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Megan Swartzfager

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“We got more yesterday than anybody”: Child Ghosts and the National  
Trauma of Anti-Black Racism in American Literature

by  
Megan Swartzfager

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford  
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Approved by

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*For Jax*

*In a world that is terrible and beautiful, you are all the beautiful things.*

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To Mom and Dad, of course, who kept me housed and fed even when I was very annoying and beyond the age at which they were obligated to do so.

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## ABSTRACT

MEGAN SWARTZFAGER: “We got more yesterday than anybody”: Child Ghosts and the National Trauma of Anti-Black Racism

(Under the direction of Adam Gussow)

This thesis examines the roles of haunting in the context of racial violence in three texts: *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward, and *Wolf Whistle* by Lewis Nordan. In each of these texts, a parent is responsible for the death of a child. In the former two texts, both by Black authors, a Black parent kills a Black child in what they believe to be a protective act in the face of violence by white people. *Wolf Whistle*, however, written by a white author, is animated by the ghost of a character based on Emmett Till. In this case, a white parent kills a Black child in an act of disciplinary violence intended to reinforce the boundaries between whiteness and Blackness. The reasons that children die and return as ghosts in these three texts shape the way that haunting functions. In the first two novels, haunting forces a reckoning with cultural trauma in order to facilitate communal healing. In the final novel, haunting aids in the problematization of whiteness and in the amelioration of white guilt—guilt which results from feelings of complicity in anti-Black violence.

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## Introduction

*“Life has a way of talking to the future. It’s called memory.”*

*-Richard Powers, The Overstory*

Stories have always been the primary means through which one human or group of humans relates to another human or group of humans, and few genres are more ubiquitous than the ghost story. Even so, types of ghost stories do emerge, and they can tell us much about prevalent cultural anxieties. As cultural theorist Jeffrey Weinstock writes, “We value our ghosts, particularly during periods of cultural transition, because the alternative to their presence is even more frightening: If ghosts do not return to correct history, then privileged narratives of history are not open to contestation. If ghosts do not return to reveal crimes that have gone unpunished, then evil acts may in fact go unredressed” (Weinstock 6). Since the civil rights movement but especially during the Reagan-Bush era and the current Black Lives Matter era, the history that is being renegotiated with the help of fictional ghosts is that of slavery and emancipation. While the dominant, “privileged narratives of history” state that the Thirteenth Amendment, the Fifteenth Amendment, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 eliminated all institutional vestiges of anti-Black racism and ameliorated the legacies of slavery, a powerful counterculture movement has worked to elucidate the many ways that slavery’s legacies persist and impact Black people in America today. It is no coincidence



that writers like Toni Morrison and Lewis Nordan were writing about anti-Black violence in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, an era marked by the “white backlash” that allowed “the Reagan administration [to] destroy[...] or weaken[...] federal civil rights enforcement agencies” (Myers 40). Notably, the 1990s were also shaped by the beating of Black motorist Rodney King by police officers, the subsequent acquittal of those officers by an all-white jury, and the 1992 Los Angeles uprising that followed. Jesmyn Ward’s writing, too, responds to contemporary revelations of racial injustice, such as the killings of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and of Tamir Rice in 2014. Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved* and Jesmyn Ward’s 2017 *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, novels published thirty years apart by Black women in America, as well as Lewis Nordan’s 1993 *Wolf Whistle*, grapple with the various ways in which the white supremacist ideologies underlying slavery and segregation affect contemporary politics and society. Not by accident, all three of these novels use the ghost of at least one murdered Black child to force a communal reckoning with the longstanding trauma of anti-Black violence.

Psychological trauma can haunt people and communities like a ghost, as “knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness but is rarely retained for long” (Herman 2). This ethereal nature of trauma makes psychological and social wounds difficult to heal; eruptions of traumatic knowledge, paradoxically, are crucial for the recovery process. A ghost “interrupts the presentness of the present, and its haunting indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events” (Weinstock 6). Historical moments within the Reagan-Bush era and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement provide an anchor for activism by

forcing the legacies of slavery into full view in the present. Without such events as the death of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice at the hands of a police officer, novels like *Sing, Unburied, Sing* likely would not have taken a prominent place in the public discourse. In this way, contemporary events that evoke historical prejudices and institutionalized violence mirror the ghosts in the three novels I will discuss. Both these events and the ghosts at the hearts of these novels “call[...] into question the possibilities of a future based on avoidance of the past” by indicating that our country’s violent past is not truly past (Weinstock 6). Novels such as the three I will discuss aim largely to reconcile past and present into one cohesive narrative—a key step in the psychological process of trauma recovery. The ghosts in these novels serve to “mediat[e] personal and cultural history” in order to explain the persistence of racial violence and offer hope for cultural recovery (Anderson 1).

Because “denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level,” it can be difficult for Americans to see the connections between slavery and current issues such as income inequality, de facto segregation, and disparities in incarceration rates (Herman 2). Morrison’s *Beloved* and Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* do the work of revealing these ties. In *Beloved*, these ties are seen in Paul D’s experience on a chain gang after his escape from Sweet Home; in Sethe’s residual fear of white men and the threat of sexual, physical, mental, and social control they embody to her; and in the natal alienation experienced by the Suggs family. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, slavery’s persistence into the present is seen in Pop’s, Richie’s, and Jojo’s encounters with law enforcement; in Given’s murder and the lack of justice for his murderer; in Leonie’s feelings of inferiority relative to her white best friend; and in Big Joseph’s aggressively

racist disdain for Leonie and his biracial grandchildren. These ties, however, appear and operate much differently in *Wolf Whistle*, a “white trash version” of the Emmett Till story by a white author (Bjerre 375). Here, ties to the past take the form of ruminations on the use of anti-Black racism as a tool for wealthy whites to prevent the unification of the working class. Here, ties to the past are not traumatic so much as they are explanations and, occasionally, justifications for anti-Black racism. The past is used by *Wolf Whistle* to assuage white guilt resulting from feelings of complicity in anti-Black violence, whereas *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Beloved* explain that the past is not gone and is, in fact, the reason for contemporary racial disparities.

All three of these novels, however, work to humanize characters that tend to be heavily stereotyped. *Wolf Whistle* humanizes Solon Gregg, the white murderer of the novel’s Emmett Till figure, in order to evoke sympathy for what Nordan believes is a misunderstood and unfairly villainized population of working-class white people in the American South. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Beloved* humanize Black people in America by reimagining both historical events and highly publicized contemporary ones within the complex lives of their protagonists. As these two authors have often acknowledged, “the presumption of the inferiority of formerly enslaved people and their descendants, ‘historically engendered and culturally reinforced,’ can be seen in American debates about ‘welfare, crimes, schools, jobs, taxes, housing, test scores, diversity, urban policy, and much more’ (Loury 70). By asking readers to sympathize with Black characters who experience the direct and indirect harms of slavery, Ward and Morrison give a sense of urgency to the uprooting of slavery’s many legacies. Morrison has said that she writes “to persuade other people—you, the reader, who is probably not black—that we [Black

people] are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery” (Site 86). Similarly, Ward has written, “I believe there is power in words, power in asserting our existence, our experience, our lives, through words. That sharing our stories confirms our humanity. That it creates community, both within our own community and beyond it. Maybe someone who didn’t perceive us as human will think differently after reading” (Fire 14). Thus, Morrison and Ward assert the social utility of storytelling. Stories, they believe, can change people’s minds. In taking advantage of this fact, Ward and Morrison attempt to create a social context that allows historically disadvantaged communities—especially Black communities in America—“to hold traumatic reality in consciousness” by establishing a foundation for unity between the white witnesses and Black victims of institutionalized racism (Herman 9).

Though these three novels are vastly different from each other, and though they each deal with a variety of issues in a variety of contexts, they are all, at heart, ghost stories. Anti-Black racism is more than a memory in America. It is less phantom than it is poltergeist, reaching physically across the years to perpetuate the oppression of and violence against Black communities and other communities of color. As Avery Gordon writes:

Slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where people reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity, propelling, as it always has, a something to be done. Such endings that are not over is what haunting is about. (Gordon 139)

Interestingly, all three of the novels discussed here have “endings that are not over.” *Beloved* continues to wander the world of the living after she is banished from 124 Bluestone Road; it is uncertain what the future holds for Ward’s protagonist Jojo and his younger sister Kayla; and the disrupted white community of Arrow Catcher, Mississippi, in *Wolf Whistle* has not come to a consensus regarding definitions of whiteness in a world where it has been shown to be murderous. The uncertainty and pain resulting from generations of violence without justice manifests in these novels as ghosts: *Beloved* in the book that is named for her, Richie and Given in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, as well as Bobo, and arguably two other boys, in *Wolf Whistle*. Judith Herman, a psychologist specializing in trauma, writes, “The language of the supernatural, banished for three hundred years from scientific discourse, still intrudes into the most sober attempts to describe the psychological manifestations” of chronic trauma (Herman 96). This is true of scientific texts, but it is even more true of the magical realist texts that aim to tell cultural and social truths rather than physical ones. In the three novels discussed here, ghosts embody traumatic memory, forcing individuals, families, and communities to confront a painful past.

In the first chapter, “Trauma and Rememory: Shared Trauma and Communal Attempts at Healing in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” I will argue that the ghostly figure named *Beloved*, thanks in part to her elusive identity, facilitates mourning both within the novel at the individual level and outside the novel at the communal and national levels. While Morrison’s novel identifies a cultural need for a formalized mourning process to put to rest slavery’s many persistent legacies and works toward acting out this process,

the novel's ending stops short of offering healing and instead suggests the persistent nature of the cultural trauma of slavery.

In the second chapter, "'Ain't no more stories for you here': Vengeful Hauntings and Traumatized Community in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," I explore the way that the intergenerational transmission of cultural history builds family groups and the way that this transmission is facilitated by hauntings. Ghosts, here, serve as a link to the history of slavery and Jim Crow justice; the former is much more distant in this novel than it is in *Beloved*. These ghosts force living characters to acknowledge painful memories as well as the role of the past in shaping current institutions—such as the criminal justice system and other systems that “are reproducing racial terror in just the ways Jim Crow-era social practices did” for resource-deprived Black communities—but they also force the living to reconnect with the past in positive ways (Lebron 150). Traumatic pasts are acknowledged in order to be surmounted, and cultural and familial traditions are foregrounded to strengthen interpersonal bonds.

In the third chapter, “'Is he still on fire?': Murderous Whiteness and Its Alternatives in Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*,” I discuss the ways that victims of white violence identify flaws in the construction of white Southern identity. These characters, including the ghost of the novel's Emmett Till figure, Bobo, show the ways that civil rights-era violence has disrupted the identities of white communities by inspiring feelings of guilt and complicity. Ghosts in this novel, rather than forcing a reckoning with a historical trauma, work to assuage white guilt by offering revisions of history that reduce harm without shifting paradigms.

These novels serve to reveal a past that has traditionally been ignored in order to allow those suffering from trauma to integrate their wounds into a cohesive story of their own lives and the life of their country. As Morrison writes, formerly enslaved people often left out the worst of their experiences when writing narratives, and, “In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (Site 91). *Beloved* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* work to excavate this forgotten past so that its legacies can be identified and uprooted. Though Nordan’s ghosts are also the ghosts of white violence, they perform a much different cultural function, but one that can ultimately be integrated with the missions of authors like Ward and Morrison to redefine the American discourse about race in a productive and socially progressive way.

Trauma and Rememory: Shared Trauma and Communal Attempts at Healing  
in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Though the climax of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* consists of an exorcism of sorts, the novel ends with images of its eponymous ghost who, though elusive, has not truly left. She is "a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place" (*Beloved* 323). The ghost that all the novel's characters and especially its central family rid themselves of and finally forget still appears to these characters as "the rustle of a skirt [that] hushes when they wake, and [as] the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep [that] seem to belong to the sleeper," but the figure of the departed is ignored because those she haunts "know things will never be the same" if they acknowledge her (*Beloved* 324). Based in part on the story of Margaret Garner—a woman who, like the novel's Sethe, escaped to Ohio from slavery in Kentucky only to be recaptured—the novel is a eulogy for the "Sixty Million and more" to whom the novel is dedicated; the number is Morrison's estimate of the number of Black people who died during the transatlantic slave trade and two-hundred years of slavery in America (Mandel 583). As the product of these two factors, *Beloved* tells a story both of individual and familial suffering and of widespread and intergenerational horror, and it offers a means for processing lasting cultural traumas at both of these levels.



On the one hand, Sethe's individual suffering offers a revision of Garner's story—Sethe and Denver survive and are allowed to go on living in Ohio after the incursion of Sethe's former master and Sethe's murder of one of her children, whereas Garner was placed on a slave ship bound for New Orleans with her daughter Cilla, whom she attempted to kill but could not and who was killed when the slave ship carrying the Garners collided with another ship en route to Arkansas. Margaret Garner and her baby daughter jumped or were thrown overboard, and Cilla was among twenty-five people who died in the accident (Sharpe 104). This revision gives the Suggs family the opportunity to mourn the murdered daughter and the traumas of enslavement, an opportunity the Garners were denied. On the other hand, the ambiguity of the identity of the ghost figure in *Beloved* offers the community of readers the opportunity to give the "Sixty Million and more" victims of slavery in America a place in history and to mourn the collective traumas the Black American community experienced during two-hundred years of slavery and still experiences today as a result of slavery's many harmful legacies. As Kathleen Brogan writes in *Cultural Haunting*,

In Morrison's *Beloved* ... haunting signals the return of a past that can neither be properly remembered nor entirely forgotten. Morrison's novel explores the connection between historical consciousness and traumatic memory, the problem of how to represent what is experienced as 'unspeakable.' *Beloved* plots the movement from trauma to history as a story of possession and exorcism in which traumatic memory—or the eruption of a denied history—is figured as a dangerous form of haunting. (Brogan 27)

I will argue that the ghostly figure named Beloved, thanks in part to her elusive identity, facilitates mourning within the novel at the individual level and outside the novel at the communal and national levels. While Morrison's novel identifies a need for a formalized mourning process and works toward acting out this process, the novel's ending stops short of offering complete or thoroughgoing healing and instead suggests the persistent nature of the trauma of slavery.

*Beloved* tells the story of a family of Black women in Cincinnati in the late 1860s, shortly after the Civil War and emancipation. At the novel's beginning, the matriarch of this family, a formerly enslaved woman named Baby Suggs who was the mother of Sethe's estranged husband Halle, has just passed away, leaving Sethe—also a formerly enslaved woman—and her daughter Denver alone in a house at 124 Bluestone Road. Unfortunately for Sethe and Denver, however, the pair is not truly alone because the house is also inhabited by the spiteful ghost of the baby daughter whom Sethe herself murdered years before when the master of the plantation from which she escaped arrived on horseback with the local sheriff, threatening to re-enslave Sethe and her children under the Fugitive Slave Act. This ghost is both a disruption of and the reason for Sethe's and Denver's isolation in their home; it drove away Denver's two brothers, Howard and Bugler, with what each brother considered "the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time" (*Beloved* 3). Compounding this isolation is the fact that 124 Bluestone Road is in a "town full of disgust" for what is left of the Suggs family (*Beloved* 5). Near the novel's beginning, Paul D, a man who was enslaved on the plantation Sweet Home with Sethe, arrives at 124 and insinuates himself into Sethe and Denver's lives. One of his first acts in the home is chasing out the baby ghost, a ghost which makes clear that it does not

welcome him. Sethe and Paul D rekindle a relationship based on their shared memories of the period before emancipation and before Sethe's escape from Sweet Home with her children. It seems momentarily that the Suggs women will rejoin the community and find happiness with Paul D's help, but they are quickly intruded upon by a strange young woman who walks out of a stream, fully clothed and with "new skin, lineless and smooth," before making her way to 124 (*Beloved* 61). Believing that she is the returned murdered daughter and sister, Sethe and Denver welcome the woman, who says her name is Beloved, into their family.

Beloved is demanding. Her constant need for attention and affection wreaks havoc on the small family that Sethe, Paul D, and Denver were beginning to form. Sethe and Denver give the young woman everything they have, and Paul D's increasing discomfort with the situation—exacerbated by Beloved compelling him to have sex with her and by a local man named Stamp Paid telling him about Sethe's murdering of her daughter, which Paid believes is the reason that Sethe has become a pariah in the Black community of Cincinnati—leads him to abandon 124 and the women within, if only for a while. Ultimately, Sethe and Beloved's attachment to one another becomes so consuming that Sethe loses her job and the family begins to starve. While Sethe and Denver, but especially Sethe, wilt, Beloved grows "bigger, plumper by the day" (*Beloved* 281). Fearing for her mother's health and troubled by the parasitic nature of the lost sister she wanted so much to love, Denver "knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard"—a yard that fear of what Sethe might do if her captors ever returned and fear of scorn from the community had effectively imprisoned her for years (*Beloved* 286). By reaching out to the community for help, Denver heals a rift that one townswoman, Ella,

says formed because when Sethe “got out of jail and made no gesture toward anybody, and lived as though she were alone, Ella junked her and wouldn’t give her the time of day (*Beloved* 302). This reframing of the divide between the Suggs family and the community as one formed by Sethe’s neglect of the community rather than by Sethe’s killing of her daughter makes the gap a bridgeable one, and Denver’s reaching out to the community leads the community to reach out to Sethe. The novel’s climax comes near the end when a group of townswomen exorcise Beloved from 124 by calling out together wordlessly outside of Sethe’s home and welcome Sethe back into the fold. Despite Beloved’s banishment, the novel ends with haunting imagery that suggests that Beloved has not truly left.

The nature of psychological trauma is deeply intertwined with memory and interpersonal relationships, and this paper is certainly not the first to examine the roles played by this idea in Morrison’s *Beloved*. About people who live with the lasting psychological effects of trauma, psychologist Judith Herman writes:

People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom. (Herman 65)

This description of the experience of a person living with trauma closely resembles not only Sethe Suggs’s life but also the novel *Beloved* itself. The narrative is fragmented, unraveling in a nonlinear manner that reveals some information well before it can be

understood and withholding crucial details until well after the reader feels a need for them in order to fill in an established outline. This narrative style helps to establish the broad cultural significance of the trauma *Beloved* navigates. Morrison has written elsewhere about the feeling of loss and inability to mourn sparked partially by the inability of previously enslaved people to include the details of their greatest sufferings in their written narratives. She writes that “In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (Site 91). This silence and alleged forgetting—Morrison’s scare quotes indicate that what is labelled forgetfulness may actually be something closer to willful repression—is exactly what Herman is referring to when she speaks of a “secrecy” that causes “the story of the traumatic event [to surface] not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom” of psychological illnesses such as posttraumatic stress disorder. The implications of this idea for such a large group as the formerly enslaved people who kept silent about the worst of their experiences are immense. If a multitude of people experience related traumas but treat those traumas as secrets, the result is an entire community or culture that is posttraumatically stressed. This idea emerges clearly in *Beloved*, both in the unusual ways that a troubled family and community behave and in Baby Suggs’s statement that 124 is far from being alone in being plagued by the ghost of a Black person who suffered a grisly death; “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief,” she says (*Beloved* 6). The far-reaching nature of the trauma caused by systematic violence against people of African descent in America is as intimate and personal a pain as Sethe’s own trauma.

The above passage from Herman also describes Sethe's experience of persistent trauma and suggests why Sethe's struggles deeply affect her daughter Denver. Throughout the novel, it is painfully clear that Sethe is haunted in more than just the literal way. Because she has not recovered from trauma suffered at the hands of her former slave master—referred to only as “schoolteacher”—and his pupils, or from the guilt and pain resulting from her own killing of her young daughter, Sethe's “brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (*Beloved* 83). Sethe is entrenched in her painful and repressed past, and *Beloved*'s appearance both embodies and enables this. Like Sethe, *Beloved* is “hungry for more” of the past, asking constantly for stories about all the minutiae of her brief childhood. Once Sethe sees “the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under [Beloved's] chin,” identifies it as the scar of a slit throat, and makes her final determination that *Beloved* is, in fact, the daughter she killed, Sethe and *Beloved* “cut Denver out of the games” (*Beloved* 281-282). After this, Sethe becomes so engrossed in mothering *Beloved*—an attempt at ameliorating her own guilt and seeking *Beloved*'s forgiveness for the killing that Sethe never seems to fully believe is entirely justified by the attenuating circumstances—that she loses her job and begins to starve, all the while leaving Denver to fend for herself. Sethe's obsession with the past and simultaneous refusal to speak of the traumatic events leading to this obsession harm her psychologically and, eventually, physically, but they also harm Denver by preventing her from living a normal life and joining a community of her peers.

Because of her inability to grapple with the most painful events in her past and to share them with the daughter she should love and trust, Sethe mires herself in despair and

prevents Denver from imagining a future because, ensnared by an unknown history, she cannot even be part of the present. For Sethe and Denver both to recover from the related traumas of slavery and Beloved's horrific death—an event so terrible that Stamp Paid refers to it only as “the Misery” (*Beloved* 209)—“Sethe must find a conduit through which she can communicate all the horrors of her past to her daughter so that Denver can understand her mother and then begin to forge a place for herself in the world” (Anderson 65). This necessity is one described by psychologists as a key step in trauma recovery.

### *A Traumatized Community*

Sethe's trauma is rooted not only in the killing of her daughter but also, and perhaps mostly, in the dehumanization she experiences at the hands of the schoolteacher who takes over the Sweet Home plantation after its prior master's death. This trauma is far-reaching for two reasons: dehumanization and other abuses by white people against Black people are a widespread and common traumatic experience, and Sethe's inability to process her trauma causes her to behave in ways that negatively affect her family and the larger community.

As Herman writes, “Traumatic reactions occur when action is of no avail. When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized. Each component of the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over” (Herman 34). This sense of being “overwhelmed and disorganized” by the trauma of an unbeatable horror both causes and results from Sethe's killing the daughter that she believes returns as Beloved. Sethe's primary trauma is the

dehumanization that she experiences at the hands of schoolteacher and his pupils. When Paul D questions her about the so-called tree of scars on her back, Sethe tells the story of being whipped by schoolteacher's white pupils on schoolteacher's orders. This incident, however, was preceded by what is, to Sethe, significantly more traumatic than the whipping itself: "those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it" (*Beloved* 19). Sethe tells Mrs. Garner, the widow of her former master, what the pupils did to her. When schoolteacher and the pupils discover that Sethe told Mrs. Garner what the pupils had done, schoolteacher orders his pupils to whip Sethe. Despite the fact that the whipping left a tree of scars that "grows there still," Sethe emphasizes that the boys "took my milk" over the bloody injury, a fact that Paul D cannot understand (*Beloved* 20). This incident is traumatic to Sethe because it intends to strip her of her ability to care for her youngest child, Denver, and because it reflects the fact that the white pupils consider her more animal than human. Her ability to mother has been endangered. When Sethe sends her children ahead of her as part of her plan to escape the Sweet Home plantation, she insists that Denver be fed sugar water because "Nobody was going to nurse her like me. ... Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me" (*Beloved* 19). Sethe's desire to mother her child is a natural one, but it is intensified by the natal alienation ubiquitous during slavery that deprived her of her own mother. Sethe says that she "didn't see [her mother] but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo" (*Beloved* 72). Sethe's one true memory of her mother, though, is one that imprinted on her the importance of a connection between parents and children. When Sethe's mother shows Sethe the brand that she bears as an enslaved person so that Sethe will be able to identify her, Sethe responds "But how will



you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too... . Mark the mark on me too” (*Beloved* 73). Sethe’s mother slaps her then, pained by Sethe’s naïve ignorance of the mark’s meaning as well as by the idea that her daughter should suffer the same way she does as an enslaved person who is almost entirely deprived of her child. Sethe eventually receives her own brand, but she is, in a sense, marked by the mark her mother bore when she herself grows into an adult in slavery, and is deprived of her children when she sends them ahead of her to escape as well as when she kills one of her daughters in what she feels was a forced action. The commonality of the branding and natal alienation experienced by both Sethe and her mother shows that Sethe’s persistent pain, far from being unique to her, is something that was shared by all enslaved people.

The other reason that Sethe focuses repeatedly on the fact that the white pupils took her milk rather than that they whipped her is that it shows that these white pupils do not consider her fully human. An incident from her time at Sweet Home that troubled Sethe more than most others, and from which she wanted to protect her children, was one in which she witnessed schoolteacher instructing his pupils on what he called the animal nature of Black people.

When Sethe escaped Sweet Home after being attacked by the schoolteacher’s pupils, schoolteacher said that Sethe had “gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who’d overbeat her and made her cut and run,” and “Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the education” (*Beloved* 176). This racist ideology to which schoolteacher subscribes allows him to justify his treatment of enslaved people to himself and to the young people that he teaches. He often thinks of himself as a benevolent master, referring

to people of African descent as “creatures God had given you the responsibility of,” but he consistently exploits and abuses these people as the institution of slavery dictated (*Beloved* 176).

This ideology enables and perpetuates racist exploitation and cruelty by dehumanizing people of African descent to the point that they are treated as livestock that can be beaten for purposes of “education.” Sethe suffers the consequences of this ideology to the extreme when she is attacked by schoolteacher’s pupils, but the ideology’s dehumanizing nature troubles her long before the attack. When Sethe, still at Sweet Home, hears one of schoolteacher’s pupils say her name during a lesson, she stops to listen and hears schoolteacher say, “‘No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right.’ ... I commenced to walk backward, didn’t even look behind me to find out where I was headed. ... When I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly. One of the dogs was licking out a pan in the yard” (*Beloved* 228). This conversation between schoolteacher and one of his pupils troubles Sethe so deeply that she feels physical discomfort—her “scalp was prickly”—and she can do nothing but remove herself from the situation. She feels powerless to affirm her humanity to these white men who have power over her, and her fear at this fact is indicated by the fact that she cannot turn her back on the room where schoolteacher is conducting his course in racist ideology to “find out where I was headed.” It is not incidental that immediately after witnessing a deeply troubling conversation that calls her humanity into question, Sethe is confronted by the image of an animal—“one of the dogs was licking a pan out in the yard.” Unable to bear thinking of herself as a member of the same category as the dog in the yard and unable to bear thinking of what being perceived

in this way would mean for her own life and the lives of her children, Sethe knows she must leave Sweet Home with her family. “But I got you out, baby,” Sethe tells Beloved at the end of the story she tells about her traumatic experiences at Sweet Home (*Beloved* 233). When schoolteacher finds her in Cincinnati, Sethe feels that there is only one way for her and her children to retain their humanity; they must die before they can be returned to Sweet Home, to schoolteacher, and to slavery.

Although it is believed at this point in the novel that the baby ghost of 124 now walks the earth in the form of the young woman Beloved, Stamp Paid refers to a “roaring” within the house that he says is uttered by “the people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons. What a roaring” (*Beloved* 213). This characterization of the “roaring,” superadded to the destructive influence of traumatic memory embodied by Beloved, shows that the individual traumas suffered by Sethe and Denver are not the only stressors that influence the family within 124. Instead, they are also troubled by a largescale, communal trauma experienced by all descendants of enslaved people, one that involves bodily injury, incineration (including spectacle lynching), and sexual violence.

Troubled by these pervasive, communal wounds as well as her own horrific experiences at Sweet Home, Sethe tries to protect her children by trying to kill them when schoolteacher, who treated her like an animal, arrives at 124 to take her and her children back to the plantation. The crawling-already baby, whom Sethe believes returns at Beloved, does die; however, Howard, Buglar, and Denver survive and go on to try to live in 124 with their traumatized mother. Unable to stand the oppressive atmosphere created by an unprocessed trauma—symbolized by the havoc wreaked by the baby ghost

in 124—Howard and Buglar leave, but not before they instill in their young sister Denver the idea that there is something she should fear. In a stream-of-consciousness chapter from Denver’s point of view, Denver thinks:

I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it. She missed killing my brothers and they knew it. They told me die-witch! Stories to show me the way to do it, if ever I needed to. ... there sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own. All the time, I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don’t know what it is, I don’t know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again. I need to know what that thing might be, but I don’t want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can’t happen again and my mother won’t have to kill me too. (*Beloved* 242)

Denver is paralyzed by a fear that she cannot process because she does not understand it. Because Sethe was so unwilling to discuss the events leading up to her killing her daughter, her surviving children live in fear of the repetition of an event whose causes they do not know. This causes Howard and Buglar to leave 124. Denver stays, but she does not do this because she feels safe. Instead, she is so paralyzed by fear that she “watch[es] over the yard, so it can’t happen again.” Unable to predict the presence of danger because she does not know what shape it takes, she generalizes her fear. All of Sethe’s traumas are imposed on Denver, but Denver cannot process them because she has far fewer tools for this than Sethe does.

Sethe does not educate Denver about her traumatic past because she believes that knowledge of the past is what is traumatic. She thinks that the only way to defend Denver against the horrors of slavery and related racist ideologies is to prevent her from knowing and understanding them. All of Sethe's actions are driven by the belief that, "as for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered" (*Beloved* 51). When Denver expresses curiosity about Sweet Home, Sethe tells her that she can never go there because "if you go there and stand in the place here it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what" (*Beloved* 44). Significantly, Sethe distinguishes this perpetuity of the character of a place from what she calls her "rememory," persistent memories that, no matter how much time passes, never become less real to her (*Beloved* 43). The word "rememory," because of the way it characterizes memory as something that happens repeatedly, signals a sort of reification of painful memories at the same time that it indicates the fact that Sethe lives in her past. As Brogan writes, "The novel's emphasis on repetition directly relates to the central role past traumatic experience plays in organizing the characters' present lives."

Traumatic memory can be defined as the re-experiencing of an event too overwhelming to be integrated into understanding" (Brogan 73). It is true that the overwhelming nature of Sethe's memories makes them unbearable to her and, by extension, too painful to share. This simultaneous consumption by and avoidance of memory defines Sethe's day-to-day, and thus shapes Denver's young life. However, as

painful as her own memories are to her, Sethe thinks of places of danger as being perpetually dangerous; though she acknowledges that her memories are in the past, she cannot believe that the horrific nature of a place can ever be erased. For this reason, Sethe shelters Denver from dangerous places by shielding her from the knowledge of them. This creates a generational divide in which two generations are traumatically affected but only one, the older generation, has the resources to begin the recovery process. Because Denver cannot cope with her own traumas due to the fact that she does not have the requisite knowledge about their underlying causes, she represses what knowledge she does have. In order to live her life, one in which she ventures away from 124 to take classes with an African American townswoman named Lady Jones, she must repress this memory. However, this return to a community that has not repressed traumatic memory—though it is also one that has not processed this or other traumas—is hazardous in that it disrupts the narrative that Denver has built for herself when a classmate forces her to remember the event that made her and her siblings fear their mother. Denver does not remember her troubling past “for a long time until Nelson Lord made me. I asked [Sethe] if it was true but couldn’t hear what she said and there was no point in going back to Lady Jones if you couldn’t hear what anybody said” (*Beloved* 243). In this way, Denver’s traumatic memory is forced to the surface, and because Denver does not have the resources to process it, the memory overcomes her and forces her back to 124 to wait in fear for the unknown circumstances that she believes might lead Sethe to kill her. Sethe’s and Denver’s experience after trauma “shows that the work of mourning requires the integration of, rather than the banishing of, the dead” (Brogan 22). However, for most of the novel and the time preceding the novel, Sethe and Denver attempt to hide from

painful memories. To do this, the pair must withdraw from a community that has not forgotten the memories that plague them.

### *Social Ghosts*

In the way that they withdraw from the community without truly leaving, Sethe and Denver haunt the edges of the Black community in Cincinnati in a way that is very similar to the way that the ghost of the crawling-already baby haunted 124 Bluestone Road prior to its ostensible embodiment in *Beloved*. Scholar Melanie Anderson terms the types of characters who withdraw in such a way “social ghosts.” “They haunt the margins of their communities,” she writes,

even if they are the main characters in the novel. Although they seem powerless, once they have come into contact with the spectral guide(s), there is a renegotiation of position, and the spaces between cultures, classes, life and death, past and present, begin to become permeable and useful. Historical and cultural wounds are healed, and contact with the spectral guides reconnects these living apparitions to their communities, their families, and their personal, cultural, and national history. (Anderson 15)

However, for most of her life in Cincinnati, Sethe has not “come into contact with the spectral guide”—who, in this case, is the ghostly *Beloved* who forces Sethe to reckon with her past—and there is certainly no “renegotiation of position” until the novel’s conclusion. Instead, Sethe is consumed by her traumatic memories before and after she is confronted by them in the physical form of *Beloved*. This consumption prevents the

healing of Sethe and Denver's individual wounds as well as of the historical and cultural wounds of the community. Midway through the novel, Paul D wonders at how the most vivid traumatic image of the novel—Sethe's killing of her daughter—is so thoroughly suppressed. He ponders, "Paul D was the only one in town who didn't know. How did information that had been in the newspaper become a secret that needed to be whispered in a pig yard? A secret from whom? Sethe, that's who" (*Beloved* 199). Though Sethe feels she has been "junked" by the community, the community attempts to shield her by shrouding the story of the crawling-already baby's death in secrecy. This secrecy, however, serves to ensure that the trauma comes to pervade a community that cannot process it because it cannot integrate it into the overarching story of the community. This is the same process of "forgetting" that prevents the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next—from Sethe to Denver—that would allow families and communities to grow beyond traumas.

In this way, Sethe and Denver's isolation at 124 is both self-imposed and communally enforced. Sethe withdraws from the community because she thinks that hiding herself and Denver from the knowledge of a painful past will shield them from the consequences of that past. The community withdraws from Sethe and Denver largely because they feel that the information that they cannot forget is information that could destroy Sethe and her small family, as shown by the way that Stamp Paid calls Paul D away from 124 to tell him about Sethe's crisis in secret. Stamp Paid knows that Sethe and Denver are hiding from this information, and he enables this. These two forms of isolation lead Sethe and Denver to feel "rebuked. Lonely and rebuked" in the same way that the baby ghost does at the novel's beginning (*Beloved* 16). In this way, Sethe and



Denver—social ghosts—come to haunt the community, preventing its recovery process in the same way that the ghost’s—Beloved’s—dominance over their lives prevents their own recovery.

### *Three Beloveds*

As a character, Beloved can be described as both the embodiment of a multitude of traumas and the impetus for an attempt at healing from those traumas. As Gordon writes, “This ghost, Beloved, forces a reckoning: she makes those who have contact with her, who love and need her, confront an event in their past that loiters in the present” (Gordon 139). The ambiguity of Beloved’s identity—it is never confirmed that she is Sethe’s lost daughter—allows her to call attention to three different types of communal trauma that correspond to three potential identities.

First, and most recognizably, Beloved figures as the murdered crawling-already baby, forcing Sethe, Denver, and the Black community of Cincinnati to reckon with the multifaceted tragedy of her death. When Beloved appears, she has “new skin, lineless and smooth” like a baby, and as soon as Sethe sees Beloved’s face, Sethe’s “bladder filled to capacity” in a way that mirrored “flooding the boat when Denver was born,” signifying on Sethe’s water breaking in preparation for birth (*Beloved* 61). Though Beloved—whether or not she is actually Sethe’s daughter—bodies forth all the suffering and loss that Sethe feels in the many years after she kills her daughter, her presence itself does not help Sethe and Denver to recover. Instead, the women of 124 become obsessed with Beloved. Denver “looked at this sleepy beauty and wanted more,” growing possessive of

Beloved and experiencing extreme anxiety when she is parted from her even briefly (*Beloved* 63). Sethe is entranced by “the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. . . . But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure” (*Beloved* 69). In this way, Beloved’s presence indicates the oppressive and consuming nature of Sethe’s trauma, which is Denver’s birthright. Sethe and Denver become dependent on Beloved because they think, “I have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (*Beloved* 216). Rather than processing the painful events in their past, Sethe and Denver allow Beloved to draw them into an enchanted version of the past that overwrites their desire for present and future. By devoting themselves to Beloved and withdrawing from community, as well as every other aspect of life beyond the bounds of 124 Bluestone Road, the two can escape the painful task of arranging their traumatic past into a coherent narrative that fits into their life stories and can be read through the narrative framework of their worldviews. In devoting themselves to Beloved, they avoid a potentially threatening present and future by remaining in a known but unprocessed past.

Second, Beloved represents the “Sixty Million and more” to whom her eponymous novel is dedicated. The young woman appears in Cincinnati after she “walk[s] out of the water” (*Beloved* 60), and she has memories “crouching and watching others who are crouching too” and of “the men without skin bring[ing] us their morning water to drink” in a space where “I cannot fall because there is no room to,” all images that call to mind a slave ship—with “men without skin” referring to white people

(*Beloved* 248-249). Though *Beloved* takes place after the Civil War, the novel is saturated in slavery, and *Beloved* herself is one means by which the novel explains that the reason for this is that the legacy of slavery's many traumas is as persistent and ubiquitous as any large-scale trauma could be. The harmful weight of *Beloved*'s presence is not lessened depending on the way her identity is interpreted; all that changes are the implications of her continued presence. The institution of slavery and its innumerable cruelties have a lasting impact on Sethe because of their own horror but also because they are what drive Sethe to kill her own child.

Finally, *Beloved* stands in for the Black women who have been oppressed and abused since Emancipation. When Stamp Paid and Paul D discuss *Beloved*, Paid tells Paul D that there "was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that's her. Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup" (*Beloved* 277). In addition to the fact that a life such as that described by Paid would be defined by deprivation, there is the implication that this "girl" was sexually abused for most of her life leading up to her escape. Related traumas are seen throughout the novel, such as when Sethe is coerced into "rutting among the headstones with the engraver" in order to the single word "Beloved" engraved on her daughter's tombstone (*Beloved* 5). This particular set of traumas is the most difficult to assuage because the traumatic events are still commonplace, as well as because sexual violence is left out of slave narratives due largely to the taboo nature of sex and sexuality in American literature until the early 1960s. Evoking the sense of perpetuity of which *Beloved* speaks when she recounts memories seemingly about time on a slave ship, this interpretation shows that, when it comes to the legacies of slavery, "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” (*Beloved* 248). The traumas that this Beloved bodies forth cannot be narrated and healed because they have not ceased to be created anew.

### *Recovery*

Ghosts feature in a variety of novels about trauma, and the ghostly Beloved performs a similar function as many of her counterparts. As Anderson writes:

the work of the specter is cultural and generational, helping the second generation understand specific cultural moments of dispossession and slavery, important events that are often elided in the greater American historical purview. The specter provides connection and identity to confused and, subsequently, ‘ghosted’ characters. Ghosts create spaces that indicate issues of dispossession and trauma, and they can create places for memorializing and healing. (Anderson 2)

As previously noted, *Beloved* serves to identify three different regimes of trauma: the trauma suffered by Sethe, Denver, and the Black community of Cincinnati when Sethe kills the crawling-already baby; the many traumas that resulted directly from slavery; and the persistent traumas left behind by slavery, such as the sexual abuse of Black women. It is true that *Beloved* “create[s] places for ... healing,” but she does this only by bringing traumatized individuals to the point of crisis.

Sethe begins to think about the possibility of healing when Paul D, “the last of the Sweet Home men” appears on her doorstep (*Beloved* 21). Drowning in painful memories that she has never processed because she never felt safe enough to do so, Sethe

acknowledges that these memories start to become “bearable because [they were] his as well—to tell, to refine and tell again” (*Beloved* 99). This revision of traumatic memory is a crucial one in the recovery process because it allows traumatic memories to be integrated into a cohesive life story. Because community and a sense of safety are prerequisites for the revision process, Sethe never felt able to process her traumatic memories before she and Paul D reunited; she believed that Paul D “was there to catch her if she sank” (*Beloved* 21). Notably, Paul D banishes the baby ghost from 124 and begins to help Sethe and Denver reintegrate into the community when he takes them to a carnival; “In fact there was something about him—when the three of them stood together watching Midget dance—that made the stares of other Negroes kind, gentle, something Denver did not remember seeing in their faces” (*Beloved* 58). However, these steps toward recovery are more than negated when a woman who says her name is Beloved walks out of the water and into the yard of 124 Bluestone Road. Sethe becomes so immersed in her past that she says she has “to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (*Beloved* 216). Because Sethe is no longer attempting to narrate her trauma, she cannot recover from it. Plunged suddenly into a communion with a figure who embodies their traumatic past, Sethe and Denver are paralyzed, unable to participate in life outside their yard and unable to consider a future.

The only thing that breaks Sethe and Denver’s reverie is a crisis that threatens them physically. Because Sethe no longer wants to leave Beloved to work during the day, she loses her job and, therefore, her income. Eventually, the cupboards run bare, and Sethe and Denver begin to starve. Embodied trauma eats away at Sethe vampirically; “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the

more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness” (*Beloved* 294-295). Fear for her own health but especially for that of her mother finally inspires Denver to act. She makes the difficult decision to leave the yard because, “since neither Beloved nor Sethe seemed to care what the next day might bring (Sethe happy when Beloved was; Beloved lapping devotion like cream), Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (*Beloved* 286). While Beloved’s “lapping [Sethe’s] devotion like cream” is a radical revision of the horrifying scene in which Sethe’s milk is stolen by white boys, it is not clear that this revision is an altogether healing one as it consumes Sethe and keeps her partitioned from the community.

By bridging the gap between the residents of 124 and the rest of the community, Denver creates a safety net and support system that allows Sethe and Denver to recover by enlisting the community’s help in banishing Beloved. When Denver asks for help, it is granted because “everybody’s child was in [her] face” (*Beloved* 290). A twin sense of common identity and shared suffering provides the energy needed to galvanize the community in support of Denver and her mother. Horrified by the “idea of past errors taking possession of the present,” the Black women of Cincinnati collectively decide to bring Sethe back into their ranks and protect her from the dangerous obsession with the past that is consuming her. The intervention takes place as a wordless crying out by the townswomen, joining together in protest of the vampiric figure that has deepened the rupture in their community. The women perform a sort of exorcism, but it is clear at the end of this ceremony that Sethe’s trauma, though reduced because shared, has not been healed. Sethe withdraws her hand from Beloved’s, and “now she is running into the faces

of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind” (*Beloved* 309).

However, rather flee toward than to the assembly of women, Sethe runs toward the white man Mr. Bodwin, Denver’s new employer, whom she envisions as schoolteacher “coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing,” *Beloved* (*Beloved* 308).

Convinced that the scene before her is a repetition of schoolteacher’s predatory approach, Sethe takes an icepick and attempts to kill Mr. Bodwin. Sethe has been so immersed in her past, largely because of Beloved’s hunger for stories concerning even the smallest details in her memories, that she is incapable of seeing the present as it is. Her past has buried her present.

### *A Persistent Trauma*

Bodwin is protected from Sethe’s attack, and Sethe is allowed into a community that now includes Paul D; however, it is clear that Sethe’s trauma has not been healed. Van der Kolk writes, “In the case of complete recovery, the person does not suffer anymore from the reappearance of traumatic memories in the form of flashbacks, behavioral reenactments, and so on” (van der Kolk 176). Within this framework Sethe’s “behavioral reenactment[...]” upon Bodwin’s appearance is a clear indicator that Sethe still experiences the internal disorganization associated with trauma. But Sethe’s act of perceived self-defense is not the only way that the persistent nature of her trauma manifests, for:

the novel’s vampiric ghost, while in a sense defanged by exorcism and reburial, remains as a vaguely troubling potentially dangerous presence. ... The

community of the living reaffirms its solidarity against the ghost in the novel's powerful exorcism scene, yet the ghost's very exclusion gives it the power to reinsinuate itself, much like the inevitable return of the repressed. (Brogan 70)

*Beloved's* final chapter is constructed around a repeated phrase that has been interpreted in innumerable ways: "It was not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 323). Within this framework is a series of vague statements implying that Beloved herself is still present but haunting the edges of the community now, rather than wreaking havoc in a home. All those who witnessed Beloved's appearance and exorcism

forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do. (*Beloved* 324)

By acknowledging facts that would disrupt not just their local history as a "free" black community but the formal history of the United States, an entire community would be forced—ready or not, willing or unwilling—to grapple with a painful history. Because of this, the community chooses to forget those things they know that are too large in scale and too full of misery to be organized into a coherent narrative. However, the lives of 124's residents prove that suppression of memory does not constitute healing and can, in fact, lead to great and prolonged suffering. Beloved continues to haunt the novel's community—and readers—because "Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they



don't know her name?" (*Beloved* 323). *Beloved* never leaves, but she cannot be made useful in any sort of communal healing because her stories—the stories of all three versions of *Beloved*—have been suppressed rather than narrated. “It was not a story to pass on,” then, takes on the meaning of the phrase “pass on” associated with death. The story is not one to “pass on” because it cannot be put to rest until it is processed and integrated into formal history. Furthermore, the story cannot be passed on in the sense of storytelling because this would cause the aforementioned disruption of formal history that would force a reckoning with a past that the novel seems to believe cannot be completely narrated. *Beloved*'s persistence is symbolic of the persistence of racist violence that is cataloged by the chronological progression of her three identities. The oppressive and violent legacies of slavery persist in the novel just as *Beloved* says they do: “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” (*Beloved* 248).

### *Persistence Beyond Exorcism*

Morrison's *Beloved* is a powerful iteration of the traumatic story of Black parent figures killing their children in an urgent and protective act. Like Margaret Garner, Sethe kills one child and attempts to kill the others because she believes that death is a preferable alternative to the dehumanization that she and other enslaved people experienced at Sweet Home. This killing is traumatic not only because of the natal alienation perpetuated as an indirect result of slavery but also because it seems to Sethe that she has no other choice. In this way, *Beloved* describes the way that vulnerability and

lack of freedom of choice disrupted families and communities under the peculiar institution. However, the novel's ending takes this meaning far beyond the novel's temporal setting in the Reconstruction period. The persistence of the novel's eponymous ghost beyond her own exorcism is indicative of the way that such widespread and profound traumas resist integration into a cohesive public narrative that is necessary for recovery from trauma. The traumatic nature of the institution of slavery and the racist ideology underlying it is so pervasive and painful that the novel *Beloved* itself does not create a clean, linear narrative; the novel's nonlinear and disjointed narrative echoes the disorganized memories and emotions that Sethe feels, thus projecting Sethe's trauma onto a larger community. Beloved is not truly exorcized because the only version of the ghost that has been expelled from the community is the ghost of Sethe's own deceased child. The other Beloveds—the abused Black women who continue to haunt the edges of communities and public history as well as the ghosts of the “Sixty Million and more” enslaved people whose stories will never be told—cannot be exorcized because the untold stories of so many enslaved people and the continuance of racial violence against Black people, including sexual violence against Black women, prevent the creation of a cohesive and complete narrative of communal trauma. Because, as Baby Suggs says at the novel's beginning, there is “Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief,” an all-encompassing history of racism in America is impossible. This problem is made all the more difficult to solve by the fact that, as Stamp Paid says:

Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four

colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. [Stamp Paid] smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank. (*Beloved* 212)

This passage narrates Reconstruction-era racist violence to show that the abolition of slavery was only one step in the eradication of racist violence and prejudice in America. This statement, however, is not a purely historical one. Because we still live in an America fraught with racist violence, the story that must be told in order for healing to occur is ever-expanding. Morrison's novel believes that, for America to aid in Black communities' recovery from historical and contemporary traumas, present traumas must cease and past traumas must come to light.

“Ain’t no more stories for you here”: Vengeful Hauntings and Traumatized  
Community in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Jesmyn Ward’s 2017 novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* begins, in a sense, where Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* ends. The novel, which earned Ward her second National Book Award for fiction, grapples with the Beloveds of an America that has attempted to bury slavery and its plurality of legacies beneath a formal history that proclaims the total and unmitigated success of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. The novel takes place in the rural Gulf town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, where all of Ward’s novels are set. This town is Faulknerian in the sense that it grew from the seeds of racism planted during slavery, making it a microcosm of post-slavery America. It is:

the kind of place where a black man might be shot dead because of a bet gone awry, and where the authorities might agree to deem the incident a ‘hunting accident.’ A place where ignoring a No Trespassing sign can get you chased off a white man’s property at the barrel of a gun. And where being black and poor or white and unlucky might get you sent upstate to Parchman Farm, the Mississippi State Penitentiary, which has evolved only superficially from the long-ago days when it operated like a plantation.<sup>1</sup> (Smith 2017)

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1. Three years after Smith’s publication, in December 2019 and January 2020, violence still reigns at Parchman and in other Mississippi prisons. A January 13, 2020 article in *The Guardian* called “Inside the US prison where inmates ‘begged for their lives’ amid days of violence” explores the reasons behind the many violent deaths in Parchman and other Mississippi prisons in this time period. *The New York Times* published an article on February 5, 2020 titled “After a Dozen Deaths, Justice Dept. Investigates

The novel, which is told in turns by the thirteen-year-old Jojo, Jojo's emotionally distant mother Leonie, and the ghost of Richie, a twelve-year-old boy who was incarcerated at Parchman Farm at the same time as Jojo's grandfather, Pops. Though Richie is the only ghost in the novel who speaks for himself, he is far from the only ghost. Leonie is haunted by the ghost of her murdered brother, Given, whose death at the hands of a white schoolmate was covered up as a "hunting accident" and who appears to Leonie when Leonie gets high—an experience she seeks daily. These two "unburied" young men—Richie and Given—are unburied in two senses of the word. First, the fact that they never achieved manhood or the sense of community and love that Ward believes is essential to it makes their deaths almost impossible to grieve, and this feeling is compounded by the fact that neither man's untimely death receives adequate recognition. The justice system fails Given and his family, and Richie—who is killed by Pops in a protective act against the retributive violence of white guards and their dogs when Richie tries to run from Parchman—feels betrayed by the only father figure he has ever known and falls into the ranks of Parchman's innumerable Black victims. A lack of closure, of burial, allows these young men to haunt the living. Additionally, these men and their stories are exhumed—unburied—and brought to the foreground in a novel that begins with Jojo's quest for the same manhood that was denied Richie and Given.

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Mississippi Prisons," which is about the Department of Justice's decision to investigate Mississippi prisons in the wake of these violent, allegedly gang-related deaths.

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* evokes a complex web of social problems and familial struggle in a way that makes an ordered analysis difficult but also in a way that makes a human and emotional appeal. It strives to “sing” the intricate web of structural injustices against which Americans of color must fight in an age that is so largely shaped and informed by mass incarceration and a racist criminal justice system, one of many legacies of slavery that are brought to light in Ward’s novel. The ubiquity of the criminal justice system in the lives of the novel’s characters is perhaps the most explicit way that these legacies appear, but racism makes itself known in Leonie’s “mixed, almost tortured, feelings about whiteness” (Cunningham 2015). Leonie comes from a Black family—and a mother who relies emotionally and practically on what James Mellis refers to as “African-based spiritual practices” such as Voodoo, hoodoo, and rootwork in his article “Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*” (Mellis 3). However, she turns her back on these traditions and her biracial children—JoJo and the toddler Kayla—in order to devote her attention to her white boyfriend Michael and her white best friend Misty, over whose hair and socially affirmed beauty Leonie agonizes at length.

Although the power of whiteness likely permeated Leonie’s young life, the moment that sparked her obsession with it was the murder of her teenaged brother, Given. In high school, Given went hunting with a group of white schoolmates early one morning, and he beat one of them in a bet by shooting a deer with a bow and arrow. Infuriated by his loss to Given, about whom he and other characters use racial slurs in the section of the novel in which the story of the murder and its aftermath are told, this

schoolmate shoots and kills Leonie's brother, leaving him in the woods. He tells his family, and with the help of the local police, the murder is disguised as a hunting accident, and Leonie and her parents, Mam and Pop, receive no justice or closure. "This ain't the old days," the murderer's father says, scolding his son for his hotheaded, racist brutality (*Sing* 51). However, the ease with which this murder is handled with the sole purpose of minimizing the repercussions felt by the white offender shows that little has changed between the early days of Jim Crow and the post-Hurricane Katrina murder of Given.

The small amount of substantive social change in terms of racial equality since the time of convict leasing and the Black Codes, designed to perpetuate a system in which Black Americans could be forced to labor under harsh conditions and in which Black lives were considered disposable in the extreme, is at the heart of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (Davis 28). Jojo's quest for maturity is largely informed by the prematurely terminated quests of Given and Richie. Given, though he only appears as a ghost to Jojo at the end of the novel, plays a significant role in Jojo's maturation because of the way that his premature death looms over Leonie, Jojo's mother, as well as Pop and Mam, Jojo's grandparents and primary caregivers. Richie's experience at Parchman, especially his ghostly afterlife on the plantation prison, helps to clarify the risks and stakes of being targeted as a young Black boy in the American South. His presence in the novel serves to connect the story of Pop's and his brother Stag's imprisonment—a story that Pop hesitates to share in full with Jojo—with Jojo's present struggles, including his own encounter with a prejudiced policing system.

Pop serves as Jojo's father figure—both because Jojo's white biological father Michael is in prison and because Michael does not attempt to foster an intimate relationship with his son—and this relationship between Pop and Jojo is largely founded on storytelling and other forms of intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. In the same way that Mam tried to give Leonie “a map to the world as she knew it” by teaching her “as much herbal healing as she could,” Pop helps Jojo grow with stories and his own forms of spiritualism and conjure, such as his use of mojos like a gris-gris bag (*Sing* 105). In fact, Jojo likens the childlike pleasure he gets from this relationship to the parental relationship he has with his younger sister, Kayla, when he says, “Like I love to hear Pop tell stories, she loves to hear me sing” (*Sing* 19-20). Like the songs, often lullabies, that Jojo sings to Kayla, the stories that Pop tells Jojo offer comfort and intimacy in ways that are traditionally associated with parenting. Unlike the songs, however, the stories and conjure that Pop shares with Jojo are instructive and protective, and Pop must perform the parental duty of imparting them to Jojo because Leonie did not learn them from him or from Mam. The intergenerational transmission of stories and of conjure serve the purpose of connecting Jojo with Mam and Pop as well as with more distant ancestors, such as a relative of Pop who was brought to America on a slave ship.

### *Conjuring Cultural Connections*

When Leonie declares that she will be taking Jojo and Kayla with her on a road trip to bring Michael home from Parchman, Pop gives Jojo a gris-gris bag. Although it is



meant for good luck and protection from evil, it also serves to connect Jojo with Pop and the many generations of hoodoo practitioners who lie behind him, linking past and present. There are many dangers from which this mojo could be intended to protect Jojo, including his parents' volatility to drug-smuggling hosts and the hazards of the road, but the thing that most imperils Jojo is the American criminal justice system. The ways that the American criminal justice system unfairly targets Black men and youth, as well as related social problems, has been at the core of many of Ward's recent writings, including the memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013) and an edited collection of essays, *The Fire This Time* (2014), for which she wrote in an introduction responding to the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Explaining the importance of historical understanding for contemporary social progress, she writes, "How inextricably interwoven the past is in the present, how heavily that past bears on the future; we cannot talk about black lives mattering or police brutality without reckoning with the very foundation of this country. We must acknowledge the plantation, must unfold white sheets, must recall the black diaspora to understand what is happening now" (*Fire* 11). *Sing, Unburied, Sing* performs exactly these tasks by showing the way that intergenerational transmission of knowledge is used to cope with and solve problems experienced by early generations that persist and impact younger generations. The gris-gris bag demonstrates this use of storytelling and cultural transmission in order to deal with social problems with historical roots, as the use of "spiritual traditions as a means and model for resisting physical and psychological violence, cultural annihilation and institutional racism in the Americas" is common in history and in literature (Mellis 3).

However, it is the context in which the gris-gris bag and its carrier are placed that most clearly elucidates the historical continuity of problems experienced by Pop and Jojo alike. On the way home from picking up Michael from Parchman, the group is pulled over by a police officer, ostensibly because Kayla is not in her car seat—Jojo had taken her out to hold her when she began feeling sick. As soon as Leonie, who is behind the wheel, tells the officer that they are returning home from Parchman, he handcuffs Leonie and treats her and Jojo with hostility. Jojo, aware of the danger of the situation on account of Pop’s stories about how Black Americans are treated by law enforcement, fiddles with the gris-gris bag in his pocket for protection. At this moment, the officer “draws his gun on him, points it at his [Jojo’s] face, [and] Jojo [becomes] nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler” (*Sing* 163). All the while, the ghost of Richie, who entered the car as it left Parchman, is telling Jojo, “They going to chain you,” and Jojo is thinking of Kayla and himself: “*What if he shoot her? I think. What if he shoot both of us?*” (*Sing* 169-170).

This incident is shadowed palpably by the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012—and the acquittal of his killer the following year—and other killings of Black youth by police officers—such as the twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, who was killed by a police officer while playing with a toy gun in 2014. However, Jojo’s experience in the novel and the real-life experiences of other Black youth and adults are rooted in the post-Emancipation use of the criminal justice system to control the newly free Black population. In this period, “Law enforcement now meant keeping the ex-slaves in line. ‘Whenever larceny, burglary, arson, and similar crimes are committed in the South,’ said

a Charleston attorney shortly after emancipation, ‘no one is suspected [anymore] save negroes.’ And almost no one save Negroes went to trial” (Oshinsky 34). Parchman Farm was one of many and perhaps the most brutal of Southern plantation-style prisons that evolved out of the Black Codes and a briefly successful convict-leasing system that allowed wealthy white Southerners to lease convicted laborers, almost all of them Black, from the state (Oshinsky 40). It continued slavery by forcing imprisoned Black people to labor for free under harsh conditions, and many of these people were killed or experienced other forms of racialized violence. Scholar Christina Sharpe identifies the legacy of slavery’s *partus sequitur ventrem* in the way that Black communities are systematically criminalized, a trend Ward presents in the historical continuity between Pop’s undeserved and unduly harsh incarceration at Parchman and Jojo’s encounter with the police officer:

Living in/the wake of slavery is living ‘the afterlife of property’ and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother. That inheritance of a non/status is everywhere apparent now in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children. (Sharpe 15)

In light of this discussion of Jojo’s place in a long line of unfairly criminalized Black youth, it is important to note that even his relatively apathetic white father, Michael, who has done time at Parchman himself, is aware and fearful of the suffering that he believes awaits his biracial but Black-identifying son at the hands of the criminal justice system and other social and governmental institutions. Jojo recalls a conversation he had with

Michael in the wake of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which took place after the explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig, where Michael worked. Michael tells Jojo that BP scientists said that large groups of animals can die unexpectedly and without identifiable cause. In hindsight, Jojo thinks, "And then Michael said something I'll never forget: *And when that scientist said that, I thought about humans. Because humans is animals.* And the way he looked at me that night told me he wasn't just thinking about humans; he was thinking about me. I wonder if Michael thought ... when he saw ... that cop push me down..." (*Sing* 226). Though Michael is the party in this conversation that has spent time at Parchman, he does not feel that he is a victim of the institutional machinations that target people like Pop and Jojo, men of color who do not have the social or economic resources to protect themselves. By internally making this distinction, Michael recognizes a truth at the heart of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*. Though Michael knows as well as anyone that white people are incarcerated, he acknowledges, like Alexander, that:

Of course, the fact that white people are harmed by the drug war does not mean they are the real targets, the designated enemy. ... white people are collateral damage. Saying that white people are collateral damage may sound callous, but it reflects a particular reality. Mass incarceration as we know it would not exist but for the racialization of crime in the media political discourse. (Alexander 205)

These are the problems against which Pop aims to protect Jojo by giving him the gris-gris bag, and they are what Jojo fears when he grasps the mojo in his pocket. However,

hundreds of years of institutionalized racism cannot be completely conquered by the gris-gris bag—although it could be argued, and Jojo believes, that the fact he (Jojo) was not killed is evidence that the magic works. The gris-gris bag’s roots in African spiritualism, in fact, place Jojo firmly within a group that has been targeted by the criminal justice system since Emancipation.

*“Past, present, and future all at once”*

Though Jojo knows Richie from Pop’s stories, he does not know what happened to him or why he wants so badly to travel with Jojo’s family from Parchman to the coast to see Pop, and it is significant that the one story that Pop cannot initially pass on fully to Jojo is one that takes place at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm. Pop and his brother Stag are taken to the prison when Pop was just fifteen, though he says he “wasn’t the youngest noway,” after Stag wounds a white man in a fight (*Sing* 19). Much of the penal system at large but especially plantation-style prisons like Parchman are grim reminders of slavery in America because people of color and especially Black men are incarcerated at disproportionately high rates that do not correspond to the amount of crime committed by these groups (Alexander 98) and because the Thirteenth Amendment allows forced, unpaid labor—slavery—as punishment for a crime (Adams 19). In fact, when Stag and Pop are arrested, the white men who “took us up the road” tell them, “You boys is going to learn what it means to work . . . . To do right by the law of God and man . . . . You boys is going to Parchman,”

indicating that these white men believe that the way that Black men fulfill the social contract is by performing hard labor for white profit (*Sing 19*). The Mississippi Delta's Parchman Farm has allowed this belief to be realized since the prison's inception, and the historian David Oshinsky writes of its broad cultural resonance in a way that bears quoting at length:

Parchman is the quintessential penal farm, the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War. Its story covers the bleak panorama of race and punishment in the darkest corner of the South. It begins in antebellum times, on the Mississippi frontier, though Parchman itself would not be constructed until 1904. And it continues to this day, a story filled with warnings and consequences, and perhaps lessons, for a nation deeply divided, black and white. ... Throughout the American South, Parchman Farm is synonymous with punishment and brutality, as well it should be. (Oshinsky 7)



“Large Prisoner Work Crew Ready to Go to Work.” Martha Alice Stewart: Time on Parchman Farm Collection (MUM01772), Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Library, The University of Mississippi. This photo, taken in the 1930s, of a work crew in the fields, when compared with the image of the kitchen staff below,

Pop's experience at Parchman, as he relates it to Jojo, corroborates this characterization of Parchman as the pinnacle of brutality and as a place that, "For Southerners of both races, [...] represented something familiar as well. Parchman was a powerful link to the past—a place of racial discipline where blacks in striped clothing worked cotton fields for the enrichment of others" (Oshinsky 137). The way that Parchman connects past and present in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* can be seen most clearly in the way the place entraps both Richie's and Pop's traumatic experiences there, the lasting effects of which can be seen in Pop's reticence when telling Jojo stories of his time at Parchman.



"Kitchen Staff and Trustees." Martha Alice Stewart: Time on Parchman Farm Collection (MUM01772), Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Library, The University of Mississippi.

The horrors that twelve-year-old Richie experienced at Parchman are defined only partially by their brutality, as Richie himself seems to be comparably disturbed by the systematic nature of racist violence inside and outside of the prison farm. Richie came from a poor family and stole to feed his siblings, and the one comfort in his life was the idea that he had found a protector when he met a young Pop—then known as Riv—at Parchman. This sense of comfort lasted only briefly, however, because he eventually ran from the brutality—of deprivation from family and the threat of sexual exploitation as well as the near-deadly whippings and hard labor. Telling Jojo why he ran, Richie says he “kept thinking about my brothers and sisters, wondering if they was eating. Wanted to know what it would feel like to wake up and not feel like a thicket of thorns was up inside of me” (*Sing* 181). At this point in the novel, Richie knows that he died running from Parchman, but he does not know how and hopes that Pop can tell him. He believes that full knowledge of this story is the only way that he can truly escape Parchman, which Richie says “imprisoned me again” when he awakened on the grounds after his death (*Sing* 186). This is profoundly reminiscent of the traumatic experiences depicted in *Beloved*, wherein Sethe is emotionally confined and Denver is physically confined until Sethe reckons with her past. His need for a resolution to his own story of Parchman lies in his inability to escape prior to his death or after it; he feels powerless and vulnerable in the face of a brutality that—he learns after death—has its roots in the distant past. Changed by this discovery, Richie tries to explain to Jojo that linear time is not the most effective way for understanding social institutions and paradigms like the white-supremacist ideologies that led to slavery, then to convict leasing, then to Parchman:



How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once? (*Sing* 186)

This sense of “the history and sentiment” of anti-Black racism persisting throughout all of American history permeates *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*—as it does Morrison’s *Beloved*—in that the “worse than slavery” experience Pop has at early-twentieth-century Parchman derives from antebellum slavery and is brought to bear on his millennial grandson Jojo through the voice of a boy who died when he was one year younger than Jojo is at the time the two meet.

Despite all of Richie’s caring instruction and vulnerability in his conversations with Jojo, he is undeniably the Beloved figure—the hungry ghost—that brings the past into the present in order to demand a future for himself. While Jojo thinks of the pain in his wrists, sore from being handcuffed by the police officer, Richie says, “Sometimes I think it done changed. And then I sleep and wake up and it ain’t changed none” (*Sing* 171). The identity of the “it” to which Richie refers is unclear; it may be Parchman, or it may be America. Regardless, this lack of change pains Richie, spurring him to ride home with Jojo to seek the answers that he thinks will heal him. Explaining to Jojo why he wants to see Pop, Richie says, “I got to see him again. . . . I got to know. . . . It’s how I get home” (*Sing* 181). While at first this desire for closure seems to be a desire for healing from trauma in the ways described in the previous chapter, especially through the desire

to connect with others in order to build a cohesive narrative of one's life, Richie's pursuit of knowledge about his death and his profound emotional need for parental figures are ultimately destructive impulses that attempt to destroy the present by allowing it to be dragged into the past. Richie believes that he was trapped at Parchman after his death partly because the "terrible and formative" experiences he had there made it "a sort of home" to him (*Sing* 191).

In order to remedy this, he travels to the source of his understanding of home, a concept he bases on the times "when Riv and I slept next to each other and Riv told me stories in the dark" (*Sing* 190). These stories and the parent-child relationship established through the storytelling act both fit well into aforementioned models of healing from psychological trauma—integration into a community (however small) and narrating traumatic experiences are both integral to the healing process. However, when Richie learns that Pop killed him in order to save him from the brutality of the white trustees, who told Pop, about another escapee, that "they was cutting pieces of him off. Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose. And then they started skinning him," Richie experiences anguish at what he feels is a hostile act performed by the one person he believed he could trust for protection and care (*Sing* 254).

Though Pop intended his killing of Richie as a merciful act—in the same way that Sethe killed one of her children to spare her from enslavement—this knowledge inspires in Richie a sense of betrayal rather than one of closure, causing him to turn "darker and darker, until he's a black hole in the middle of the yard, like he done sucked all the light and darkness over them miles, over them years, into him" (*Sing* 257). Because he

represents the persistence of the past into the present, and because his psychological wounds resist healing, Richie's presence in the novel, and especially the fact that he appears to Jojo, exemplifies the idea that "stories of cultural haunting record the struggle to establish some form of historical continuity that allows for a necessary distance from the past" (Brogan 9). The lack of stable distance from the past that governs Pop's internal life and Leonie's life at-large that comes to a head with Richie's intrusion into the family's life runs parallel to the lack of political and social difference between Richie's experiences and Jojo's. To achieve Brogan's ideal relationship with the past, the family must struggle with their ghosts—like Richie—in order to establish distance. The relationship between Jojo and Richie emphasizes what is shown by the parallels between Jojo's and Richie's experiences with the criminal justice system: a long history of a criminal justice system with roots deep in slavery persists into the present by continuing to brutalize Black youth. This obliterates any distance that Pop may have tried to maintain by not telling Jojo the end of Richie's story, and, in fact, emphasizes the need for the story's end. As Avery Gordon writes in *Ghostly Matter: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, "Slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where people reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity, propelling, as it always has, a something to be done. Such endings that are not over is what haunting is about" (Gordon 139). It follows from this statement that, for a haunting to come to a close, an ending must truly be an ending. However, the social and governmental environments that shape Jojo's life are the same ones that disallow Richie's

leaving Parchman after his death, and Richie's haunting only becomes more pernicious when he learns of the circumstances surrounding his death, circumstances with heavy implications about the damage that American institutions have wreaked upon Black families and communities—damage that can be seen in Leonie's present-day desire for children that look progressively less like her and more like her white boyfriend as well as in the way that it precludes honest storytelling from Pop, the most active parental figure in the novel. The persistence of this trauma causes Richie to lose sight of the home he sought when he first met Jojo, a place he told Jojo is “a song.” The place is the song and I'm going to be part of the song” (*Sing* 183). Instead of finding closure in the completion of his story, he finds only a need for vengeance, hoping to take part of Pop's family and make it his own in order to find the love and sense of home that he no longer feels he had with Pop. For this reason, Richie—whom Jojo believed was gone when the black hole disappeared—returns when Leonie is performing the ceremony that would allow a cancer-consumed Mam to pass on. Though Mam has begged Leonie to perform the ceremony, she becomes distressed when she senses a presence that is “young. Full of piss and vinegar,” “vengeful as a beat dog,” “pulling all the weight of history behind him,” and “hungry for love” (*Sing* 264-265). Mam is surprised that the spirit that appears to her at the time of her death is not that of her murdered son, Given, but an unknown boy whose theft of her motherhood would disrupt the ancestral community that she holds dear. Because Mam's cancer and Richie's anger have drained Mam of her strength, it is Jojo and Given who must protect her from a violent death that would trap her spirit with Richie's. Given shouts that Mam is not Richie's mother, and Jojo tells Richie, “Go ...

Ain't no more stories for you here. Nobody owe you nothing here" (*Sing* 268). Their combined power allows Given to help Mam pass on instead of her being taken by Richie, preserving family ties.



"Juvenile Prisoners." Martha Alice Stewart: Time on Parchman Farm Collection (MUM01772), Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Library, The University of Mississippi. This photo was taken in the 1930s, likely not long before Pop would have been at Parchman.

### *Natal Alienation and Cultural Resistance*

While the sinister, institutionalized machinations that target Black Americans—especially those of a criminal justice system that tears Black men away from their communities—are seen in Pop's and Richie's stories about Parchman as well as Jojo's near-fatal experience with a police officer, the white-supremacist sentiment that begot these systems is also seen within Jojo's biological family. Michael's father, Big Joseph, hates Leonie and his own grandchildren. When Leonie drives to his house to leave a note

saying that she and the children will pick up Michael from Parchman, Big Joseph rides his lawnmower aggressively toward her car, holding a rifle. However, more than the rifle, it is “the way he points to that tree” that makes Leonie “see violence” (*Sing* 56). The presence of this violent anti-Black sentiment—one that roots Leonie’s fear of Joseph’s pointing at a tree in a long history of lynching and other forms of extralegal violence by white people against Black people—within Jojo’s family does the work of enforcing the natal alienation that was ubiquitous during slavery and that Richie experienced at Parchman when he “kept thinking about my brothers and sisters” but had no way of reaching them (*Sing* 181). This anti-Black sentiment not only deprives Jojo and Kayla of their paternal grandparents but also of their mother, who has internalized the sentiment.

Significantly, the theme of natal alienation is one that appears in the way that Leonie eschews her mother’s teachings, especially after the murder of Given that leads to Leonie forming a strong but ambivalent emotional relationship with whiteness. The white supremacist ideology seen in Big Joseph’s behavior has made its impression on Leonie, likely since before she met Big Joseph himself. In addition to her attraction to and repulsion by the power that comes with whiteness—power that allowed a young white man to murder her brother and have it ruled a hunting accident—she is consumed by the ways that whiteness is socially exalted. In fact, the chapters narrated by Leonie are filled with ruminations on subjects such as the hair of her white friend Misty. Watching Misty play with her hair, Leonie thinks how this act is something of which Misty is never conscious, “always unaware of the ease of it. The way it caught all the light. The self-satisfied beauty of it. I hated her hair” (*Sing* 37). Leonie’s envy of Misty’s hair is

apparent in this passage, and this jealous feeling is so profound as to cause Leonie to internalize the idea that white features are inherently more beautiful than features associated with people of African descent. While preparing to pick up Michael from Parchman, Jojo states with disdain, Leonie “relaxed her hair in the kitchen and rinsed it out in the sink, so it’s as straight and wispy as Misty’s. . . . so when Leonie stood over the sink and rinsed and hissed as the water ran over her scalp, over the chemical burns I’d see later, little scabs like dimes on her scalp, her hair looked like it didn’t belong on her” (*Sing* 63). While Leonie is aware of the problematic ways that her white friend expresses her privilege—she is especially disturbed and frustrated by the way Misty speaks of the potential beauty of a courthouse that Leonie associates only with the brutality of prison, “*a place for the dead*”—relaxing her hair in the way that Jojo describes in such a troubled and judgmental way is only one way that she eschews her cultural background, a problem that Jojo registers with his disgust of the process of hair relaxation (*Sing* 96). Leonie is fully aware of the way that Blackness is stigmatized, and she internalizes this stigma. After she is reunited with Michael, she considers that Jojo’s skin is lighter than her own and that Kayla’s skin is lighter than Jojo’s, wondering “if we had another baby, if it would look more like [Michael] than Michaela. If we had another baby, we could get it right” (*Sing* 150). In this way, she detaches not just from her own identity and those of her parents but also from her biracial children due to the fact that they, like her, have dark skin that she has learned to believe is unacceptable.

Because of the stigmatization of Blackness and because of the way that her brother’s race excused his murder in the eyes of peers and the judicial system alike,

Leonie ignores the rootwork and spiritual teachings of her mother. While Mam tried to teach her, Leonie recalls, Leonie would “look away and roll my eyes to the pines, wishing I were in front of the TV, not out trudging through the woods with my mama talking about periods” (*Sing* 103). However, when Kayla becomes carsick on the way to Parchman and there is no medicine available, Leonie starts to feel regret at not following her mother’s teachings more closely. It is at this point that she recognizes rootwork as more than medicine, as “a map to the world as [Mam] knew it, a world plotted orderly by divine order” (*Sing* 105). Altered by her realization of the importance of traditions handed down across generations, Leonie agrees to Mam’s prompting to perform a ceremony that will allow Mam to pass away before she is completely consumed by her cancer. Leonie is so distraught, however, at the feeling that “the first thing you ever done right by your mama [is] to usher in her gods. To let her go” (*Sing* 270). The suffering that she feels is so intense that she loses the identity that she has so recently found in familial and cultural history, causing her to leave with Michael, saying, “*I can’t be a mother right now. I can’t be a daughter. I can’t remember*” (*Sing* 274). This statement links remembering—remembering the past, including the recent past, and remembering cultural teachings—to the ability to be an effective part of a family and community. In light of this, Leonie does not transcend the status of the “social ghost” outlined in the previous chapter, that of an individual who exists on the margins of their community. While Anderson writes that “spectral guides reconnect these living apparitions to their communities, their families, and their personal, cultural, and national history,” it is clear that not all of these connections are made for Leonie (Anderson 15). She possesses a



knowledge of national history that is evident in her descriptions of the criminal justice system and her fear at the symbolic gestures toward lynching that Big Joseph makes, and she remembers her cultural history when she performs the ceremony that allows Mam to pass away. However, the pain she feels about her personal history, including the feeling that she had not done right by Mam until the very end and the feeling that she and her children are not appropriately bonded (*Sing* 272)—overwhelms her and prevents her from connecting to her family. “Restoration of the breach between the traumatized person and the community” is not achieved, and there is no indication later in the novel that Leonie or her family is striving to reconnect (Herman 70). Leonie forswears her personal history, and the act of running away with Michael suggests that she is disconnected from her cultural history as well. Because of this, she cannot reintegrate into a family that is so deeply affected by its personal, cultural, and national histories.

### *Strengthened Bonds*

In order to define a family unit based on emotional connection, the novel acts as many of the stories Brogan terms “cultural hauntings” do, as the “focus on storytelling shifts emphasis away from biological to adoptive models of cultural transmission. . . . the oral transmission of group history and lore itself creates the group, rather than being merely its byproduct” (Brogan 18). Jojo seeks and creates this type of group throughout the novel by attaching himself emotionally to Pop rather than Leonie or Michael and by telling his own stories to his younger sister. Pop, unlike Leonie, tells stories of the past,

and Jojo helps Pop process this past by encouraging this storytelling. Kayla, nurtured since birth on the type of emotional bonds formed through storytelling, in turn, is able to heal others with an uncanny emotional intelligence. After Mam's death, Pop calls her name in the night as if he is praying to her. In the day, "Kayla patted his arm ... just rubbed him like Pop was a puppy, flea-itching and half bald, starved for love" (*Sing* 279). When Jojo finds Richie wandering the woods behind their house, it is again Kayla who provides comfort and healing. Richie feels displaced, unable to pass on but unable to enter Jojo's home because, he believes, there is "no need" or "lack" that he can exploit by trying to fill it (*Sing* 281). Though it appears from his disjointed speech patterns that Richie's spirit is weakening, his greatest concern is about the great number of troubled souls unable to find the song that is the afterlife he refers to throughout the novel. Jojo and Kayla see a large number of lost, pained souls in a tree outside their home, souls that seek home in a song like Richie once did but that are trapped on earth by traumatic experiences. When she senses these souls, Kayla, who "takes all the pieces of everybody and holds them together," releases Pop's hand to walk toward the tree and sings the spirits into "something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease" that the spirits themselves term "home" (*Sing* 284-285). At the same moment that these tortured ghosts seem to find their home, Pop leads Jojo and Kayla back into the house, indicating that a group formed and strengthened by knowledge of personal, cultural, and national history, is a source of healing—even when the healing process may need prompting from a "spiritual guide."

In the current sociopolitical context, of which a major feature is the Black Lives Matter movement that was founded in 2013, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* makes a case for the importance of group identities with historico-cultural foundations as well as a case for a national acknowledgment of historical and current injustices and the threads that bind them. In addition to being shaped by slavery's legacies in the criminal justice system as well as the killings of Black Americans by police officers in the years leading up to the novel's publication, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is shaped by other recent revolutions in the American political discourse. One exemplary event is Hurricane Katrina, which

radically reconstituted our understanding of race, place, and inequality. Activists and theorists who, since the nineteen-sixties, had insisted that the legacy of slavery and white supremacy was the interpretive key to America's history now had a contemporary tragedy to point to as the proof of their case. ... Nine years later, in 2014, the killing of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, gave national prominence to the Black Lives Matter movement; the young activists who led the protests had been weaned, politically, on pictures of an avoidable flood.

(Cunningham 2015)

The connections seen here between disparate events in which the American government failed or deliberately harmed residents of color serve to more fully illustrate the point that historical injustices reverberate through today's society. Just as slavery has its echoes in Parchman Farm and the rest of the criminal justice system, so it influences the allocation of resources, social geography, and violence that is often excused by the state. In her introduction to *The Fire This Time*, Ward writes, "Every time I logged in or read another

article about Trayvon, my unborn child and my dead brother and my friends sat with me. I imagined them all around me, our faces long with dread. Before Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder and manslaughter in July 2013, I suspected Trayvon's death would be excused" (*Fire* 1). This emotional appeal to the reader regarding the similarities between faces on television news and faces that are loved personally and intimately by the storyteller humanizes the Black Lives Matter movement and other movements for justice and empathy, as well as offering comfort and companionship to readers of color who feel devalued in the face of institutional violence, in the same ways that allowing characters like Jojo and Leonie to explain their experiences does.

“Is he still on fire?”: Murderous Whiteness and Its Alternatives in Lewis

Nordan’s *Wolf Whistle*

Mississippi Delta author Lewis Nordan was fifteen years old when fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was murdered by two white men in 1955, and he was fifty-four years old when he rewrote history in his 1993 novel *Wolf Whistle*. In “Growing Up White in the South: An Essay,” an explanatory essay included in press releases for *Wolf Whistle* that intended to explain Nordan’s intentions, Nordan explains why the story of Till’s murder still occupied his mind almost forty years after the fact: “I revere the memory of Emmett Till. His death marked not only a turning point in civil rights but, in a very personal way, in my own life. . . . my racial identification with the murderers of Emmett Till still troubles me” (“Growing” 6-7). Nordan has often described *Wolf Whistle* as the “white trash version” of the Emmett Till story, by which he means that the novel aims to contextualize the behaviors and represent the reactions of working-class white people in the South in the period surrounding Till’s murder. In an interview, Nordan once explained his position: that

poor, middle-class whites living in a community in which this terrible thing happened, we have a voice too. And our voice was too silent during the fifties.

We didn't say, "How dare you." Instead we just retreated and thought, "Oh my

God, is this us who did this?" So we never really even talked about it at the dinner table, we were so horrified by it and so implicated in it, by our silences and by our casual use of racial epithets, and things like that. It was a turning point, really.

The truth is, until I embraced who I actually am, certainly who I was, I had no way of writing that story effectively. So that's what I meant by "white trash"

version. (Bjerre 375)

Here, Nordan establishes his interest in the Emmett Till story as well as the reason for the almost forty-year delay between Till's murder and the publication of *Wolf Whistle*.

Feelings of complicity in this grotesque and socially pivotal murder, feelings deepened by a failure to breach the codes of white Southern behavior that Nordan felt impeded him and others from speaking out against racialized violence even in the wake of Till's

murder, persisted in Nordan's psyche. These feelings demanded attention, but the guilt associated with them made their insertion into a narrative nearly impossible before

Nordan had reckoned with it. As psychologist Judith Herman writes, "Witnesses as well

as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma. It is difficult for an observer to remain

clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time," and it

is clear in many interviews of Nordan that the act of standing by in a time of violent anti-

Black racism in the South wounded his psyche (Herman 2). Because Nordan's trauma

regarding Till's murder was rooted not in the feelings of fear and danger caused by

membership in a targeted group—as the traumas in Morrison's *Beloved* and Ward's *Sing*,

*Unburied*, *Sing* are—but in feelings of guilt and complicity, the novel created in response

to Nordan's own personal trauma is one that grapples with whiteness, especially poor

whiteness, in the South. In this sense, “Nordan’s project in *Wolf Whistle* has an affinity with that of Toni Morrison and other social theorists and literary critics who in recent years have begun to turn the gaze of race theory toward the construction of white identity” (Costello 207). For this reason, the characters that haunt this novel are not, for the most part, the novel’s Emmett Till figure but the ghostly figures that represent toxic whiteness and its alternatives.



Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie Till Mobley. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Mamie Till Mobley family.

*Wolf Whistle*, published thirty-eight years after the 1955 murder of fourteen-year-old Black Chicagoan Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, focuses on the “white trash periphery” of a brutal lynching that marked a turning point in the civil rights movement in America (Costello 220). Emmett Till was visiting family in Mississippi when he was accused by a white woman named Carolyn Bryant of wolf-whistling at her outside the grocery store that her husband Roy Bryant owned. Days later, Roy Bryant and his half-

brother J. W. Milam would appear at the doorstep of Till's uncle, Mose Wright, take Till away, and murder him before throwing his body—tied with barbed wire to a seventy-five-pound cotton-gin fan—in the Tallahatchie River. Though they later confessed to the murder, Bryant and Milam would never be convicted. This event is at the heart of *Wolf Whistle*, and few of the most essential details are altered; in fact, the novel's Emmett Till figure goes by Till's nickname, Bobo. Early in the novel, Bobo is seen showing local children pictures of his white "girlfriend"—the picture is later discovered to be one of a famous actress—angering the white patrons of the bar whose porch he stands on. When Lady Sally Anne Montberclair leaves Red's Goodlookin Bar and Gro., Bobo makes the ultimately fatal mistake of wolf-whistling at her, just as Emmett Till was alleged to have done to Carolyn Bryant. Just as Bryant's husband Roy was the person who declared the need for retribution against Emmett Till, Sally Anne's wealthy husband Lord Pointdexter makes the decision that Bobo should be killed. A major difference between the stories, however, is that Bobo's eventual murderer, Solon Gregg, witnesses the wolf whistle, whereas neither Roy Bryant nor J. W. Milam was present when Emmett Till was alleged to have behaved similarly with Carolyn Bryant. Solon's presence at the bar allows him to report the events to Sally Anne's husband Lord Pointdexter Montberclair, whereupon it becomes clear that Solon's desire for some form of retribution against Bobo is rooted in the South's complex web of race and class relations and misdirected personal anguish.



## *Class Conflicts in Constructed Whiteness*

Much of Solon's anger stems from a long history of exploitative and violent relationships between wealthy white people and working-class white people and between working-class white people and Black people. When Solon watches Bobo at Red's Goodlookin Bar and Gro., he feels jealous of and inferior to the young boy, who looked like a "spote" (sport) and "wore him a white shirt, too, like a natural man, Bobo did, not no feedsack shirt neither, uh-uh, Bobo had him a tie knotted up at the collar, tied it his ownself, four-in-hand, something another, and a wide-brimmed felt hat pushed back on his head, and a big-ass gold ring" (*Wolf* 23). Solon is disgusted and insulted by Bobo's neat appearance and confident speech with the other Black children and men on the porch, feeling that Bobo is not behaving appropriately according to the norms governing Black behavior in the presence of white people. This makes Bobo's whistle at Sally Anne, which Bobo did when the other children on the porch dared him, all the more offensive to Solon.

This transgression against the sanctity of white womanhood is something that Solon must punish in order to reaffirm his whiteness and, by extension, the superiority he expects to feel over Bobo. Interestingly, prior to Bobo's whistle, Solon himself is thinking that he would like for the Black men and children on the porch to get "the idea that him and Miss Sally Anne were together, friends, you know" to claim membership of the upper class as well as to display his masculinity through closeness with someone who is described as a beautiful woman (*Wolf* 33). After the whistle, however, Solon makes the likely unconscious decision that reinforcing the social order is the best way to protect his

own status as well as that of white people as a group. He does this by intimidating Bobo, but he is thwarted when Sally Anne orders Bobo to her car so she can drive him home safely. His ego wounded by Bobo's confidence and Sally Anne's undermining of his white masculine prerogatives, Solon tells Sally Anne's husband Pointdexter, also called Dexter, that Bobo whistled at Sally Anne and carried a picture of her in his wallet—a statement that is a perversion of the truth (*Wolf* 23).

Solon walks home from the Montberclair mansion to the “white-trash ghetto” of Balance Due, a transition and a neighborhood name that both bespeak the class dynamic that informs Solon's actions. All the while, he is watched by a flock of buzzards named after other powerful white male Mississippians: “Vardaman and Bilbo and Hugh White and J. P. Coleman and Ross Barnett and other names of past and future governors and senators of the sovereign state of Mississippi” (*Wolf* 66-67). Solon subsequently enters a guilty reverie that is interrupted by Dexter's appearance. Dexter rants to Solon about Sally Anne's behavior, including an affair with a man named Hoyty-Toyty McCarty. Solon is half-asleep, but he knows he is being asked to kill someone. The way that Dexter's aggression is misdirected here is shown in Solon's attempt at following the conversation: “At first Solon thought Lord Montberclair was asking him to murder Hoyty-Toyty McCarty for him, the organist. That was the distinct impression Solon was receiving from the conversation”, but in reality, Dexter wanted Solon to murder “the sassy-mouth boy in Red's Goodlookin Bar and Gro. this morning, Bobo. Now wasn't that something?” (*Wolf* 116). Ultimately, Dexter convinces Solon to kill Bobo in a

display of how “class resentment and exploitation [function] as causes of racial scapegoating” in *Arrow Catcher, Mississippi* (Atkinson 25). Dexter explains to Solon that “decent whitefolks have always needed the likes of you” to enforce the social order, giving voice to the widely held belief that racism was used as a tool by wealthy white people to redirect the anger of working-class white people—an anger rooted in their own class exploitation—against Black people. This surreally blunt identification of the social order serves to establish a framework in which Solon and his peers are the victims of a white elite—a framework that allows Solon, who might otherwise appear entirely inhuman, to evoke a sense of pity or injustice. Solon agrees to commit the murder, and while he follows through, he also shows discomfort with his status and the fact of his manipulation when, on the way to kidnap Bobo, Solon takes Pointdexter’s clothes at gunpoint and thinks he “looked like a spote hisself” (*Wolf* 128). This statement refers to Bobo’s confident presentation earlier in the novel and the insecurity it inspired in Solon, but it is also a claim of peer status with Dexter.

*Glenn Gregg: “unrecognizable as himself, or even as a child”*

The other major source of Solon’s pain and aggression is the grievous injury of his fourth-grade son Glenn, indirectly caused by Solon’s own ill treatment of his family. In much the way that Pointdexter Montberclair’s sorrows and frustrations are displaced from his wife, Sally Anne, and Hoyty-Toyty McCarty, and onto Bobo, Solon’s unhappiness precipitates his mistreatment of his family. Though the novel humanizes

Solon, largely through depictions of his feelings of guilt toward his son, it goes to great lengths not to excuse his actions, which are at various points described with words such as “evil.” Rather than justify or excuse Solon’s murderous actions, this humanization serves to mark the racist violence in the novel as the result of white suffering more than of systemic anti-Black racism.

This more intimate cause of suffering experienced by a white man takes on greater meaning in the novel’s ideological framework than the class dimension, not only because Dexter Montberclair also seems to be spurred to violence by a personal cause unrelated to issues of race relations—the affair between his wife Sally Anne and a man known as Hoyty-Toyty McCarty—but also because of repeated reference to Bobo’s murder being the result not of systemic, institutionalized racism but of “random” acts and feelings of “evil.” It is important to note here that the novel gestures at systematic injustice—Alice asks her fourth-grade class to draw pictures of “the murder trial, what they remembered most of this horrible travesty of justice, this momentous injustice of setting child-murderers free, this racial and human insult to each of them”—but these gestures characterize anti-Black racism as a mistake committed by a broken machine rather than as the intended product of hundreds of years of entanglement between capitalism and racism. Instead, these so-called evils are significant to the novel for their emotional impact on white subjects.

Glenn’s fatally injured status as a boy “unrecognizable as himself, or even as a child” is one that enables Solon to understand the extent of the harm his behavior—driven largely by a desire to conform with ideals of white masculinity and to compensate

for the stigma of his class position. After seeing Glenn for the first time after Glenn tried to murder him by pouring gasoline on him and setting him on fire, Solon leaves home again for the Arrow Catcher Hotel and “wishes the gas fire had burned all his skin off instead of his boy’s. He wished he was the one laying up in an iron bed instead of his baby, that’s what he wished” (*Wolf* 104). This feeling of suicidal guilt, however, metamorphizes into the homicidal modality that eventually leads to Bobo’s death, establishing clearly that Solon’s killing of Bobo has its roots in only tangentially related traumas: Solon’s class position and the attendant contested whiteness. After his initial expression of guilt, Solon thinks that he should “put [Glenn] out of his misery, so to speak. Seem like the least a daddy could do, after he caused so much trouble to the tyke” (*Wolf* 106). Interestingly, the homicidal turn that Solon’s thoughts take is still, at this point, explicitly tied to Solon’s own feelings of guilt. He frames this hypothetical act of murder as a penitent one that would ameliorate the suffering for which Solon himself is and feels responsible. The troubling image of Solon killing his mutilated son in what he believes would be an act of merciful euthanasia quickly expands its reach. Solon begins to dream of killing his entire family, presumably to alleviate not only the pain that he caused them but also the pain he shares with them—pain caused by their class position and contested whiteness. At this point, Solon imagines Glenn’s death as curative, restoring things to a time before enacted violence: “Killing [Glenn] had healed his burns and taken away his scars. He was the same beautiful child he once was, with a Roy Rogers school satchel and a milk jug full of gasoline” (*Wolf* 110). Though Glenn is

healed physically, he still holds the milk jug of gasoline, which may explain why the actions Solon's finally takes are not those he lays out in this fantasy. This indicates that not all harm is truly undone and that there is still the threat of retributive violence that would again reveal the flaws in the whiteness that Solon defends so aggressively—a whiteness that caused the problem of Glenn's patricidal intent in the first place.

When Dexter finds Solon in the hotel, he has little difficulty convincing Solon to treat Bobo as a scapegoat for all the pain and hostility Solon is feeling. This is due not only to his feelings of insecurity based on the tenuous nature of his whiteness—which results from his class position—but also from the threat that a restored Glenn still holding a “milk jug full of gasoline” poses to Solon's self and identity. If the victims that first occur to Solon will only intensify the contested nature of his whiteness, Solon is left with the problem he set out to solve. Before Dexter arrives, Solon lies in his hotel bed thinking that he must release his frustration, but he does not know how best to do this:

He was feeling like if he didn't do something soon, kill somebody, something, almost anything, to make meaning out of all this pain of his, and his baby boy laying up in a bed looking like an Egyptian mummy, well, he just didn't know what would happen to him, he didn't know how he was going to endure one more minute on this awful planet Earth. (*Wolf* 117)

When Dexter suggests that Solon kill Bobo, Solon accepts the opportunity for a variety of reasons. As mentioned previously, Solon fulfills what he believes is the role that a white member of the working class should play, one that reaffirms his whiteness. This

reaffirmation through anti-Black violence appears to Solon as an effective alternative to the family slaughter that would do nothing to shore up his own white identity.

Here, the nature of Glenn's injury is brought to bear on the psychological haunting of Solon by his not-yet-dead son. When Glenn's appearance is first revealed at the beginning of the novel when Alice brings her students to visit their suffering classmate, the novel focuses on Glenn's eyes just as it will focus on Bobo's later in the narrative, telling us that "His eyes were wide open because the lids had been burned away" (*Wolf* 18). In this way, Glenn bears witness to the world around him in a way that resembles how Bobo's "demon eye saw what Bobo could not see in life, transformations, angels and devils, worlds invisible to him before death" after Bobo is murdered, his eye displaced from its socket (*Wolf* 175). Both of these children are victims of Solon, who is a metonym for the toxic white masculinity that he kills Bobo to defend. Glenn's witnessing, however, functions in a slightly different way than Bobo's. Glenn's wide-open eyes are pointing fingers, staring guilt into Solon by looking directly in the face of the harmful, violent whiteness that would soon cause Glenn's own death as well as Bobo's. They also, however, produce feelings of guilt in his teacher, Alice Conroy.

Glenn's injury and death impact people outside his family, as his pain is emblematic of that experienced by the rest of the fourth-grade class and their young, white, idealistic teacher Alice Conroy, who is staying in *Arrow Catcher* with her uncle Runt Conroy. In fact, the novel begins with Alice encouraging her students to give voice to their concerns about Glenn, concerns that inspire more abstract thoughts of potential suffering. "Is he dead?" and "Is he still on fire?" and "Am I going to die?" and "Are we all

alone in the world?” the children ask (*Wolf* 1). The way that the children’s questions progress from questions about Glenn’s ordeal to questions of their own suffering and fear is indicative of this metonymy. Similarly, Glenn’s mother’s singing about the circumstances of Glenn’s injuries is powerful enough to evoke for Alice the tragedies of the state of race relations in Mississippi. Hearing Mrs. Gregg’s song, Alice “saw what was unimaginable . . . children holding hands with grownups, black and white, singing,” and she saw “Emmet Till dead” (*Wolf* 17). It is the perceived “unimaginable” nature of Alice’s initially harmonious vision that causes her despair, and this despair is compounded by the vision of Emmett Till dead. Emmett Till’s death is also described as “unimaginable,” but the word takes on a different meaning in this context. While the scene of interracial harmony is unimaginable because social norms do not allow for it, Alice characterizes Emmett Till’s death as unimaginable because of the incomprehensibly horrific violence of child murder—and because of the terrifying reality that such a murder, one intended to uphold a white supremacist order, was all too likely.

Ever the optimist, Alice believes that she can cure Mississippi’s ills by encouraging her fourth-grade class to share their feelings and by forcing them to confront horrors such as Glenn’s injury, an embalmed body at the local funeral home, and the trial of Bobo’s murderers (*Wolf* 225). Even on the first of these field trips, Alice learns that the confrontation of these painful images does not heal her or her students, as she realizes that Glenn’s injuries are fatal: “The burned child would never recover, this much was clear immediately, and for the first time, Glenn Gregg would soon be dead if he was



lucky” (*Wolf* 18). This pessimistic thought sets the stage for later observations about childhood suffering that alter Alice’s outlook entirely.

Alice’s loss of optimism takes place as a response to Bobo’s death, which took place in spite of the healing role she intended to play in the lives of her students—a role that she believed would somehow prevent such violence. Though Bobo’s death is the cause of Alice’s loss of optimism and the reason that she experiences feelings of guilt and complicity, these feelings emerge well in advance of the actual murder. As Alice walks home to her uncle Runt’s house one day, she sees the image of a “child in a river” in a raindrop as she “passe[s] by Lord and Lady Montberclair’s Mexican mansion” (*Wolf* 87). However, “her eyes would not hold to the spot. She looked away quickly, and then, when she looked back, she couldn’t locate that particular raindrop again” (*Wolf* 80). Because of this, Alice has difficulty identifying the drowned child in her vision and, when questioned, says “I’m not sure. Maybe the Gregg child, the one that got burned. But the child in the raindrop was dead in a river, somewhere, seemed like he got drowned” (*Wolf* 87). Glenn’s eyes, as well as Bobo’s, gesture at toxic whiteness by staring; Alice fails at this task because “her eyes would not hold to the spot.” Whereas Glenn and Bobo look unflinchingly at the world that caused their deaths, Alice does not confront the world in the same way. This failure to look, as well as her belief that the body she sees is Glenn’s rather than Bobo’s, are at the heart of her feelings of guilt Alice holds herself responsible for failing to look at—and by extension deconstruct—the violent whiteness that leads to Bobo’s death.

## *Smoky Viner*

Whereas Glenn impacts people by demonstrating how internally destructive communities obsessed with the construction and preservation of their own whiteness can be, another fourth-grader named Smoky Viner—horrified by the damage this white community has wreaked on Bobo and his family—impacts his peers by identifying their complicity in such destruction and by refusing to conform. In fact, Smoky’s character is defined by destruction. His peers are frustrated by him because, using his “thick neck” and “hard head,” Smoky “was ramming his head into the wall, like a bull . . . the plaster was flying . . . . You couldn’t keep anything nice with Smoky Viner around” (*Wolf* 203). He is disrupting the comfortable environment in which his peers wish to exist. Though “everyone hate[s] Smoky Viner” for this behavior, Smoky is proudest of his ability to disrupt and destroy. Other characters in the novel also have destructive tendencies—such as Solon, who commits acts of violence to assuage pain over his sister’s absence—but Smoky’s destruction takes the form of social nonconformity that is ultimately restorative (*Wolf* 57).

Though Smoky Viner is not dead, he fills the role of the “social ghost” defined in previous chapters. Like Sethe and Denver in *Beloved* or Leonie in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Smoky “haunt[s] the margins of [his] community” (Anderson 15). Smoky’s behavior greatly irritates the other fourth-grade boys on the arrow catching team—the school team that plays a fictional game in which partners shoot and catch blunted arrows—and they threaten him with such punishments as extreme exclusion by “end[ing] up in Whitfield”: Mississippi’s primary public mental institution (*Wolf* 203). Though Smoky’s social

isolation is superficially the result of his bizarre habit of smashing structures with his head, it becomes clear from a locker-room exchange after Bobo's body is found that it is a different kind of smashing that makes Smoky an outcast.

Roy Dale—Alice Conroy's nephew and Runt Conroy's son—is at arrow catching practice with all of his peers except for two boys named Sugar Mecklin and Sweet Austin, who were absent from school after finding Bobo's body in the nearby lake the day before. Mimicking the language they have observed from their parents and other authority figures, the boys trade jokes about the young Black body, "and they were still funny, too, vacation days for finding a dead one, one who stole a gin fan and tried to swim across the lake with it. ... Then somebody said something that shut the mouth of everybody standing in the locker room" (*Wolf* 204). As Brannon Costello writes, "these stories about Bobo's death become a sort of cultural capital that the boys disseminate amongst the group to confirm their whiteness" (Costello 216). This "locker-room whiteness factory" performs much the same function that Solon's intervention between Bobo and Sally Anne and his subsequent murder of Bobo do, albeit at a more benign level. This scene works to show readers how the normalization of anti-Black violence as an essential part of a white identity develops from jokes shared between children into the violence enacted by adults. Smoky's disruption of this scene, a scene that appears as innocent fun to the other children, explodes this normalization by problematizing it in a moment of radical nonconformity.

When Smoky Viner stands up for Bobo, the other boys in the locker room feel the impact, the destruction of their meticulously constructed identities, immediately. Hoping to maintain membership in a group, Roy Dale turns to a friend and suggests that the two “ought to sign us a blood oath” regarding situations that are otherwise irrelevant to the plot. “Want to be partners?” Roy Dale asks. This desperate gamble at maintaining order fails, and Smoky’s “words were still in the air” (*Wolf* 205). The other boys are unable to continue normally, and it is likely that many of them are experiencing similar internal conflicts to the one Roy Dale does. The cognitive dissonance Roy Dale experiences consists of both jealousy of and hatred for Smoky Viner in the wake of Smoky’s comment: “Roy Dale wondered why he hadn’t known enough to say what crazy Smoky Viner said. Roy Dale even had a daddy that warned him, and he still didn’t know enough. Roy Dale was laughing like a durn hyena, that’s all Roy Dale was doing. Roy Dale realized he hated Smoky Viner worse than ever” (*Wolf* 206). Here, Smoky Viner’s defense of Bobo—and, by extension, his deviation from what Roy Dale and his classmates have accepted as the only possible presentation of white masculinity—causes a rift in Roy Dale’s psyche.

Roy Dale has ascribed a moral goodness to Smoky’s words, but this feels to him to be incongruous with the behavior he has learned from his peers and from white authority figures. This breach of racial custom is wildly uncomfortable for Roy Dale—so uncomfortable that he takes violent action to rid himself of it in much the same way Solon agrees to kill Bobo to alleviate his own pain. Paired off with Smoky for arrow-catching practice, Roy Dale reaches blindly into his quiver, not bothering to ensure that

he does not grab the one arrow in his quiver—the one arrow on the team—that has a sharp tip, and shoots Smoky in the forehead with it. Unlike in Solon’s case, however, Roy Dale’s violence is curative because it turns out that he has chosen a blunted arrow and that Smoky Viner is safe. Deviant behavior has been punished—the blunted arrow still hits Smoky with so much force that he is knocked unconscious—but no damage is done. Roy Dale feels remorse and suffers no consequences. In the moment that Roy Dale lets fly the arrow, along with “all his rage, his emptiness and loss”:

The atmosphere rarefied./ Birds fell from the air./ Cattle toppled over in a field./  
Car motors stalled on the highway./ The body of the Bobo-child, dressed in a  
heavy garment of fish and turtles and violent death, reversed all its decay, and  
flesh became firm once more, eyes snapped back into sockets and became bright,  
bones unbroke themselves, feet became swift, laughter erupted like music, and  
bad manners and disrespect and a possessive disdain for a woman became mere  
child’s play, a normal and decent testing of adolescent limits in a hopeful world.  
(*Wolf* 208-209)

In this world, white violence must be inconsequential for Bobo’s “child’s play” also to be free of consequences. Roy Dale’s aggression is not victimless, but it is not permanent either. It is significant, as well, that Bobo’s healing comes not after Roy Dale expresses remorse both verbally and by breaking the remaining arrows in his quiver but while the arrow he shot at Smoky is still in the air. It is also significant that this healing does not take place as a direct result of Smoky Viner’s speaking up. It is the release of “all [Roy

Dale's] rage, his emptiness and loss" that heals Bobo (*Wolf* 208). Bobo is not the only one who is changed, however, as the scene is riddled with reflections from Roy Dale about ways he believes he can be a kinder, more open and sincere person—"maybe Roy Dale could learn to call Runt "Daddy," he believed he could try. Maybe he could learn to speak words of love to him, though he felt nothing in his heart like love. Maybe he could speak to his mother honest words of rage for leaving him behind"—and he hopes that his violent behavior in the past is not eternally condemning—"maybe he could believe that his vile laughter at the death of a child, like himself, did not eliminate him from human hop, by its villainy" (*Wolf* 209). Though this scene makes no reference to the forms of persistent, systemic violence discussed by Ward and Morrison, it, too, grapples with ideas about the scars left by violence and the possibility of positive change.

*Bobo: "the bemoaned heart of Nordan's book"*

Throughout the novel, Bobo speaks far less often than he is spoken about. In one particular chapter, however, his absence is felt especially strongly. When Solon and Dexter appear on Bobo's aunt and uncle's doorstep on the fateful night, demanding that Bobo's guardians send Bobo with them, Bobo's voice is nowhere. After the kidnapping, Solon speaks in a friendly, conversational tone to the young boy in the car next to him—the boy he intends to murder within the hour. Bobo, however, never responds and is only referred to by name near the chapter's end. According to an interview with Nordan, this

absence was constructed deliberately to make the chapter less “unbearable” to read.

Nordan says:

Now, the first time I wrote that, it did have Bobo in it and by having his point of view, his pain, his blood, his fear, it was unbearable. So I deliberately went through that whole chapter again and took out all reference to him, knowing that it could hurt someone's feelings; black readers or anyone else might think that Bobo didn't get a full voice, a full point of view in the story. Bobo's point of view only comes after his death, as a kind of a magic-eye point of view. (Arbeit 632)

Though Bobo’s removal was intended to reduce harm to the reader, the deliberate exclusion of his voice from the text “reproduces aesthetically the sins of the racist society that killed Bobo. At least one reviewer found Nordan’s focus on the white trash periphery rather than the African American center somewhat unsettling” (Costello 220). The reader Costello references here is the African-American author and professor Randall Kenan, who wrote in a review of *Wolf Whistle* that, when Solon Gregg and Bobo are in the car together in the moments leading up to Bobo’s murder, “the narrative runs slightly chill and the focus is wrecked, and suddenly the reader is puzzled by the realization of a conspicuous absence,” namely, Bobo’s absence (Kenan 593). Discussing the role of a Bobo who lacks agency and interiority, Kenan writes:

We see his shadow fight Solon Gregg; we hear his dead body speak in sweet visions of pastoral phantasms and curious agape-like love of the earth and its people; but never are we invited into the head of a child who becomes a scapegoat

who becomes a martyr who becomes a loss. We are shown his mother, glimpsedly; his Auntee and Uncle, hauntingly, stoically, humanly; yet Bobo-the bemoaned heart of Nordan's book-is little more than an object. (Kenan 594)

This process of objectification happens not just through the Nordan's deliberate unmaking of Bobo's subjectivity for the sake of a less distressing reading experience but also through Solon's own feelings about Bobo immediately before the murder. Solon thinks that Bobo reminds him of "one of them little plaster of Paris Jesuses, like you see sometimes riding up on the dashboard of a car" (*Wolf* 169). This sentiment aptly describes Bobo's post-murder role of a martyr and savior of a white community lacking self-awareness and moral guidance.

In the same way that *Beloved* and *Richie* force a communal recognition of and reconciliation with a painful past, Bobo's spirit disrupts the white community of *Arrow Catcher* by forcing it to reckon with the tenuous and dangerous nature of its own group identity. After his death, Bobo sees the world with the "demon eye" that is knocked from his skull during his murder, and he sees "without fear or anger, or even a sense of injustice, but only with an appreciation of the dark and magical and evil world in which he had been killed" (*Wolf* 178). This identification of the issue as one of "evil" denies the systemic nature of the anti-Black violence that led to Bobo's death, and it ultimately serves to make him more Christlike, more like a martyr, by depicting him as having a clear and peaceful outlook on a world that would kill a child and excuse his murderers due to issues of race. Furthermore, the only people in the novel for whom Bobo is depicted as showing concern are the two white boys who find him in the lake: Sweet



Austin and Sugar Mecklin. Bobo thinks of his love for them and sings to them, “*Don’t look, don’t look at me, preserve your innocence another moment longer*” (Wolf 186). As soon as Bobo has seen these boys through the process of contacting Sheriff Chisholm and being consoled by him, “Bobo had stopped seeing. This part was finished. Now Bobo was dead and gone” (Wolf 187). By using Bobo’s voice only as a tool for shepherding white children from innocence to knowledge of the violence committed by members of their community, the novel frames Bobo as a martyr. Not one of the novel’s white characters envisions the body found in the lake as a person with a family. His compassion and equanimity in the face of his own brutalization are used to guide the white community out of “the darkness [it has] been looking for [its] whole sad li[fe],” darkness that has gone unnoticed or disregarded by the people who perpetuate it, and into self-awareness and social progress. He is used as a tool in a way that does not address the communal trauma of racist violence itself but redresses “the traumatic effects of Nordan’s implication in the racial injustice and oppression that made the lynching possible” (Atkinson 32-33). This is perhaps a fine distinction, but it is an important one. These traumas are indisputable and intimately intertwined, but whereas Nordan’s trauma manifests only as guilt, traumas of racist violence manifest today in the persistence of the institutions that have allowed such violence in the post-Emancipation period in which *Beloved* is set and into the post-Hurricane Katrina America in which *Sing, Unburied*, *Sing* takes place. Failure to acknowledge Bobo’s “pain, his blood, his fear” fails to achieve the widespread societal healing Morrison and Ward, as well as authors like Christina Sharpe and countless others, seek by encouraging the acknowledgment and

integration of this pain. Nordan finds his own healing and the potential for the healing of a white community's guilt at the cost of losing a more comprehensive healing that acknowledges Black humanity in order to deconstruct longstanding institutions that do not.

### *Failure of Hope*

Nordan explores the sociohistorical context of anti-Black racism among poor white people in the South as a way of humanizing Solon Gregg and establishing a victim role for the white people some might hold responsible for, or at least complicit in, acts of racist violence such as the murder of Emmett Till and the acquittal of his killers. However, elsewhere in the novel, the idea that racism in America is the result not of a complex social and economic history but of “random” suffering and “evil” is used to excuse the failure of the novel's white characters to save Bobo. After witnessing Solon's threatening exchange with Bobo, “Runt Conroy suddenly knew what he had not known before, that he was all alone in the world, that we all are, and because he had put off knowing this simple fact for so long, he was also as defenseless as a child against the random and irrelevant terrors of the solitude as well” (*Wolf* 42). This feeling initially sparks in him a presumably protective instinct to follow Bobo and warn Bobo's family, but Runt ultimately does not find Uncle's house and gives up. Alice also feels the urge to protect Bobo—or at least children like him and the one she saw in the raindrop—and she experiences feelings

of guilt for not having done more to prevent Bobo's murder. However, rather than Alice fully recognizing and grappling with the systemic underpinnings of Bobo's murder, it is through her that "*Wolf Whistle* comes close to undermining itself and recentering the whiteness that it seeks to deconstruct" (Costello 220). One passage from Costello details this clearly and bears quoting at length. Uncle's identification of Solon as Bobo's murderer in court, he writes,

is unquestionably a moment of extraordinary and triumphant courage for Uncle, but not only does the narration focus on how it affects a white woman in the audience, but we are also led to believe that her act of courage (with far less at stake) in calling herself colored has helped enable him to testify. Moreover, as Runt's magical parrot swoops around the courtroom as it prepares to defecate on Solon's head, it inspires memory in many of those present. While Alice flashes back to her recent, specific, personal childhood, "the ebony-colored women and men around her" flash back to "dark Africa, Kilimanjaro, and the Ivory Coast, and sorcerers dancing with poison cobras to ensure rainfall, as birds and monkeys chattered and jabbered from the jungle trees" (251). Thus, her whiteness receives a complex treatment at the same time that blackness becomes essentialized.

(Costello 220)

This essentialization of Blackness happens periodically throughout the novel, and except for one Black character, Rufus McKay—who identifies the double standards that allow Roy Dale to speak disrespectfully to him by saying, "Black chile talk to a white man like this little piece of trash be talking to me, I hate to think what be done happen"—Bobo's

relatives Auntee and Uncle are the only Black characters rendered with significant interiority (*Wolf* 97).

In much the same way that the rest of the novel focuses on white society, *Wolf Whistle*'s conclusion deals not with the bereavement of Bobo's family but with the confusion and guilt of a white community that has realized its complicity in the death of a Black child partially through national media attention that stereotypes that community, forcing it to grapple with its identity. Runt Conroy, whose given name is Cyrus, says that Bobo's death and its aftermath could be "why I want to change my name," indicating a rejection of the identity that previously determined how Runt/Cyrus navigated the world. While many of the novel's other white characters also express grief and guilt at Bobo's death, there is much tension surrounding the question of whether this sentiment is strong and ubiquitous enough to yield lasting change. In a comic exchange, Runt/Cyrus asks a friend, Coach, to call him Cyrus, but Coach continues to call him Runt, calling out in exasperation and denial when Runt/Cyrus tells him that he has used the wrong name. Furthermore, young men move to town who trouble Runt/Cyrus, who says, "It was unsettling to be around people who lived where this thing had happened and for them to seem not to have noticed. There was a little too much of Solon Gregg in every one of these new boys, young men" (*Wolf* 261). Here, it is unclear whether the change Bobo makes in *Sugar and Sweet*, the change that Smoky makes in *Roy Dale*, and the change that Runt experiences after witnessing enacted violence and its precursors over the course of the novel will last. Priest suggests that *Wolf Whistle* belongs to a tradition of retellings of Emmett Till's story by white authors in which a "contradiction between the well-

intentioned desire to represent Till and the desire to maintain the boundaries and privileges of whiteness produces a curious effect: the novels attempt to recognize Till's humanity by entering into his suffering, absorbing it, and re-presenting it. Their protagonists are nurtured by their encounter with Till's suffering" (Priest 8). However, the novel leaves uncertain whether this nurturing through objectification has the power to produce lasting social change. Furthermore, Alice, the novel's embodiment of the well-intentioned, though naïve, white liberal leaves town at the novel's end, and the final scene is of Alice and Sally Anne gazing into a crystal ball then walking away, having seen nothing.

This ambiguity likely speaks as much to the rapidly shifting racial discourse in the time surrounding the novel's publication—a time when Bill Clinton's tough-on-crime policies were being placed on top of Ronald Reagan's and George H. W. Bush's similarly punitive policies and when the acquittals of the police officers who brutalized Rodney King were still fresh in the cultural memory—as it does to the conflicting responses of Mississippians to Till's murder in 1955. Brogan writes that ghosts “figure prominently wherever people must reconceive a fragmented, partially obliterated history, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future” (Brogan 29), and it does seem that this is the at the heart of the role played by *Wolf Whistle*'s three ghostly children. In spite of issues of equitable representation of characters of different races and of neglect of the systematic and persistent nature of violence against Black people, Glenn Gregg, Smoky Viner, and Bobo all function to problematize existing white identities and

suggest the potential for alternatives, offering hope to a “fragmented” and traumatized community.

## Conclusion

Over a period of roughly thirty years, the ghosts of anti-Black violence have haunted American literature. Each of the novels examined here uses the ghosts of children to force a communal reckoning with history—a reckoning that aims to provide some kind of widespread healing of trauma—and each of these novels leaves the question of healing unanswered. Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) restores Sethe and Denver to their community, but the world of these characters is still very much haunted by the novel’s titular character. Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) hints at what seems to be at least a partial healing, but it, too, leaves unresolved the issue of Leonie’s psychological trauma. Nordan’s *Wolf Whistle* (1993) also leaves much room for speculation: Its final scene is one in which two white women with an emotional investment in the murder of Bobo and the events surrounding it gaze into a crystal ball and see nothing. The voice of Bobo is inserted here, somewhat jarringly, to offer a glint of hope, but no living character in the novel appears to have much hope for a move toward racial equality—or even a move away from racist violence—by the narrative’s end. All three stories depict undeniable progress, but it is not clear if this progress is substantial enough to improve society as a whole.

Just as the ambiguity of these novel's endings reflects the uncertainty that marks our moment in history, their ghosts mirror the anxieties expressed in the public discourse about race relations and the tension between formal and actual history. The consumptive fear engendered by such tension can be seen clearly in the hunger of Beloved and of Richie, both the ghosts of children killed by their parental figures in an act designed to protect them against white violence. Sethe and Pop are haunted by their respective ghosts because, though they both believe they performed a kindness when they killed, they also feel a crushing sense of guilt. This guilt eats at their presents, their futures, and their selves. Beloved is a parasite, growing "bigger, plumper by the day" on the food of Sethe's attention (*Beloved* 281). Sethe withers as she gives herself over to the painful past that Beloved represents. Richie is a hungry ghost, too—so much so that he becomes a "black hole in the middle of the yard, like he done sucked all the light and darkness over them miles, over them years, into him" (*Sing* 257). Though Sethe and Pop are both healed by their surviving children and their communities, the hunger of these ghosts doubtlessly takes its toll on them. The wasting of Sethe and Pop is representative of the emotional drain exerted on Black communities by racist institutions that disenfranchise and dehumanize them. Just as in the cases of Sethe and Pop, "restoration of the breach between" the targets of racist violence, their communities, and society at large, depends "first, upon public acknowledgement of the traumatic event and, second, upon some form of community action" (Herman 70).

Contemporary activists are asking that this public acknowledgment and community action toward the healing of trauma take the forms of a restructuring of



formal history as well as of policy change. Though Nordan's novel does attempt a kind of healing for the white population, its primary concern is not the direct impact of anti-Black violence but the ability of this violence to disrupt white identity—a disruption that is often traumatic to the white individuals who feel newly complicit in such violence. Because it does not foreground the direct harms of anti-Black violence in ways that would subvert the existing erasure and dehumanization of Black communities, it persists in erasing Black communities. In this way, it fails to enact pro-Black intellectual activism at the same time that it offers alternative definitions of white identity—thus curing the trauma caused by disruptions of white identity caused by the act of witnessing anti-Black violence—and suggests pathways for healing white guilt.

In the world outside the novels, however, such changes in historical education and policy are beginning to unfold. Christina Sharpe writes, “How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? Might we instead understand the absence of a National Slavery Museum in the United States as recognition of the ongoingness of the conditions of capture? Because how does one memorialize the everyday?” (Sharpe 20). However, there is, as of 2018, a museum that attempts to “memorialize” slavery and its descendants: The Equal Justice Initiative's “The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration.” The museum is located where a warehouse used to imprison enslaved Black people near a highly profitable slave auction site in Montgomery, Alabama was once located (EJI 2018). Facilitating this assignment of slavery to the past are a public discourse that allows challenge to institutions and a shift in policy implementation that is slowly but surely reducing the race disparity in incarceration

(Humphreys 2016). None of this is to say that anti-Black violence and racial disparities in housing, income, education, and more no longer exist, but it appears that we are in the midst of a healing process. The reckoning that authors like Morrison, Ward, and Nordan have encouraged us to have with our ghosts is making room for the past in order for our country to have a future.

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