

The Revisiting Ghosts in Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine Toni Morrison's use of the spectral narrative in the novel *Paradise* and the role of the spectre in the novel. In the novel, both the town of Ruby, which is called a 'black man's paradise', and the convent, which is regarded as a place of sin, are infested with ghosts, which are not only supernatural beings, but also symbols of historical violence, collective trauma, and unresolved social problems, which represent repressed memories and ignored voices. Morrison employs the ghost narrative as a radical literary device to explore historical violence, trauma, and the possibility of future healing. The ghosts in the novel act as historical witnesses, challenging the official narrative of history by narrating silent memories. At the same time, the ambiguity and indeterminacy that characterise the spectre of the spectre subvert the traditional linear temporal narrative, pointing to the possibility of an unwritten future: the destruction of the town of Ruby represents the failure of the utopian isolation of African Americans, whereby self-exclusion can never be the solution for the haunting past, and may instead breed new groups of violence. And the open ending of the Convent is in response to Morrison's exploration of how to reconcile and live with the haunting ghosts in contemporary society. The ghost narrative that the novel employed not only challenge the official narrative of history, but also provide a path to explore and imagine those unresolved hoistorical ghosts in contemporary society.

Keywords: Haunting, Ghosts, Trauma.

1. Introduction

Black literature is an essential and indispensable part of American literature. Since the Harlem Renaissance in the late of 1920s, black literature gradually gained more attention from the mainstream literature. Toni Morrison, the 1993 Nobel Prize winner, is a literary master that cannot be ignored. As a black female writer, Morrison has a deep feeling for the black nation. In her life time, Morrison created over 100 works to voice for millions of silent African Americans as she contended "we live in a land where the past is always erased and American is the innocent future...the past is absent or it's romanticized" (qtd in Dizard 389). Thus, to fill in the gap of black absence in American history is one of her concern. Apart from that, instead of simply depicting the silenced and painful memory of slavery, Morrison seemed to concern more about how to deal with the painful past and live with those scars as she once ascertained "slavery wasn't in the literature at all. Part of that, I think is because, on moving from bandage into freedom which has been our goal" (qtd in Keizer 179). In response to her concern, *Paradise* could be seen as her literary effort to explore how should the contemporary Afro-Americans address and live with the past haunting ghosts. As the last volume of Morrison's love trilogy, *Paradise* traces the nearly 100 years of black history from the beginning of the Emancipation Proclamation to the Civil Rights Movement era in 1976, describing how a group of Afro-Americans struggled to build an ideal black utopia in a response to racism and violence in the American society.

While much scholarship has focused on the novel's allegorical critique of patriarchal communities Ruby—a town founded on myths of racial purity—this paper shifts critical attention to the metaphoricality of spectral. These ghosts, far from mere gothic tropes, function as radical narrative agents that dismantle official narrative and reimagine possibilities for living with ghosts.

2. Ghosts Analysis in the Novel

In *Paradise*, ghostly figures are employed as historical witnesses to disrupt the official narratives of American history. Drawing on Avery Gordon's concept of "social haunting", this chapter argues that the ghosts in the novel serve as counter-archives, embodying silenced memories and challenging the selective amnesia of dominant historical discourses.

(1) Ghosts as historical witness

Referring to the ghosts in Morrison's novels, *Beloved* is probably the most familiar one. The little girl who was killed by her desperate mother returned in the form of a ghost after several years, forced her mother Seth to face the painful past and find a way to heal the trauma. However, ghosts do not only appear in *Beloved*. In fact, ghosts, as one of symbols of African culture, have repeatedly appeared in Morrison's works, such as the Dead family in *Song of Solomon*. In *Paradise*, almost every character in the story is more or less haunted by ghosts: Ruby town, where where "a sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear" (Morrison *Paradise* 8), are repeatedly haunted by the ghosts of disallowing. Women, whether they are from ruby town or the monastery, are all deeply troubled by ghosts: Stuart Morgan's wife Dovey indulged herself into talking with a man that only she can see; Deacon Morgan's wife Thorne had to rely on mysterious herbs to maintain her spirit after the death of her son; Mavis always saw and heard the haunting ghosts of her dead twins Moore and Pearl.

Ghost narration is a common literary element. In *The Satanic Verses*, a novel that bears haunting ghosts like Morrison's, Salman Rushdie offers a definition of the ghost as "Now I know what a ghost is,"he thought. "Unfinished business, that's what" (540). Ghosts symbolize "unfinished business," representing unresolved issues or disputes from the

past, returning to the present in this unique form. This literary tradition can be traced back to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where Hamlet's deceased father returns as a ghost, urging his son to seek revenge. In *Paradise*, the term "unfinished business" primarily refers to issues of slavery and racial discrimination that have been officially erased or deliberately suppressed or concealed in American social history. Similarly, in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon believed that "the past always haunts the present" (viii), and "the ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure" (8), signifying those repressed, ignored and excluded presences. In the form of ghosts, these marginalized presences disturbed the current established order, and uncovered the hidden past. These literary ghosts "elicit an awareness of the actual lived experience of the African American past situated within the historical events, and by writing about these memories and personal experiences, she calls attention to the unique position of this past as a haunting presence in relation to mainstream American history" (Anderson 3). For centuries, black individuals have been excluded from mainstream society, relegated to marginalized status. In the novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison in 1952, the protagonist's black skin serves as the determining factor in his invisibility. He exists as an unrecognized figure, isolated from mainstream society. Similarly, in *Paradise*, the disallowance by the white and other light-skinned blacks remains a historical trauma for the Ruby citizens and their ancestors. Therefore, Morrison uses the ghost as a literary means, acting as a historical witness, to narrate the aphasia of the history and fill the gap of the official narrative as Kathleen Brogan notes, "In contemporary haunted literature, ghost stories are offered as an alternative—or challenge—to 'official,' dominant history" (17). For millions of Afro-Americans, Emancipation Proclamation only served as "a war time measure that would be inoperative for the future as soon as the war ceased" (Winsett 7). During the reconstruction period, a series of laws against the free blacks and numerous openly persecution of blacks turns previous effort into dust. These laws are known as the notorious Jim Crow laws which was deemed as "the lowest point of African American life in the United States" (Winsett 6). Asserting "separate but equal", these laws forced public facilities to be segregated on the basis of race. During Jim Crow segregation became entrenched in the South, racial violence and the pervasive repression of African Americans were ubiquitous. Seeing no hope in the south for a better life, many African Americans sought to escape from South and poured into west and north of America, which was known as the Exoduster Movement. Though was deemed as social ghosts by the mainstream society, Morrison cunningly encoded this history background into the founding history of the black town Haven and Ruby. In *Paradise*, these black residents were forced to undertake the migration journey, an "on the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma, the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built" (Morrison *Paradise* 13). Stung by those disallowings, several black families, led by Big Papa Zechariah Morgan, headed west, in a hopes to build a black paradise away from the mainstram society. In the novel, the unresolved problem of racial discrimination

continues to return in the form of ghosts, reminding the residents of the disallowing they once suffered: the third generation father, represented by the Morgan brothers, attributed the decline of haven town to the contact with the white world. So far, they led the rest of the family on the journey to the deeper west again. During the journey, Ruby Morgan, younger sister of the Morgan twins, died due to discrimination against her black skin, which prevented her from receiving timely medical assistance. Finally, after the establishment of a new black town, Morgan twins named the town as Ruby to remember the disallowance and the trauma. The name of the town also represents the unresolved racist trauma that has been lingering in the whole community. Ruby town is like a ghost, witnessing the trauma of the town's past and telling the history of unacceptable marginal figures.

(2) Ghosts as future harbingers: toward a racial openness

Deconstructing the official narrative and filling the historical gap is only the first step. Morrison is more concerned about how to live with the haunting ghosts in contemporary society. In response, through the depiction of two different communities, Ruby town and Convent, Morrison achieved her literary experiment.

Ruby: a self-enclosure community

Although men are proud of the young Ruby Town, the past ghost of disallowing as collective trauma was incared deeply in their mind. By collective trauma, Kai Erikson explained it in his widely influential book *Everything in its Path* as "a blow to the basic issues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (153). In *Ruby*, the disallowing ghost was repeated, emphasized and aggravated "like a bullet in the brain" (Morrison *Paradise* 109). The authority of the Ruby town represented by Morgan brothers sought to self-isolation to deal with the haunting ghosts as illustrated by the remoteness of Ruby town. Moreover, a power hierarchy based skin color is established against their previous refusal by the whites. Roger Best, originally belonged to one of Ruby's founding families, was "the one nobody admitted existed" for he was "the first to violate the blood rule". Refused by whites, they refused them in return; disallowed by their lighter-brothers, they disallow mix-racial people; rejected by the hospital, they reject to send Roger's wife and his unborn child for medical treatment. The unwritten rules of racial purity also deeply crippled Roger's daughter Patrica Best who married to Billy Cato only to obtain a dark-skinned offspring "because he had the midnight skin of the Catos and the Blackhorses" (Morrison *Paradise* 198). Under a binary opposition, dark skin symbolizes purity and ignorance while light skin was condemned as impurity and evilness. Compared to the unmarried but pregnant Arnette, Patrica's daughter Billy Delia was considered as an inherent slut for her light-skin: when she was three years old, her innocent behavior of taking off her Sunday panties to ride a horse was interpreted as a proof of her inherent promiscuity. Although new fathers has made "great efforts" to maintain the safety of ruby town, the town is still crumbling: compared with *paradise*, ruby was considered as "this prison calling itself a town" (Morrison *Paradise* 308) by Billie Delia. The final destruction of ruby town also implied Morrison's attitude: there is no possibility to end the the haunting ghosts by self-isolation, which only caused new violence mechanism.

Convent: a space for living with the haunting ghosts

According to Derrida, a "spectral moment" is a "moment that no longer belongs to time" (xx). The idea of present and

past merged into timelessness, which reflects the characteristics of timelessness of ghosts: it represents the memory of the past, but appears irregularly at a certain moment in the present or future. Therefore, how to live with those past ghosts was explored through the depiction of Convent and the women lived there. In the novel, the name of Ruby town not only represents the ghost memory of the past, but also represents that this town has lost its vitality and has become a copy of the ghost. Ruby town has no life and no new memory, just repeating the ghost memory of the past. Unlike Ruby, which attempts to suppress its haunting ghosts through isolation and exclusion, the Convent embraces its spectral past and transforms it into a site of healing and transformation, allowing its inhabitants to live with their haunting ghosts rather than suppress them. Through the character of Consolata (Connie) and the Convent's evolving identity, Morrison explores how to coexist with trauma and memory, offering a radical alternative to Ruby's doomed isolationism.

The timeless quality of Convent was firstly illustrated by its spacial history. Changing from an embezzler's mansion which caters for men's sexual carnival to a boarding school led by Mary Magna, a Catholic nun, in an attempt to correct the behaviors of the native Indian girls and finally to a shelter for traumatized women of different races and classes, Convent itself exemplify its mobility and fluidity for transformation.

Moreover, the timeless quality of Convent is reflected in the Convent's ability to merge past, present, and future. In Ruby, the haunting ghosts was silenced and stiffened, allowing no communication. One of the most obvious scenes of physical conflict in the novel is the different interpretations of the inscriptions on Oven between the older and the younger generation. New fathers attributed the decline of Haven to too much unneeded interactions with the outside world, as a result, they interpret the motto as "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" (Morrison Paradise 86), implying submissiveness and obedience to the past. Allowing no space for new interpretation, the older generations attempted to fix the future of its inhabitants in the repetition and created a themed space which contains "a story that is repeated without difference, predetermined and unchanging" (Evans 384). The oven becomes a symbol without practice, indicating that Ruby is only a repetition of Haven.

Yet, the ghosts that haunt the Convent—such as the memories of the women's traumatic pasts—are not suppressed but are encouraged to communicate and integrated into its daily life. Consolata (Connie) is the central figure in the Convent's journey toward coexistence with haunting ghosts. A character with obvious characteristics of ghostedness that possess mysterious power of "seeing-in" (Morrison Paradise 247)—a magic to bring the dead back to life, and her "bat vision" (Morrison Paradise 241) to look into human mind clearly despite the fact that she was blind. Her growth from a marginalized, broken woman to a "mature spirit-guide with one foot in the real and another in the beyond" (other 309) embodies the Convent's ethos of transformation and healing.

According to Judith Herman, healing patterns can be achieved through three stages: "the establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life" (155). The establishment of a safe place is of critical importance for "once the traumatized person has established a refugee, she can gradually process toward a widening sphere of engagement in the world" (Herman 162). With no clear

boundaries, no orders and no binary opposition but full of inclusiveness and possibilities, Convent as a third space lay foundation for women's healing process Mavis called it "the most peaceful place on earth" (Morrison Paradise 182). Then, narrating or lamenting past trauma is a crucial step to recover from the traumatic past. Hundreds of years of humiliating history and suffering memories are carved deeply in the hearts of countless blacks, which to some extent, have led to their psychological distortion and deformity. Whether it is collective or personal, male or female, blacks are haunted by these painful memories. Toni Morrison, as a member of them, keenly recognizes the importance and necessity to face and step over the past trauma. As shown in *Beloved*, the reappearance of ghost *Beloved* forced Seth and other blacks in the community to confront the past history and their painful memories as slaves. Through narration, Seth is relieved from pain and gained her psychological peace. In *Paradise*, the first one to poured out her hurtful story was Pallas, the youngest girl who was betrayed by families and raped by strangers. She was in a state of aphasia when she first arrived Convent that "she can't cry yet...The pain was down too far" (Morrison Paradise 172). Soothing by the secure atmosphere of Convent where "you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time" (Morrison Paradise 176), Pallas gradually unloaded her psychological burden and spoke out her story to Consolata, engaging in the process of dialogue and healing. During the healing ritual, they are encouraged to speak aloud their traumatized past in the form of "loud-dreaming" (Morrison Paradise 264), and engages in a communal dialogue to narrate, remember and mourn the past trauma. Under Consolata's instruction, they lay down on the floor of the cellar—a space out of the outside world where they can empower themselves. By willingly sharing each other's painful memories and giving mutual response, the ghost of the past is dispersed and "accusations and hatred are replaced by murmurs of love" (Morrison Paradise 264). The communal lamenting and console in the healing ritual provide necessary nurturing support for each woman to recover from the past that "brings into new sympathies, new affects as well as cognitions and new forms of intersubjectivity" (Bartky qtd in Michael 654). Storytelling and dialoguing create possibilities for stepping over the past hurts that once paralyzed these women, making them get rid of the haunted nightmare and find their individual agency. For the third stage of recovery, they face the task of reconnecting with ordinary life to create a future as they "mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now she must develop a new self" (Herman 196). In daytime, they provide each other with communal sharing by farming the garden and cooking food, and they continue to practice the spiritual healing process in the evening where they found a new self: Mavis no longer consider herself as "the dumbest bitch on the planet" (Morrison Paradise 37); Seneca stop to cut herself; and Pallas choose to give birth to the baby rather than to stab it. Through reconnecting with ordinary life, these women survive from the painful past and reclaim their subjectivity by actively constructing their future as a new agent who "were no longer haunted" (Morrison Paradise 266) by the past. Such collective "resurrection" ritual—where they confront their traumas and embrace their spectral pasts—symbolizes the Convent's ultimate lesson: that living with ghosts is not about erasing them but integrating them into one's identity. This acceptance allows the women to move forward, even if their futures remain uncertain.

3. Conclusion: From Literary Ghosts to Real-World Action

Toni Morrison's ghostly narratives in *Paradise* transcend the realm of fiction to illuminate pathways for confronting historical trauma and living with past ghosts in the contemporary world. The Convent, with its embrace of hybridity—a sanctuary for women of diverse races, classes, and traumas—stands in stark contrast to Ruby's exclusionary purity, mirroring the tensions between multiculturalism and homogeneity in modern societies. Just as the Convent thrives by integrating difference rather than erasing it, contemporary movements for racial and social justice, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), challenge systemic oppression by centering marginalized voices and histories. Morrison's spectral figures, which force characters to reckon with the unresolved violence of slavery and racism, parallel the ways BLM activists confront the "ghosts" of police brutality, demanding accountability for historical and ongoing violence. By refusing to bury the past, Morrison's ghosts insist that true progress requires acknowledging the open wounds of history—a lesson reflected in contemporary efforts to dismantle Confederate monuments or reclaim public spaces as sites of memory. Morrison's work thus functions not merely as literary imagination but as a blueprint for action, demonstrating that confronting spectral histories—whether through art, activism, or policy—is essential to forging inclusive futures.

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