would see that our stories were as universal, our lives as fraught and lovely and important, as theirs.”

In *Sing*, Ward invokes the Southern Gothic to depict the impacts of historical injustices and injuries on marginalized black people in the rural Mississippi. In Ward’s Gothic narrative of southern haunting, black characters do not appear simply as passive victims of historical injustices and persistent antiblackness. Instead, Ward endows her characters with agency and infuses black American spiritual traditions into her Gothic

⁹ Ward’s brother was hit and killed at the age of nineteen in 2000 by a white drunk driver who never paid a penny of the fine for which he was sentenced and served only three years out of his five-year prison term (*Men* 234-35). Following her brother’s violent death, Ward’s cousin and three friends whom she grew up with died respectively by a drug-induced heart attack, shooting, suicide, and a car accident (7).



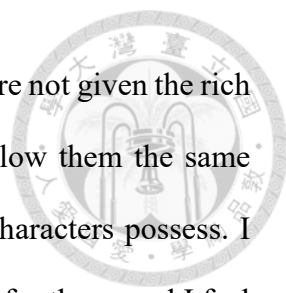


narrative to underscore black resilience. In this chapter, I argue that Ward fuses the Gothic haunting and the elements of black American spiritual traditions in *Sing* to disclose the impacts of unresolved grief and melancholia on black individuals and family and potentials for black people to *salvage* their futurity.¹⁰ By investigating Ward's critical engagement with historical legacies and poetics of southern haunting, this chapter explicates the ways in which Ward gives form to the plight and burden of survival in the rural South and reimagines black agency, resistance, and resilience.

In *Sing*, Ward details the life of an impoverished black family fractured by traumatic loss and unresolved grief due to antiblack racism in Bois Sauvage, a town on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. Bois Sauvage is modeled after Ward's hometown, DeLisle. The fictional town is the setting of all Ward's novels. Ward's creation of Bois Sauvage recalls Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi, a county imbued with grief, decay, and death. Ward's writing is deeply indebted to the literary legacies of Faulkner. Her Gothic work of southern haunting, *Sing*, is particularly influenced by Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. While Ward greatly admires *As I Lay Dying* and is awed by Faulkner's craft, as a black American writer, she is concerned with the lack of complexity and interiority of his black characters.¹¹ In a 2018 conversation with Ayana Mathis, when talking about Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and *As I Lay Dying*, Ward comments:

¹⁰ I borrow the word "salvage" from Ward. Ward uses the word to entitle her second novel *Salvage the Bone*. Ward's usage enacts a wordplay between "savage" and "salvage." For Ward, rural black southerners are "savage" who struggle to survive the hurricane of endemic antiblackness. In her 2013 interview with Anna Hartnell, Ward explains that the word "savage" has a special meaning for black people from the South. As she explains, "[f]or us it means that you're a fighter and that you're a survivor. And that you'll do what you need to do in order to survive. . . . The way I wanted to use that term, especially in that part, is to say that we are fighters and we are resourceful. Even in the face of *this*, of the losses that we experience, of this entire interconnected pressure after pressure after pressure. The pressure of racism, the pressure of the history of racism, of economic inequality, of a popular culture that constantly tells you that you're worth less. Even in the face of all that, we still survive and we still claim for ourselves a certain sense of dignity or humanity" (212-13).

¹¹ In a 2011 interview with *The Paris Review* on Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones*, Ward has made a similar comment on Faulkner's black characters: "The first time I read *As I Lay Dying*, I was so awed I wanted to give up. I thought, 'He's done it, perfectly. Why the hell am I trying?'" But the failures of some of his black characters—the lack of imaginative vision regarding them, the way they don't display the full range of human emotion, how they fail to live fully on the page—work against that awe and goad me to write."



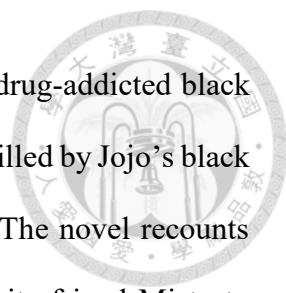
But I don't think he serves his black characters well. They are not given the rich interior lives, and I am very aware of that. He doesn't allow them the same humanity and complicated quality that Faulkner's white characters possess. I am always thinking about my characters—I feel them, feel for them, and I feel conscious of the ways black characters are short-changed in his work. (qtd. Long)

Not content with the ways in which black Americans serve simply as a trope or figuration,¹² Ward manages to explore the interior lives of black people, the complexity of black experiences, and the psychological impacts of institutional racism on black individuals in her writing.

Ward's *Sing*, as a black variation on the Southern Gothic, is a work that contests the treatment of black people as racial others in traditional Gothic narratives. In Gothic fiction, for white southerners, the sense of haunting and social tensions in southern landscape typically stems from the suppression of dark urges and terrors of "racial degeneration" or transgression (Wester 157), or from "what Faulkner called 'the old shame' of slavery, a regional version of Original Sin" (Gray 26). Ward, however, through multiple perspectives of her black characters, delves into the experiences of black people to underscore that for contemporary black southerners, the land of the South is nightmarish and haunted for different reasons. For them, in the South, there is still a sense of the macabre and doom fueled not only by tormented memories of the past, but by a persistent climate of antiblack racism and socioeconomic inequality that leaves black lives precarious and suffused with hidden grief.

To present the experiences and psyches of marginalized black people in the rural Mississippi, Ward deploys polyvocal narration in *Sing* through three narrators from

¹² For more on the success and limitations of Faulkner's perspective as a white southern writer, see Werner, "Endurance and Excavation: Afro-American Responses to Faulkner."

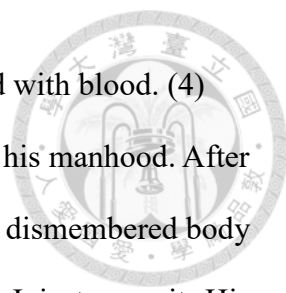


different generations: a thirteen-year-old mixed-raced boy Jojo, his drug-addicted black mother Leonie, and Richie, the ghost of a twelve-year-old black boy killed by Jojo's black grandfather River when they were incarcerated in Parchman Farm. The novel recounts the trip of Jojo, his three-year-old sister Kayla, Leonie, and her white friend Misty to Parchman to retrieve Jojo's father Michael, who is imprisoned for drug trafficking. Ward's use of the road-trip narrative, as Greg Chase and Nicole Dib point out,¹³ is not a contingent choice but an invocation of the Bundren family's odyssey in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. While Faulkner's road-trip narrative is a burial odyssey of a family of Southern poor whites, Ward's haunted road trip is a coming-of-age journey through which the protagonist Jojo navigates what it means to live while black in the rural Mississippi.

As a Gothic coming-of-age narrative, *Sing* foregrounds growing up in the South as a journey shadowed by death. In the beginning of the novel, Ward creates a sense of the macabre to foreshadow the challenges that come with growing up in the South through a graphic depiction of Jojo helping his grandfather River slaughter a goat. Abject body images and graphic violence, as Elsa Charléty notes, are conventions in Southern Gothic to express horror, terror, and fear in a more visceral manner (114-15). Ward's portrayal of Jojo's confrontation with death resonates with the convention. To convey abject horror, she describes the bloody killing and the dismembered body of a dead goat with unsparing detail:

Pop slits. The goat makes a sound of surprise, a bleat swallowed by a gurgle, and then there's blood and mud everywhere. The goat's legs go rubbery and loose, and Pop isn't struggling anymore. All at once, he stands up and ties a rope around the goat's ankles, lifting the body to a hook hanging from the rafters. That eye: still wet. Looking at me like I was the one who cut its neck,

¹³ See Chase 137; Dib 201.



like I was the one bleeding it out, turning its whole face red with blood. (4)

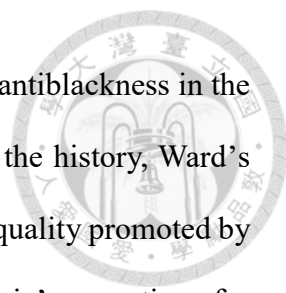
For Jojo, the slaughtering is a test to face death physically and prove his manhood. After he helps River turn the goat inside out and peel its skin, however, the dismembered body of the dead goat and the smell of death provoke abjection, causing Jojo to vomit. His failed attempt to look at death straight indicates that growing up into manhood in the South is a difficult challenge for black boys. Ward's Mississippi, as Chiara Patrizi notes, is a "place in which being Black means growing up faster, and often dying sooner and amid widespread indifference" (75). In such a gloomy town, blackness is, as Christina Sharpe describes, indexed to "immanent and imminent death" (13).

The black body as abject nothing in a world historically dominated by antiblack sentiment is revealed in Ward's graphic description of lynched bodies, an image which exposes the horrors of inhuman antiblack violence. In *Parchman*, a woman tells River and Richie about the lynching of a black couple:

She said their people went out in the woods and found them the next day. Said the mob beat them so bad they eyes disappeared in they swollen heads. There was wax paper and sausage wrappings and bare corncobs all over the ground. The man was missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals. The woman was missing her teeth. Both of them were hanged, and the ground all around the roots of the tree was smoking because the mob had set the couple afire, too. (188)

The couple are lynched simply because the black man "brushed up against [a white woman] real close-like" on the sidewalk (187). Their violent death shows that in an antiblack world, black lives are not recognized as lives, and white people, as River comments, "kill animals better than that" (255).

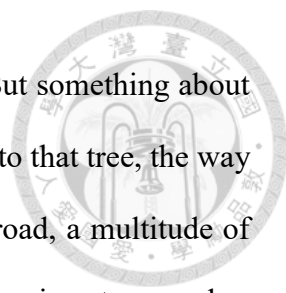
In *Sing*, Ward inserts fragmented accounts of racial subjugation and violence in the



past into the narrative of the present to underscore the persistence of antiblackness in the South. Through juxtaposing racist oppression in different phases of the history, Ward's non-linear narrative structure challenges the cultural belief in racial equality promoted by the post-racial rhetoric and grand narratives of progress. In Leonie's narrative, for instance, the story of her brother Given's death and Leonie's horrible encounter with Michael's heavily racist father, Big Joseph, expose the unending antiblack sentiment in the contemporary South. Given is a teenaged boy who innocently believes that his football teammates, "White and Black, were like brothers to him" (47). However, he was shot dead by his White teammates in the woods simply for winning a hunting contest they expected him to lose. His murder is covered up by Big Joseph as a hunting accident. Big Joseph, an authoritative ex-sheriff who hates black folks, embodies the haunting presence of antiblackness that refuses to acknowledge black humanness. In the novel, he calls Jojo and his family niggers, despises their skin and blood, and lives as if they do not exist in the town. For him, Jojo and his black family are ghostly others who are there but quite not there.

In her precarious encounter with Big Joseph, Leonie experiences the history of antiblack violence returning to haunt as she sees a Spanish oak. Living in an area named the Kill in upcountry, a name suggesting violent tendencies in the dominant whites, Big Joseph is a man who greets black people with his gun if any of them intrudes into his land. When Leonie drives up to the Kill to drop a note about Michael's release, she unwittingly ignores a No Trespassing sign Big Joseph nailed on a tree. Upon spotting Leonie trespassing, Big Joseph aggressively speeds up the lawn mower which he is riding to reach Leonie, an act that frightens her:

Fear rises to my shoulders, up my neck, a bubbling choke. I don't know what I'm afraid of. What can he do but curse me? What can he do? I'm not in his



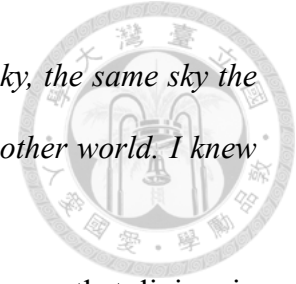
driveway. Doesn't the county own the sides of the road? But something about how fast he's gunning that lawn mower, the way he points to that tree, the way that tree, a Spanish oak, reaches up and out and over the road, a multitude of dark green leaves and almost black branches, the way he's coming at me, makes me see violence. (56)

The Spanish oak signifies the absent presence of the history of brutal antiblack violence—lynching, shooting, and murder of blacks that occurred in the woods, including the murder of Leonie's brother Given. The horrible history, together with the approaching of Big Joseph, provokes intense fear in Leonie. Through this meeting, Ward shows that the buried past of gratuitous violence continues to haunt and trouble blacks, both physically and psychologically.

Like Leonie, Jojo is exposed to racist antagonism rooted in the history of the South. During a traffic stop on his road trip, Jojo is handcuffed by a police officer and treated like an animal. As Jojo recounts, "The man telling me sit, like I'm a dog" (170). What is worse, the police officer points his gun at Jojo's face and kicks him, despite the fact that Jojo is an unarmed boy. Shocked by the police violence, Jojo is haunted by the image of the gun. His experience of gratuitous violence proves what River believes: "*They look at you and see difference*" (48). In Jojo's narrative, Ward also reveals the historical root of the treatment of black people as animals and the negation of black humanness by inserting fragments of River's storytelling about his family history. On his road-trip to Parchman, Jojo often recalls stories told by Pop, one of which is about Pop's great-great-grandmother who was kidnaped and transported to the Americas by "white ghosts" (69). On the ship, she is brutally stripped off humanity:

*She learned that bad things happened on that ship, all the way until it docked.
That her skin grew around the chains. That her mouth shaped to the muzzle.*

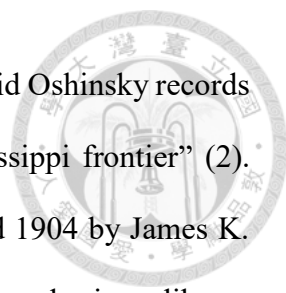
That she was made into an animal under the hot, bright sky, the same sky the rest of her family was under, somewhere far away, in another world. I knew what that was, to be made a animal. (69)



By invoking the experience of the Middle Passage, Ward discloses that living in Mississippi today does not protect Jojo much from dehumanizing violence that has its root in history. In the contemporary South, the condition of black life is to live under the threat of gratuitous violence and death. As antiblack sentiment and death stalk black people, fragile homes and dim future prospects are normal aspects of black lives.

In *Sing*, the collapse of the boundary between the past and present occurs when Richie, a black victim of antiblack practices and sentiment, returns to haunt. Richie is a boy incarcerated in the Mississippi State Penitentiary, the Parchman Farm, for a petty crime—stealing food for his “nine little brothers and sisters always crying for food” (24). After dying violently as an escaped prisoner, Richie haunts as a ghost rendered homeless by antiblack violence. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon points out that “[h]aunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts” shows “what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us” (xvi). Ward’s invocation of ghostly haunting generates the same effect. As a ghost tied to another time, a time outside of temporality, Richie represents unspeakable loss and unacknowledged grief positioned out of the frame and juncture of historical time. As one of the innumerable victims who suffer from inhumane labor exploitation facilitated by the state penitentiary and whose deaths are, like those who failed to survive the Middle Passage and slavery, *disremembered and unaccounted for*, Richie haunts the present with a melancholy desire for a place to be.

Parchman, the notorious Mississippi State Penitentiary, is a penal farm where



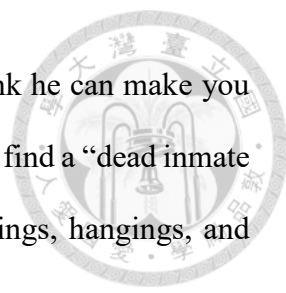
inmates are forced into labor as punishment, a practice which, as David Oshinsky records in *Worse Than Slavery*, “begins in antebellum times, on the Mississippi frontier” (2). Parchman itself is not constructed in antebellum times but in around 1904 by James K. Vardaman, a governor who, according to Oshinsky, believes that a “good prison, like an efficient slave plantation, could serve to ‘socialize’ young blacks within the limits of their God-given abilities” (110). Originally established “for blacks who had ‘lost’ their way” with a benign intention, however, Parchman becomes a system of labor exploitation perpetuated by white supremacists and a living hell of torture, murder, and inhumanity especially for black people (Oshinsky 110). As Ward unveils in *Sing*, Parchman, according to River, is a place of “*Mass murder*” (73); for Richie, that is “no place for hope” (139).

In *Sing*, Parchman, as an instrument of the white authority to criminalize black people for free labor, embodies the afterlife of slavery.¹⁴ As a penal farm, Parchman resembles a slave plantation. As River describes,

Parchman [is] the kind of place that fool you into thinking it ain't no prison, ain't going to be so bad when you first see it, because ain't no walls. Back in the day, it was just fifteen camps, each one surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. Wasn't no brick; wasn't no stone. Us inmates was called gunmen because we worked under the trusty shooters, who was inmates theyselves, but who the warden gave guns to oversee the rest of us. (21)

Like slaves on a plantation, in Parchman, black people are treated as less than human. As River discloses, on the working farms, the inmates forced to work under unbearable sun from sunup to sundown are overseen by trusty shooters and inmate guards who would

¹⁴ Chase notes that Parchman makes its appearance in two of Faulkner’s novels—*If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939) and *The Mansion* (1959). In his novels, however, Faulkner focuses on the experience of white characters only, which “deemphasize[s] the role such institutions have played in perpetuating a racialized caste system from the Jim Crow era to the present” (Chase 202).



“treat you like a plowing horse, like a hunting dog—and bred to think he can make you like it” (22). In addition, in Parchman, it should not surprise anyone to find a “dead inmate bleed to death in his cell” (96), for extreme violence such as stabbings, hangings, and beatings happens on a regular basis.

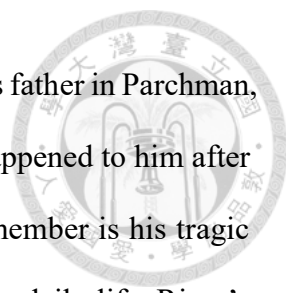
If there is an inmate running away, the guards would track him with dogs and kill him once he is found; if an inmate is found resting from hard farm work, he could be severely whipped. Even a twelve-year-old boy would not be spared from whippings. As River recounts, when Richie is spotted not working, he is tied to posts, brutally whipped like a dog by the sergeant:

When that whip cracked in the air and came down on his back, he sounded like a puppy. Yelped so loud. And that’s what he kept doing, over and over. Just yelping for every one of them lashes, arching up off the ground, turning his head like he wanted to look at the sky. Yelling like a drowning dog. When they untied him, his back was full of blood, them seven gashes laid open like filleted fish (120)

Through River’s memories of horrible violence, we can observe that in the post-slavery era “the means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain” (Sharpe 12).¹⁵

Resurrecting Richie, Ward transforms him from a lost object in official histories to a ghostly subject whose melancholy desire for the lost home and River’s recognition drives him to return and haunt Jojo. The haunting of Richie, like that of *Beloved*, entails generative potentials for history, for it prompts the traumatized melancholy subject to reengage with the past and enables a discursive reproduction of the unspeakable history. To illustrate, taking River as his brother and father (*Sing* 135), Richie believes that River

¹⁵ Sharpe makes this comment based on his observation of the condition of black lives in the post-Civil War United States, but her point holds true for black lives in the post-slavery era in general.

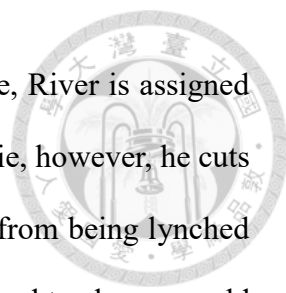


is his home. Accordingly, when he spots Jojo who comes to pick up his father in Parchman, he follows Jojo home. Richie hopes that River could tell him what happened to him after he escaped Parchman. The part of the story that Richie does not remember is his tragic death—an event that is traumatic for both River and Richie. In Jojo’s daily life, River’s storytelling is the source through which Jojo learns about his family history and explores what it means to be a black man. However, River, traumatized by his murder of Richie—the boy who regards River as his brother and his father, is unable to “tell a story straight” when it concerns Richie (67):

Whenever Pop done told me his and Richie’s story, he talked in circles. Telling me the beginning over and over again. Telling me the middle over and over again. Circling the end like a big black buzzard angles around dead animals, possums or armadillos or wild pigs or hit deer, bloating and turning sour in the Mississippi heat (248).

The gap in River’s storytelling reflects his disarticulated grief—one that unfurls a transgenerational haunting. River’s unspeakable loss and grief haunt Jojo in the form of Richie. Gordon notes that haunting as a frightening experience “always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present” and is “distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done” (xvi). By rendering the traumatic past and wordless grief of the past generation as a transgenerational haunting, Ward foregrounds that a confrontation with historical injustices and wounds needs to be done, for the confrontation is necessary for Jojo to learn about life, love, and survival in the South as a black man.

Richie’s melancholy return serves as a catalyst for River to put the unspeakable into words for the living and the dead to engage with the tragic side of black history and bear witness to the brutality of antiblack violence that reduces black bodies and lives into



nothing. In Parchman, after Richie escapes with another inmate Blue, River is assigned to track them with hunting dogs. The moment when River finds Richie, however, he cuts Richie's throat and lets the hunting dogs tear his body to spare him from being lynched and cut into pieces by the white mob who see the two niggers, Blue and twelve-year-old Richie, no different as "two beasts" (253). By killing Richie himself, River saves him from the brutality the other escapee suffers. After Blue is captured by white mob, "they was cutting pieces of him off. Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose. And then they started skinning him" (254). River's murder is a desperate resistance of the racial other to the negation of black humanness under the condition of racial subjugation. By putting into words the painful memory of Richie's horrible death, River transforms his privatized loss and hidden grief into a shared memory, which guides Jojo to learn that in antiblack society, love sometimes means a willingness to inflict pain to prevent greater suffering and that being a black man in the rural South entails a constant negotiation between loss and salvage of negated black humanity.

In a Gothic narrative where the southern landscape is loaded with the burdensome legacy of history—dismembered black bodies, homeless ghosts, and haunting grief, Ward invokes African spiritual traditions of voodoo to suggest that black cultural heritage can provide support and consolation for black people and help them live with antiblack trauma and brutality. Voodoo is an African diasporic religion evolved from the incorporation of traditional African religions and practices brought to the New World by enslaved Africans during colonial times with European Catholicism and native American religions.¹⁶ The syncretic tradition of voodoo involves spirit possession, ancestor worship, and herbal medicine. Its religious beliefs, practices, and herbal knowledge have been passed down

¹⁶ For more details about the development of New Orleans voodoo and hoodoo, see Filan, *The New Orleans Voodoo Handbook*; Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*; Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System*.

through generations. In this sense, the cultural tradition of voodoo stands as an embodiment of black cultural memory, connecting diasporic blacks to their ancestors and, ultimately, to their African origin.

In *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson notes that traditionally, Enlightenment thinkers such as Georg Hegel consider Africans disqualified from universal humanity because of their affinity with and worship of nature (29-30). Instead of dismissing African spiritual traditions as superstitious and primitive, Ward affirms the value of black heritage to challenge the Western thinking that discredits black wisdom. In *Sing*, Ward blurs the lines between humans, animals, and nature with voodoo and shows that black American cultural heritage helps black people to negotiate their position of nonbeing and develop positive ecological connections with the world. In *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being*, Kevin Quashie contends that “[a]ntiblackness is part of blackness but not all of how or what blackness is. Antiblackness is total in the world, but it is not total in the black world” (5). Such a view finds its echo in Ward’s black cosmology.

Traditionally, animalizing racial others has been one of the means for the dominant White to maintain the ontological integrity of whiteness and the idea of Man prescribed by Western humanism.¹⁷ As Jackson notes, “the animal’s negation, as repudiation of ‘the animal,’ has historically been essential to producing classes of abject humans” (2). As racialization is based on abjection of animality, black people are burdened with the “specter of abject animality” (27). In a similar vein, Joshua Bennett notes in *Being Property Once Myself* that black people have experienced living as “sociolegal nonpersons: a subgenre of the human, always already positioned in fraught proximity to

¹⁷ Jackson notes that “Western humanism has not produced African diasporic subjectivity in a manner that would permit black people to decisively remove themselves from being subjected to violence against “the animal” (14). In addition, for the Enlightenment humanists such as Hume, Hegel, Jefferson, and Kant, “‘the African’ does not symbolize ‘the animal’; instead, ‘the African’ is ‘the animal’” (Jackson 14).

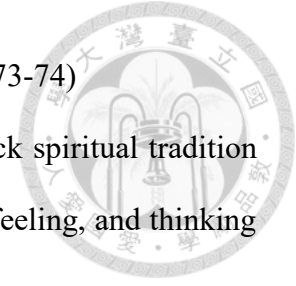
animal life” (4-5).

While black people are racialized as abject human animality, Ward critiques the hierarchical human-animal binarism and displaces the idea of animality as abjection through black America spiritual traditions. In *Sing*, African spiritual practices and belief enable River to connect with the non-human world to recover black humanity and cope with loss and grief resulting from antiblack violence. River comprehends the world as populated by spirits. In one of his conversations with Jojo, River tells him that “everything got power” (73). He explains that according to his great-grandfather,

there’s spirit in everything. In the trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals. Said the sun is most important, gave it a name: Aba. But you need all of them, all of that spirit in everything, to have balance. So the crops will grow, the animals breed and get fat for food. . . . if you got too much sun and not enough rain, crops will wither. If you got too much rain, they rot in the ground . . . You need a balance of spirit. A body, he told me, is the same way. (73)

For River, maintaining a “balance of spirit” is the philosophy of life and the way in which he manages to develop resilience in the face of deadly antagonism in the rural South. In Parchman, River suffers from antiblack brutality and learns that there is something “like water so black and deep you can’t see the bottom,” things that “move a man. Like currents of water inside. Things he can’ help” (68). The thing is unnameable grief engendered by dehumanizing brutality, grief that River learns to survive by resorting to black cultural wisdom. For River, animal spirits can serve as a source of strength. As he explains,

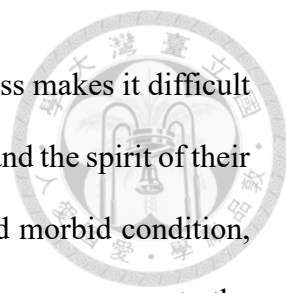
Like this. I’m strong. I can split this wood. But maybe if I had some of the boar’s strength, a little bit of wild pig’s tusk at my side, something to give me a little bit of that animal’s spirit, then maybe, just maybe . . . I’m better at this.



Maybe it come a little easier to me. Maybe I'm stronger. (73-74)

Through River's embrace of animal spirits, Ward suggests that black spiritual tradition can empower black people by providing alternative ways of being, feeling, and thinking for black people to claim agency.

In addition to River, Jojo and his grandmother Phillipène are able to find support and consolation from African spiritualism and cultural heritage. Jojo inherits the ability to communicate with the nonhuman world from his family. For him, the interspecies connection gives him a sense of security. As he recounts, "[t]here was comfort in that, in hearing the pigs snuffle and the goats tear and eat, in seeing the chickens peck and scratch. I didn't feel so small or alone (14). Phillipène inherits herbal knowledge from plant lore passed down through generations. Working as a midwife, rootworker, and healer, she serves as a healing presence not only in the family but in the black community. She also possesses a supernatural ability to receive messages from the non-human world—a "seed of a gift" that passes down in the blood—the ability to hear the world sing, to communicate with it, and to see glimpses of the future (40). Like River, she relates to nature intimately and copes with loss and grief in an antiblack world through her black heritage. After her son Given died, she plants a tree for him every year and expects the trees to grow into a "*whispering forest* (50). Phillipène's insistence on planting trees shows that grief never goes away, but black spiritualism transforms grief to a generative resource and enables her to perform the work of unending mourning to bear with irrecoverable loss and resist the denial of black life. Through Phillipène's grieving practice, Ward transforms the woods, a place where dead black bodies were mercilessly abandoned, into a place possible for life-affirming and healing. While African spiritualism certainly cannot undo structural antiblackness, it could offer oppressed black people a source of consolation to cope with the devaluation of black lives.

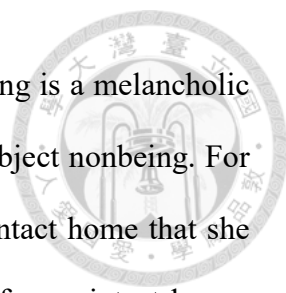


In *Sing*, Leonie is the character whose melancholic hold on to loss makes it difficult for her to connect with black communal histories, cultural traditions, and the spirit of their ancestors. While Leonie's unresolved grief appears as a negative and morbid condition, her melancholic attachment to loss is less an individual pathology than a response to the racial condition where blackness is defined as inferior by dominant white culture. The complexity of Leonie's melancholia can be explored through Anne Anlin Cheng's theory of racial melancholia. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Cheng conceptualizes racial melancholia as a "dynamic of rejection and internalization" through which the dominant white culture and racial others form their identity (xi). According to Cheng, dominant white culture establishes itself through simultaneous rejection and incorporation of racial others (xi). The racial other, as the melancholic object (the lost object of dominant white culture), is also a melancholic subject insofar as s/he internalizes white rejection and the sense of imperfection (Cheng xi).

Leonie, as a racialized other troubled by dominant white's devaluation of blackness, internalizes white rejection and shows ambivalence about blackness and her cultural roots. Unable to fully embrace blackness, Leonie dislikes Jojo's mimicry of River's way. In addition, unlike her mother, Leonie is unable to embrace black cultural heritage. As she reflects on Phillipène's teaching of rootwork and herbal knowledge,

[Mam] thought that if she taught me as much herbal healing as she could, if she gave me a map to the world as she knew it, a world plotted orderly by divine order, spirit in everything, I could navigate it. But I resented her when I was young, resented her for the lessons and the misplaced hope" (105).

For Leonie, there are no signs of future in black cultural heritage. Holding the belief that blackness does not guarantee a future with domestic inviolability and happiness, Leonie is drawn to whiteness. Even though Leonie hates Big Joseph, she names Jojo after his



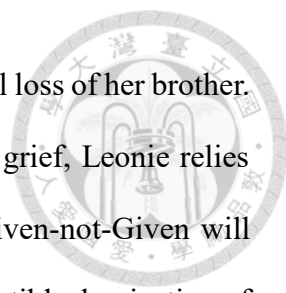
white grandfather Joseph and Kayla after Michael. Her way of naming is a melancholic response to the dominant white culture's rendition of blackness as abject nonbeing. For Leonie, whiteness promises a sense of security, belonging, and an intact home that she has lost since Given is murdered. To fulfill her melancholy desire for an intact home, Leonie even wants a baby whose skin is lighter. After being reunited with Michael, she thinks, "if we had another baby, if it would look more like him than Michaela. If we had another baby, we could get it right" (150).

Although Leonie is attracted to whiteness, as a melancholic subject, she does not totally surrender to and identify with the racial ideal of whiteness. Cheng points out that the racial other's internalization of white rejection, "far from denoting a condition of surrender, embodies a web of negotiation that expresses agency as well as abjection" (17). Leonie's ambivalence about both whiteness and blackness is such a negotiation. When Michael brings Leonie and her children to visit Big Joseph, his racist attitude and aversion of their skin color and blood provokes abjection in Leonie:

I would throw up everything. All of it out: food and bile and stomach and intestines and esophagus, organs all, bones and muscle, until all that was left was skin. And then maybe that could turn inside out, and I wouldn't be nothing no more. Not this skin, not this body. (207)

While white rejection causes Leonie to abject her black being, following the sensation of abjection are anger and resentment. She recalls Given and is enraged at "how [Big Joseph] would ignore the perfection of him: the long bow-drawing arm, the high forehead over the dead eyes" (208). Leonie's ambivalence, anger, and resentment show that racial melancholia resulted from white rejection does not render the racial other an agency-less victim but functions as a complex negotiation of experiences and identifications.

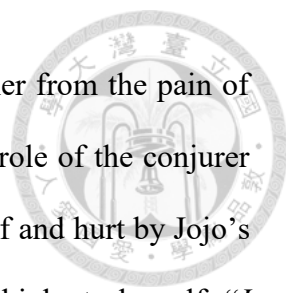
In *Sing*, the dead Given returns to haunt Leonie as her unresolved grief over the



imaginary loss of perfection resulting from white rejection and the real loss of her brother. While black heritage helps River and Phillipène cope with loss and grief, Leonie relies on drug to “burn up all the sorrow and despair” (51). The ghost Given-not-Given will appear when Leonie gets high. As the death of Given represents the antiblack rejection of black life, Leonie’s melancholic hold on to him can be read as an ethical and political gesture that affirms the value of black life. As David L. Eng and Shinhee Han suggest, “[i]f the loved object is not going to live out there, the melancholic emphatically avers, then it is going to live here inside of me” (365).

In addition to Leonie’s unresolved grief over loss, the haunting of Given reflects her guilt of and frustration over failing to be a mother. Like Morrison, Ward draws attention to the implications of melancholia in relation to the impacts of antiblack racism on black motherhood. While Morrison reframes melancholia as the slave mother’s resistance to dehumanization and reclamation of deprived motherhood, Ward shows that as antiblack practices and sentiment create barriers for black Americans to connect with their communal histories and the spirit of their ancestors, melancholia, as the black subject’s constant struggle against antiblackness, expresses the frustration of a black mother who desires to fulfill her maternal duties but fails to do so. In *Sing*, Leonie’s accumulated frustration with a world where growing up means losing more undermines her maternal instinct and detaches her from Phillipène’s teaching of conjure healing which represents the crafts of mothering. For Jojo, Leonie is a mother who kills things. Despite being a neglectful and abusive mother who ignores the hunger of her children and cares more about herself, Leonie does attempt to compensate for her faults, though her attempts do not pay off.

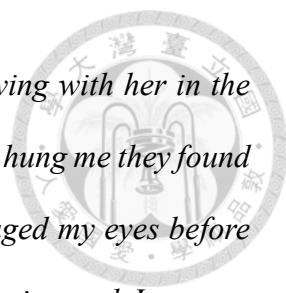
In the end of the novel, after the death of Phillipène, Leonie, overwhelmed by grief, is unable to fulfill her role as a mother. When Phillipène finds that it is time for her to



leave the world, she requests Leonie to perform a ritual to release her from the pain of cancer by sending her to the world of the dead. After taking on the role of the conjurer and granting her mother a healing death, Leonie, overcome with grief and hurt by Jojo's lack of understanding, resorts to drug again to escape reality. She thinks to herself, "*I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter. I can't remember. I can't see. I can't breathe*" (274). Leonie's final ending suggests that unresolved grief can be generative insofar as it allows the desire for remembering to persist; however, once the desire for oblivion outweighs that for remembering, it could become ominous.

After Phillipène's death, Jojo and River are engulfed in grief as well. Choi points out that with the subject of death, the narrative "brings us back to Jojo's initial desire of becoming a man" (446). To grow into maturity, Jojo has to learn about life and love through death and grief—a journey in which the ghosts of the past serve as guidance. As Jojo is left alone to struggle with painful loss and grief, Richie, still unable to find his way home after he learns about the details of his violent death, returns again. This time, Richie does not return alone, but with a bunch of homeless ghosts. Together, they gather and perch like birds on the tree outside Jojo's house. The grotesque vision of ghosts represents melancholic excess which directs attention to unacknowledged grief of anonymous black victims who died violent deaths:

And the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies. They crouch, looking at me. Black and brown and the closest near baby, smoke white. None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes, their great black eyes. They perch like birds, but look as people. They speak with their eyes: *He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed*

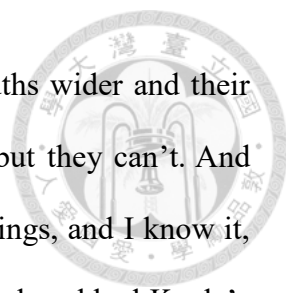


and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me still I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe. Eyes blink as the sun blazes and winks below the forest line so that the ghosts catch the color, reflect the red. The sun making scarlet plumage of the clothes they wear: rags and breeches, T-shirts and tignons, fedoras and hoodies. Their eyes close and then open as one, looking down on me, and then up at the sky, as the wind circles them and moans, their mouths gaping now, the airy rush their song, the rush: Yes. (282-83)

The bunch of ghosts, as Anna Hartnell points out, “collapse the distance between times and spaces and different phases in the history of black oppression on US soil” (307). Collectively, they represent the unspeakable histories of loss. Their appearance, fueled by a melancholy desire for home, for being remembered, shows unrecognized grief as a driving force behind their resistance to historical forgetfulness.

As Jojo stares straight at death in the form of the unburied, he is confronted with the unspeakable horror of antiblack brutality. Jojo’s quest for manhood, as Choi notes, is “now translated into the question of recovering long-lost humanity in (black) American history” (447). The Gothic haunting of the unburied, as historical loss, embodies unresolved grief still awaiting acknowledgement. Since Jojo, not yet recovering from Phillipène’s death, is unwilling and unable to respond to the ghosts’ request for acknowledgement, Kayla sings to comfort the multitude of ghosts which refuses to disappear:

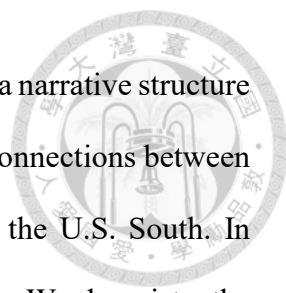
So Kayla begins to sing, a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing



that I can understand. . . . And the ghosts open their mouths wider and their faces fold at the edges so they look like they're crying, but they can't. And Kayla sings louder. She waves her hand in the air as she sings, and I know it, know the movement, know it's how Leonie rubbed my back, rubbed Kayla's back, when we were frightened of the world. Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease. . . . *Home*, they say. *Home*. (284-85)

By evoking singing to provide the ghosts with the feeling of home, Ward reasserts the significance of black cultural heritage as a supporting resource for black Americans to cope with traumatic histories. Singing has been an integral part of African American culture. Through singing, Kayla transforms the black holes of loss and grief embodied by the unburied into generative sites where a sense of belonging is able to take form. In "Afterword: After Loss, What Then?" Judith Butler notes that loss is generative when it "becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community" (468). In *Sing*, loss at once fractures and allows for a sense of belonging. The experiences of loss fractures Jojo's family and creates barriers for Jojo to respond to the dead's demand and bear witness to black communal histories of loss. However, through Kayla's singing, the living and the dead, as a contingent and temporary collection of fragments that lingers in grief, form a contingent whole experiencing a sense of home which emerges from and through a "common sense of loss (which does not mean that all these losses are the same)" (Butler 468). Although Ward does not end *Sing* with a full recovery of Jojo from painful loss, the sense of home provided by Kayla promises a hopeful future. In this respect, her singing is "transformative, ameliorative, and actualized in the future-tense" (Davis-McElligatt 121).


In *Sing*, Ward crafts a Gothic narrative of southern haunting that is both melancholy



and generative. Through invoking the Southern Gothic and deploying a narrative structure that disrupts the linear flow of time, Ward exposes the uncanny interconnections between the past and the present and the haunting of disarticulated grief in the U.S. South. In addition, through looking into the unspeakable things unspoken, Ward resists the silencing of historical injustices and injuries that continue to haunt black people, exposing that “post-racial society in America is still an illusion, and, to some people, even a delusion” (Choi 437). As the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow never cease to negate black humanness, loss and grief rule black existence. By delineating black experiences of loss and grief, Ward shows that melancholia, as a state where loss cannot be overcome, is “both a formal relation and a structure of feeling, a mechanism of disavowal and a constellation of affect” that entail “the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the psychic and the social, the aesthetic and the political” (Eng and Kazanjian 3).

While melancholia is commonly viewed as an individual pathology, Ward’s *Sing*, like Morrison’s *Beloved*, discloses that for racialized others, melancholia is a constant negotiation with antiblack racism. While Morrison depicts melancholia as the slave’s resistance to the dehumanizing violence of institutionalized slavery and an ethical response to the lost beloved, Ward complicates melancholia as a response to white rejection and racial injustice in the post-slavery and post-Jim Crow South. Mobilizing a reengagement of history through loss and grief, Ward also shows that the difficult challenge of survival requires an alignment with the unburied dead, for “the population of ghosts in Ward’s novel,” as Hartnell writes, “constitute the knowledge that Jojo needs in order to survive. Their song is his life” (309).

Last but not least, Ward reimagines black resilience through invoking black spiritualism. She infuses magical elements of black cultural heritage into the Gothic



narrative to explore potentials of agency, resistance, and resilience for marginalized black people. By showing the healing power of syncretic African spiritual traditions, Ward affirms the value of black cultural heritage for the survival of marginalized black Americans. In a nation structured by an ecology of whiteness, as the personal and cultural histories are rendered as “moth-eaten shirt [s]” and black being, fractured by loss, is condemned to the state of not whole (*Sing* 137), Ward discloses that black cultural heritage could give black people the strength to carry losses and move on, living with it as a part of personal life and collective history.

Coda



Morrison's *Beloved* and Ward's *Sing* engage with the Southern Gothic to represent historical legacies, traumatic loss, and its attendant grief that shape the realities of black American lives. In their novels, both Morrison and Ward narrativize black trauma with a focus on two kinds of irrecoverable losses—the loss and absence of black Americans and their stories in American historiography and the personal losses of beloved ones specific to the black characters in the stories. By appropriating the trope of haunting to register irrecoverable loss, both writers underscore the irrepressibility of the past and illuminate the social and cultural implications of racial grief and melancholy for black history, politics, and identity.

Written in the late twentieth century, Morrison's *Beloved* contributes specifically to the development of an American literary tradition that intersects African American literature with the Southern Gothic to expose the haunted condition of black life. In *Beloved*, Morrison raises the dead in both spectral and corporeal forms to depict the melancholic haunting of the anonymous enslaved Africans died during the transatlantic slave trade and under chattel slavery and the personal losses of the black characters, especially the losses that plague the former slave mother, Sethe. Through the haunting of its titular character, Morrison's *Beloved* reveals that for the black melancholic subject, melancholia not only expresses resistance to institutionalized slavery which deprives enslaved blacks of subjectivity and agency, but functions as a generative force shaping a reengagement with the traumatic past that is imperative for a more bearable future to come. Notably, Morrison's engagement with the unspeakable loss of black history does not provide a transcendence over historical loss. In the end of the novel, *Beloved*, the embodiment of an excess of loss, disappears, but future hauntings remain possible for

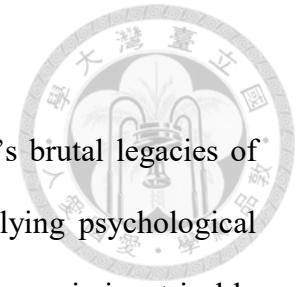
people of African descent in the U.S.

In *Sing*, Ward looks into the unspeakable history of the U.S. South and the haunting loss and grief in the post-slavery era. The aesthetic concerns and themes of *Sing* position Ward within the lineage of the black literary tradition established by Morrison. Representing the voice of a new generation of black politics and thought, Ward's *Sing* features a Gothic text that responds to the ongoing antiblack violence and the resulting movement, Black Lives Matter, one that "inherits the unresolved ghosts of the civil rights past" (Hartnell 300). In *Sing*, Ward invokes the ghosts of unburied victims of antiblack violence to lay bare the painful racial dynamics and the resulting grief in "post-racial" U.S. society. By drawing attention to the implications of unresolved grief for black history and racial identity formation, Ward discloses that as long as melancholia, as a negotiation with antiblackness, perpetuates the grieving subject's desire to remember loss, it allows for agency and resistance. However, when the desire for oblivion outweighs that for remembering, melancholia could become ominous.

Like her literary forebear, Morrison, Ward is concerned about confronting historical loss and unresolved black grief. While the ending of Morrison's *Beloved* emphasizes black history as an unclosed closure, Ward's *Sing*, as an attempt to recover the tormented black history and claim a black identity, illuminates that black cultural heritage enables black people to reconnect with the spirits of their ancestors and bear witness to the traumatic history of antiblack violence. As the history of troubled race relations and institutionalized violence has rendered the U.S. South a land where black lives are devalued as nothing, hauntings of loss and grief remain part of the reality of black life. However, by drawing attention not only to the haunting of past losses and new grief, but to the supporting role of black spiritual traditions in her depiction of black lives, Ward suggests that black cultural heritage could serve as a resource of strength and resilience

for black people to resist antiblackness and endure losses and grief.

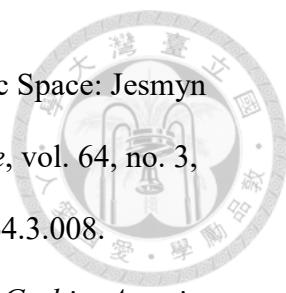
Morrison's and Ward's novels, with their grasp of the nation's brutal legacies of racial subjugation, the complexities of black lives, and the underlying psychological problems, reveal that aesthetic, political, and psychological concerns remain inextricably linked and mutually illuminating. In this thesis, reading Morrison's *Beloved* alongside Ward's *Sing* in light of Southern Gothic aesthetics, Derrida's concept of hauntology, and contemporary theories of racial melancholia, I manage to explicate the implications of haunting loss and grief in black American writers' critical engagement with the historical scars of slavery and the ongoing and shifting cultural wounds of racism. It is my hope that this thesis, with its insight into the two Gothic texts' engagement with black grief, loss, and haunting, will contribute to sparking new thoughts and lines of inquiry for further research on the intersection of the Southern Gothic, black loss and grief, and racial politics.



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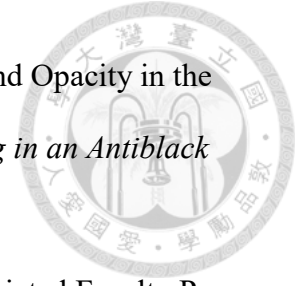


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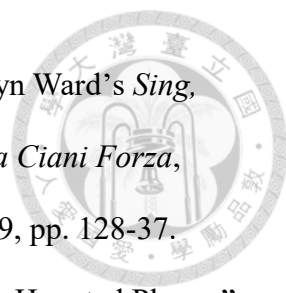
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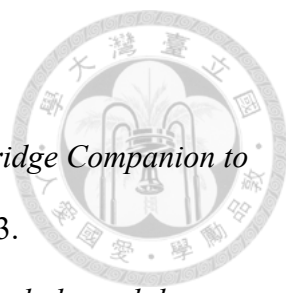
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