

Chapter 1



Introduction

Bringing back the dead (or saving the living from the shadow of death) is the ultimate queer act.

—Sharon P. Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*

I am very happy to hear that my books haunt.

—Toni Morrison, in Nellie McKay, *Conversations with Toni Morrison*

In delivering her acceptance speech to the Nobel committee in 1993, Toni Morrison invoked the ghosts of past recipients: “I entered this hall pleasantly haunted by those who have entered it before me.” Ten years later, Morrison explains what she meant by this statement: “I think of ghosts and haunting as just being alert. If you are really alert, then you see the life that exists beyond the life that is on top. It’s not spooky, necessarily. It might be. But it doesn’t have to be. It’s something I relish, rather than run from” (Morrison, “Toni Morrison’s ‘Good Ghosts’”). I begin this book imagining Morrison’s many memorable ghosts—L from *Love*, Circe from *Song of Solomon*, and Dorcas from *Jazz* (to name just a few)—haunted by Beloved. What they tell us about Morrison’s most famous specter is rather simple but surprisingly important. She has captivated readers, so much so that all other ghosts in the Morrison canon have had to fight for their due. Beloved, they remind us, is just one of many specters and not even the first one to be fully realized in the Morrison canon. Why must she eclipse the others, and what do we learn from listening to the others, asking all of them to speak in chorus?

Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts queers one of the most fertile and beloved topics in Toni Morrison scholarship, the ghost. Moving beyond, but not ignoring, Morrison's representation of ghosts as the forgotten or occluded past, the book uncovers how Morrison imagines the spectral sphere as always already queer, a provocation and challenge to heteronormativity—with the ghost sometimes an active participant in disruptions of compulsory heterosexuality, sometimes a figure embodying closet desires, and sometimes a disembodied emanation that counterpoints homophobia. In the introduction to *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam argues that “[f]or the purposes of [her] book, ‘queer’ refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (6). It is interesting to note that such an important queer theorist as late as 2005 must define the term as if it were still a new concept in the field, but such are the implicit demands of such a flexible term. It is this flexibility that is both its strength and weakness. In 2011, an anthology of queer theorists (a virtual who’s who in the field), debated the meanings, future, and even limitations of the term in *After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg and others. In this study I have tried both to capitalize on the term’s flexibility while also holding close to Halberstam’s definition and its emphasis on “nonnormative logics,” which I take to pursue an antiessentialist inquiry into structures of power and identity.

The ghost may not always be queer in the way we often imagine lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identities, but in Morrison the apparition inhabits, and perhaps may even be said to attract, a representational field of queer valences around itself, supporting Kathleen Brogan’s argument that in contemporary ethnic women’s literature “ghost stories are offered as an alternative—or challenge—to ‘official’ dominant history” (17). In Morrison, the ghost is at the center of queer subterfuge, disruption, and challenge. And there are many of them—everything from old-world hauntings to postmodern erasures, dead or disembodied narrators to fleeting shadows and visions, strange eruptions of sound and music to the indecipherable and uncanny. Morrison’s ghosts are at turns fascinating presences, disturbing absences, but mostly provocative embodiments of both and therefore prime figures to trouble the binaries that queer theory seeks to deconstruct.

This project embraces a definition of queering as a broad challenge to all forces of convention and conformity, but it also addresses a very specific nexus of representational and reading practices centered upon

the homosexual, lesbian, and bisexual figure. The ease with which queer readings may erase race is the subject of the next chapter, which situates Morrison's work within current debates about queer theory as potentially violent in its impulse to universalize and passé in its potential to effect real social change. Morrison's novels are often works of great theoretical importance in their own right, and Morrison is no less a guide in these readings than Judith Halberstam, Patricia Hill Collins, Trudier Harris, Jacques Derrida, Eve Sedgwick, Barbara Smith, and others.

The way Morrison represents the relationship between (queer) sexuality and black identity is a central concern of *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts*, and both black studies and queer studies inform my approach. Along with the editors of *Black Queer Studies*, I "hope that the interanimation of these two disciplines—black studies and queer studies—whose roots are similarly grounded in social and political activism, carries the potential to overcome the myopic theorizing that has too often sabotaged or subverted long-term and mutually liberatory goals" (Johnson and Henderson 6). To this must be added the fascinating criticism that has emerged on ghosts and haunting by Jacques Derrida, Avery Gordon, and others. In the range of what may be considered merely implied to wildly overt, the twin themes of this book—queer and ghost—structure themselves upon the tension between known and unknown, visible and invisible, familiar and strange.

To queer the ghost, we risk speaking in tautologies. As Nicholas Royle succinctly states, "The uncanny is queer. And the queer is uncanny" (*The Uncanny* 43). But in the doubling much gets revealed about the separate themes of ghosts and queer identities, about our cultural investments in telling stories of haunting and queer transgression, about structures of thought concerning life and death, individual and community, identity and difference. In the convergence of these two themes, moreover, new statements exist and new insights are possible. In *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, Sharon P. Holland asks "who resides in the nation's imaginary 'space of death'?" (4), how are these outsiders silenced, and when, if ever, are they given voice? This book argues that Morrison queers the ghost in order to address some of these silences and to examine the interlocking forces of racism, sexism, and heterosexism.¹

Along with Marisa Parham's *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture*, I see the haunting as not necessarily interesting "because it resonates with the supernatural, but rather because it is appropriate to a sense of what it means to live in between

things—in between cultures, in between times, in between spaces—to live with various kinds of doubled consciousness” (3). But I also understand these words as sharing conceptual space with Eve Sedgwick’s definition of queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (*Tendencies* 8). It does not take great conceptual leaps to connect the work being done in queer theory with studies of ghosts and haunting.

The evolution of ghost theory, indeed, runs parallel with the rise of queer theory—with both fields, interestingly, claiming enormous thematic and hermeneutical terrain. To take one prominent example, Jacques Derrida’s hauntology—a central concept in ghost theory—asks us to consider everything as ghost—history, memory, text, and, indeed, the world as we perceive it. Nothing escapes the problem of presence/absence. Nothing is without ghost effects. It should not, then, surprise us that scholars have queered many a ghost, and that queerness itself, in all its many definitions, gets cast as akin to ghostliness and haunting. Terry Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian*, for example, answers its own question, “Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian—when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been ‘ghosted’—or made to seem invisible—by culture itself” (4). And, more recently, José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* explains that “[t]he double ontology of ghosts and ghostliness, the manner in which ghosts exist inside and out and traverse categorical distinctions, seems especially useful for a queer criticism that attempts to understand communal mourning, group psychologies, and the need for a politics that ‘carries’ our dead with us into battle for the present and future” (46).

We might ask, “What is not queer?” just as easily as Derrida invites us to ask, “What is not a ghost?” If these are the conceptual tools and terms for understanding everything, certainly they need to be disciplined to keep them from meaning nothing, but Derrida insures that his hauntology, a concept that precedes ontology, addresses everything. It is—not unlike deconstruction—an application of thought and not a thing in itself, and in this way it conceptually maneuvers like queering, eluding definition and stasis, and, alternatively, emphasizing open inquiry. “Ghosts,” as Colin Davis has observed, “are a privileged theme because they allow an insight into texts and textuality as such” (17), a statement that might easily be applied to queering.

It should not surprise us, then, that scholars of ghost theory and queer theory sound very similar in the extravagance of their claims.

Slavoj Žižek, to cite one current voice, argues that “if there is a phenomenon that fully deserves to be called the ‘fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture,’ it is this fantasy of the return of the living dead” (22); and Eve Sedgwick, to consider queer theory’s most seminal powerhouse, boldly claimed that “virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” (1). At the convergence of ghost and queer theories, we might expect further hyperbole and a doubling of the rhetoric of relevance, but the present study has a more modest goal: to queer the ghost in Morrison as a way of understanding its relevance to her work and her time.

It would be tempting to count the ghosts in Morrison’s novels and then offer my readers a firm number of twenty-seven or thirty-two specters, haunts, phantoms, and visions as a way of suggesting their prominence in and relevance to Morrison’s work; however, the measure of their importance lies mainly in their elusiveness, their resistance to naming and fixity, which makes a count not only impossible but missing the point. In novel after novel, Morrison explores not only epistemologies of ghosts and haunting but their ontology. What are they made of? What is their relationship to the living? How are they different from us and from one another? How do they come into being? And how do our cultural beliefs serve to guide these answers?

To most readers, many of Morrison’s specters will be recognizable as ghosts. Some, like Dorcas in *Jazz*, stare out of photographs, becoming almost Poe-esque, “in a silver frame waking [Violet and Joe] up all night long” (13). Bill Cosey, in *Love*, not only gazes out from a gilt-framed portrait, but Junior is “flooded by his company” and sees “his hand closing the door” (118–19). Some of Morrison’s ghosts speak, such as Pilate’s father in *Song of Solomon*: “Clear as day, her father said, ‘Sing. Sing,’ and later he leaned in at the window and said, ‘You just can’t fly on off and leave a body’” (147). Some voices, such as that of Florens’s mother in *A Mercy*, come to us as first-person narrators of whole chapters or hefty passages, and many of the novels feature several ghosts and even crowds of them. At the end of *Paradise*, for example, there are various voices and visions that are just as unnamable and unfixable as the identity of the white woman who gets shot at the beginning of the narrative. And in *Tar Baby* the night women pour into Jadine’s bedroom, “Pushing each other—nudging for space . . . [pouring] out of the dark like ants out of a hive” (258). Some readers will want to think of them as figments of Jadine’s dreamlife, and even though the novel works hard

at establishing Jadine's wakefulness, the status of the night women gets blurred when they are associated with other dreams. They not only push and nudge one another, terrifying Jadine as they bare their breasts, but they serve to push at the reader's beliefs about the paranormal, anticipating Morrison's most famous representation of a haunt.

Morrison, throughout her writing career, has invited her readers to speculate about ghosts. But each phantom is uniquely rendered, serving different purposes and pushing against clichés of haunting. Many of these apparitions not only confront the cliché of the spooky ghost but also the very shape, definition, and meaning of ghost, such as May in *Love*, who "[b]efore her real death . . . was already a minstrel-show spook, floating through the rooms, flapping over the grounds, hiding behind doors" (82). Morrison's characters often puzzle over the ghostly status of ambiguous figures, such as the "naked berry-black woman," who Golden Gray "is certain is not a real woman but a 'vision' (144) or Beloved, whose (un)earthly form serves as a point of debate throughout much of the novel."²

In order to honor Morrison's rich problematizing of binaries of life/death, presence/absence, body/spirit, *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* examines specters that will not at first seem like ghosts to most readers, such as the haunting music in *Song of Solomon* or the ornate embezzler's house in *Paradise*. Morrison's explorations of ghosts and haunting invite the widest Derridean consideration of ghosts as the master trope for everything from identity to memory to history to reading. But even the thematic considerations of music as ghost or myth as ghost, which may strike some of my readers as applying the term too loosely, frequently provides a tangential reading that addresses more conventional specters as well. There are just so many opportunities in the novels, and so I have tried to suggest the range of thematic considerations, everything from considering whiteness as a figure of ghostliness to a more conventional consideration of the haunted house, albeit recognizing how Morrison, even as (or especially when) she is addressing stock themes and narratives, provides a radical revision of shopworn tropes and strategies of representation.

There are numerous theoretical lenses with which to consider Morrison's ghosts—with many new and exciting scholars working at the intersections of African American studies and queer studies—but I begin with Freud's notion of the uncanny because it has the greatest potential for capturing Morrison's ability to evoke the "familiar strangeness" that Freud located in—among other themes and narratives—the haunted

house, the double, the realistic doll, the severed limb, and the dead. In its attention to the convergence of strangeness and familiarity Freud's essay offers, in the words of one scholar, "a significant, wide-ranging presence in our culture, and the tradition of its scholarship lends us an important way of thinking about the history of representation at the turn of the twentieth century."³ Freud's concept of the uncanny can be felt even in those works that do not address his work, but many of the new theoreticians of race and sexuality find their own early resources, in everyone from Frantz Fanon to Ernst Bloch, and the ghosts of past theories have certainly helped inspire recent work on the intersection of theories of race and sexuality.⁴

The hyperbolic claims for queer studies, race studies, and ghost studies, moreover, share not only a certain extravagance of meaning but also philosophical and ethical positions that might be thought of as a liberationist ethics grounded in the importance of uncovering the repressed in order to release individual and communal potentialities. José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* offers the most unapologetic voice in its "rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). But I also find great inspiration in the politically engaged work from many recent theorists, such as Sharon P. Holland, Roderick Ferguson, and Darieck Scott, the latter arguing that he and others begin with the "three now familiar tenets of 'identity' analysis: blackness is a construction, not an essence, which serves to shore up white identity and superiority; categories of race are intimately connected to categories of gender and sexuality; philosophy needs literature to embody, and thereby better envision, its concepts" (258). Not surprisingly, Morrison appears with great regularity in many of these recent philosophical meditations, these adventurous inquiries into race and sexuality.⁵

Muñoz's fierce utopian yearning finds an especially amenable resource in Morrison's queer ghosts, and my interest in queering the ghost aligns most with his notion that "[q]ueerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing." In Morrison, the ghost pushes us beyond the breach of understanding, feeling, and recognition. The ghost, in the shorthand of the present study, queers everything but especially Morrison's capacious exploration of love in all its forms and expressions.

In queering the ghosts in Morrison's novels, I do not propose to uncover static dimensions of the text but dynamic interactions between

the tensions in the text and a queer politics of engagement. I do not, in other words, make claims for Morrison's intentions or textual truths but instead consider how Morrison's evocations of ghosts and haunting may be usefully queered, indeed, recognized as always already queer. Some subjects, such as *Beloved*, serve to challenge heteronormative ways of reading. Many readers will be suspicious of a queering of Morrison's most famous novel and with good reason: the figure of *Beloved* is exemplary in its ability to resist most readings, especially those that fall along categorical lines, such as heterosexual/homosexual, adult/child, and even living/dead. In queering her ghost, I examine the orthodoxy that has grown around her and the way she resists such containment. Other ghosts, such as the narrator of *Love*, will yield more to a traditional "outing" in their evocation of performances of the closet and repressed desire.

In a preface to *Love*, Morrison describes the narrative voice of *Jazz* as "the book itself, its physical and spatial confinement made irrelevant by its ability to imagine, invent, interpret, err, and change." After creating this unprecedented voice, which many critics praised for its music and formal innovation, Morrison set herself a different task. "In *Love*, the material (forms of love, kinds of betrayal) struck me as longing for a similar freedom—but this time with an embodied, participating voice. The interior narrative of characters, so full of secrets and partial insights, would be interrupted and observed by an 'I' not restricted by chronology or space—or the frontier between life and not-life" (x–xi). In imagining a "frontier"—even as she banishes it as a barrier—Morrison likens her creation of a spectral narrator as an exploration into unknown places or, rather, the erasure of lines demarking conventional distinctions between life and death. The narrative strategies, which had resulted in the success of *Beloved*, are left behind for new challenges. Indeed, Morrison's body of work shows exactly this temerity in setting new and impossible challenges even as she continues to investigate the meaning of ghosts, the way haunting works and its relationship to individual and social identities, and the problems, rewards, and dangers of representing the uncanny.

It has been the secret argument of this book that Morrison represents one of the most ceaselessly innovative writers of our time and, indeed, of all time. For forty years, Morrison has set herself new tasks. One only needs to list her many creative projects, everything from librettos to children's books to playwriting to curating a show at the Louvre, to register her intrepid approach to new challenges. If we were to isolate our inquiry solely to the novels, considering them for this same spirit of exploration, we would quickly note the historical range, the thematic

reach, and, perhaps most importantly, the formal innovation. To read only *Beloved* or to consider the nine other novels always against this fifth novel is to miss a wonderful opportunity to observe one woman's rich engagement with a wide variety of themes, problems, and formal invention, such as the truly radical nature of *Song of Solomon's* interplay of aurality as an emergent force within the text against the narrative's ultimate mysteries as dependent on an understanding of oral traditions or *Jazz's sui generis* reinvention of the relationship between narrator and book. It has been my hope that in pursuing a single thematic link across the novels that the reader will not see repetition but rather a crucial aspect of Morrison's history of innovation. To view her return to this theme as repetitive would require a reader to not only ignore her continuous defamiliarizing and radical reinvention of the trope, but it also suggests a specious divide between notions of the ghost as separate from character. No one, for example, would dare accuse her of returning repeatedly to character. Although I am not arguing that all of her ghosts work as fully realized characters, some, such as *Beloved* and *L*, certainly do, while others offer a tireless defamiliarization of a trope not unlike Shakespeare's reinvention of the fool or Faulkner's changing scripts of history. As this study has argued, the trope of the ghost already circulates in a queer field, but in Morrison's handling it not only pushes against stock characters but also finds ever new possibilities for challenging heteronormativity.

To honor the formal qualities of haunting, I create ghostly pairs for each of my chapters, allowing Morrison to haunt Morrison. *Sula*, for example, serves as a ghostly companion to *Beloved*, guiding us deeper into the closet narratives and the intrepid inquiry into forbidden knowledges. But then I continue to create a chain of ghostly pairs by beginning the next chapter where I left off with *Beloved*, considering how its representation of 124 as haunted helps to elucidate the Convent in *Paradise*, both novels attempting to collapse the distance between human embodiment and structural haunting. And then I continue the chain by beginning the next chapter with *Paradise* as a novel that haunts *Love*, allowing my readings of each novel to lead to another and then another until the book has covered each of her novels in a chain that would look like a zigzag if it were diagrammed. I began this process unsure if my approach could be sustained, but what I discovered is that ghosts—disruptive, otherworldly, transgressive—are easily queered, and Morrison's ghosts lead inevitably toward the most fruitful and provocative challenges to conceptions of love.

With their bodies marked not only by absence but presence, ghosts tease and taunt the queering impulse into attention. They seem to offer endless poses of the spectral body as resisting boundaries. Although not focused on ghosts, Judith Butler may have just as easily been talking about them when she introduces *Bodies That Matter* with a problem: the impossibility of “[fixing] bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies ‘are’” (ix). Indeed, bodies matter and they matter even more when they are without matter and “indicate a world beyond themselves.” This is the project of *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts*: to offer a sustained analysis of ghosts in the novels of Toni Morrison as an avenue for queering those same novels. I believe this focus is essential to understanding Morrison’s life-long project of exploring the reaches and meanings of something we simply call love only to contest each other’s meanings and surprise ourselves with confusion and contradictions. As tropes, queering and haunting double the hermeneutical trouble and fun.

In *Spectral America*, Jeffrey Weinstock explains that, “[b]ecause ghosts are unstable interstitial figures that problematize dichotomous thinking, it perhaps should come as no surprise that phantoms have become a privileged poststructuralist academic trope” (4). We might easily extend Weinstock’s argument about haunting to tropes of queering, which also problematize dichotomous thinking and arguably serves as a “privileged poststructuralist academic trope,” one that surely rivals “how phantoms and haunting [have] exerted their influences in literary and popular discourse” (7). If the readings in *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* risk overreaching, it is in the service of testing the limits of the hermeneutical possibilities of these tropes, which are also methodological approaches.

Scholars have exhaustively considered what would seem to be every major theme in the novels—with a short list including race, masculinity, motherhood, music, politics, myth, history—and from virtually every scholarly position—including Africanist, feminist, new historicist, and countless other approaches. It is, therefore, surprising that there has been no monograph that queers Morrison despite the early promise of Barbara Smith’s queer reading of *Sula* in 1977 and the exciting recent work done by Kathryn Bond Stockton on *Sula* and *Beloved*. In more than three decades of active scholarly criticism on *Beloved*, there have been many provocative readings of gender and sexuality, but they frequently stop painfully short of queering the text. Why?

If Eve Sedgwick is correct that “virtually any aspect of modern Western culture, must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition,” then works, such as Toni Morrison’s most famous novel, *Beloved*, or her eighth novel, boldly titled *Love*, not only invite but demand a queer reading. Once ventured, a queer reading not only seems possible but fills an essential lacuna in our understanding of Morrison’s lifelong project to investigate love and its boundaries. In an early interview for *Black American Literature Forum*, she has stated, “actually, I think, all the time that I write, I’m writing about love or its absence.”⁶ In several interviews, Morrison has described the evolution of the novel *Love* and her decision to “take out all those *loves* and look for other words and other sentences,” describing it as “just the most amazing exercise, because now I know why everybody uses the word: because it works.”⁷ But, in Morrison’s words, the novel does not merely explore love but also “the way in which sexual love and other kinds of love lend themselves to betrayal.”⁸ Here, as in virtually every interview—and certainly every new novel—Morrison can be seen meditating on the limits of love.

When we read Morrison against herself, an early novel against a later novel, I believe new possibilities open up. The queer themes seem to reinforce each other, making the queering of the ghost an act of recognizing patterns and filmy presences. There are eerie ways in which the novels begin to speak to one another as if an early creation exists to haunt a later evocation of the same bizarre image, closet theme, or twist in narrative. Yes, I am reading the novels intertextually, but I also think it is important to consider this play as not indifferent and merely scholarly but instead full of spooky desire. It is my dream that this study will aid other readers of Morrison, and scholars of African American literature and queer studies. But just as Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* because she could not find the book she wanted to read, *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* is the book I wanted to read—a sustained queer analysis of my favorite novelist. I wrote it because I wanted to read it.

Charles I. Nero’s searing critique of Morrison’s failure to “imagine homosexual relationships among heroic characters” and her “[playing upon] the stereotype of the ‘light-skinned’ black man as weak, effeminate, and sexually impotent” sits as a cautionary work if not a seriously compromising voice to my celebration of Morrison’s queer ghost (232). Have I failed to highlight (or even recognize) the ways Morrison is implicated in heterosexist systems of thought? In calling for a heightened

awareness of the sexual politics of African American literature, Nero's powerful 1991 essay ("Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature") remains an important inquiry into the role of homophobia and heterosexism in "the intellectual writings of black Americans [which has] been dominated by heterosexual ideologies that have resulted in the gay male experience being either excluded, marginalized, or ridiculed" (229). With a prestigious Pulitzer in the late 1980s and a Nobel Prize in the early 1990s, Morrison, no doubt, served as a logical figure to address, but Nero rests his case on Morrison's failure to imagine a full range of sexualities on the plantation in *Beloved* as well as a few isolated phrases from earlier books that may play upon stereotypes without further inquiry. Although Nero finds more overt examples of homophobia in the form of direct quotes from writers like Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver, his willingness to take on a broader black intelligentsia may be said to use Morrison tactically. More than twenty years later, I celebrate his challenge even as my study seeks to present a very different Morrison, one who has always questioned sexual orthodoxies but has also imagined homosexual characters, such as L from *Love* and Willard and Scully from *A Mercy*, with more clarity and complexity. In the chapters to come, I do consider some of Morrison's early brushes with sexual stereotypes, but not without considering the complex discursive field they respond to, and sometimes—as with the case with chapter 9—considering an early novel in conversation with a later novel.

With such a long history of criticism to draw from, my examination of Morrison's novels cannot help but slip, from time to time, into a study of reception, but any reading of *Beloved* surely has a very rich resource of critical essays, all with their own arguments, agendas, strategies. In chapter 2, "Spirit: *Sula* Haunts *Beloved*," I turn the notion of haunting on its head by imagining what haunts the more famous novel—even as it haunts everything else and even those novels that precede it. The problem of writing in the shadow of this mythic figure became the very thing I needed to address: how can we queer the ghost that everyone knows so well? What are the risks? What is at stake in queering something that already assumes such a solid place in our imaginations? This chapter had to come first in order to set the stage for the other ghostly queerings but also as a way of confronting readerly resistance head-on. This chapter, therefore, does not solely provide a queer reading of the novel but also a consideration of how *Beloved*/*Beloved* queers everything she/it rubs up against. A reading of *Beloved*

must come first because that is how haunting goes. If you try to ignore it, terrible things will happen.

Over her entire body of work, looking back at the first four novels and gazing ahead to the future works, *Beloved* haunts because it has grown, like a succubus, beyond the words Morrison has written. It has assumed a life of its own. In many ways, Morrison's characterization of the novel as having an agency of its own has contributed to the ways the novel and its ghost have grown mythic over the years, and we, too, must recognize ourselves as collaborators in the building of myth. Chapter 3, "Houses: *Beloved* Haunts *Paradise*," examines Morrison's reconsideration of the haunted house narrative, a popular narrative that Morrison reshapes in order to more fully engage in questions of place and (sexual) orientation. Beginning with *Beloved*, the chapter considers what it means to collapse the distance between inside and outside, interiority and exteriority, spirit and containment. Paul D's arrival at 124 enacts a heteronormative drama when he drives the ghost out of the house and enters as a masculine, patriarchal presence, disrupting the all-female world that Denver fears losing. Despite the powerfully spatial rendition of heteronormativity in these opening pages, the novel returns to the notion of a queer space or orientation and forestalls simplistic interpretations of a (sexual) orientation or a normative reading of any of the characters. The battle for space, the struggle to understand and make peace with its interiority, announces the novel's resistance to fixed meanings of orientation.

This is a strategy Morrison will return to in *Paradise*, and the chapter sees the later novel as haunted by the earlier exploration of space as symbolic of familial and sexual meanings. In *Paradise*, however, Morrison allows us to see this application of meaning through the misogynist perspective of the men of Ruby. But these voices, with classic Morrison finesse, are not only proved unreliable but also representative of cultural and historical forces that tie sanctuary to danger, paradise to exclusions, and female bodies to perversity. *Paradise* is one of many novels haunted by *Beloved*, but it is also probably the richest in pointing to the convergence of racist, misogynist, and homophobic discourses as structured upon certain historical and ghostly configurations of space.

Moving from a consideration of space in *Paradise* to its representation of the interiority of motherhood and its resistance to clichés of black matriarchy, chapter 4 examines ghostly figures who not only counter clichéd representations of black matriarchy but also test the limits of love through an erasure of the line between the living and the

dead. “Matriarchy: *Paradise* Haunts *Love*” furthermore considers these novels as part of the trilogy (with *Love* serving as a coda to the trilogy) that *Beloved* begins. There is as much attention to motherhood, the special exigencies of this powerful subjectivity, in these two novels as in Morrison’s most famous novel, but in the later novels mothers turn up missing and haunt those who remain behind. If motherhood represents Morrison’s most powerful theme for exploring the limits of love, these novels complicate normative conceptions by queering matriarchy.

Love, as this chapter argues, is Morrison’s queerest novel, offering three central figures who are queer, though not without making, in Terry Castle’s words, the lesbian apparitional, in this case through L’s association with matriarchy and the novel’s “closet” narrative of lesbian desire as motherly concern rather than erotic identification. In creating a pair between *Paradise* and *Love*, I am following in this chapter a simple chronology of publication, but these two novels also speak powerfully to one another about the unfinished business of the trilogy and its exploration of all kinds of love. The latter novel, therefore, might be seen as a compendium of types of love, but Morrison’s introduction, as I consider in the chapter, highlights the novel’s germ in lesbian and outlaw identities.

In chapter 5, “Music: *Love* Haunts *Song of Solomon*,” I invert chronology and consider the way that *Love* might haunt an earlier novel, *Song of Solomon*. Much has been written about Morrison’s third and very important novel, but *Love* helps to clarify some of the most mysterious hauntings in the earlier novel. In this chapter, I take my biggest risks in considering sound as ghost, asking how the “ghostly voicings” help to explore the inordinate pressures placed upon black men as they navigate a terrain riddled with homophobia, misogyny, and violence. These two novels, along with *Beloved*, offer scenes that challenge popular stereotypes of black gangs with more complicated depictions that, for all their painful detailing of violence, also explore mystical spirit forces that help to imagine the black man with agency and possibilities rather than hopelessness.

In examining Morrison’s exploration of male violence through her evocations of sound and her allusions to music, this chapter provides an alternative to the many essays that have considered music as salutary in Morrison. In many interviews, Morrison has imagined a much wider field of meaning for black music, and my reading of *Love* and *Song of Solomon* sees music as not just haunting in the sense of memorable but as mystical, supernatural, and no less engaged than *Beloved* or L in reaching from another plane of existence.

A logical extension to the discussion of music in chapter 5 is the examination of voice in chapter 6. “Voice: *Song of Solomon* Haunts *Jazz*” considers voice as a specter, beginning with the many voices in *Song of Solomon* but locating its queerest point of view in Pilate, the woman who sings the songs of the ancestors, though she does not necessarily slavishly accept their choices. Pilate, indeed, may be Morrison’s greatest representation of an escape from the pressures of heteronormativity. Some scholars have seen her as the central consciousness of the novel, and my reading finds community in those arguments. But Pilate’s point of view becomes most powerful in its relationship to a shifting narratorial point of view. The openness this creates in the novel is powerful and far exceeds the usual analysis of *Song of Solomon*’s ambiguous ending, and it haunts Morrison’s greatest experiment with voice in her sixth novel, *Jazz*.

In the latter novel, Morrison offers perhaps her most elusive ghost, the disembodied voice of a narrator envisioned as a book. It is a tour de force novel that may at first resist everything except the most sophisticated readings of its postmodern play and metafictional conceits. In this chapter, I use *Song of Solomon* to ask whether the narrator might be identified not only with such philosophical and literary abstractions, which receive a most powerful reading in Maurice O. Wallace’s “Print, Prosthesis, (Im)Personation: Morrison’s *Jazz* and the Limits of Literary History,” but also the rather embattled identity position of bisexuality. How does the narrator, in its neutered role as book open to all readers, present characters through a lens of bisexual desire, highlighting such possibilities even in the face of virulent heterosexuality.

Chapter 7, “Blackness: *Jazz* and *Tar Baby*,” might have easily served as a fine introduction for this book, had not *Beloved* threatened to assume its prime position by virtue of its popularity. But my examination of *Jazz* and *Tar Baby* considers how Morrison’s evocation of a mythic blackness is already queer. As Darieck Scott argues—with credit given to Frantz Fanon—“blackness functions in Western cultures as a repository for fears about sexuality,” and, by extension, “blackness is queer” (10). Scott offers a powerful reading of *Beloved*, one that focuses on the silences, elisions, and repressions tied to the sexual violation that occurs in the chain gang scene, which is addressed in other passages of the novel and haunts Paul D’s consciousness. My consideration of mythic blackness as tied to queer identities finds *Jazz* to be rich with layers of interpretation as the characters try to make sense of the world that already comes to them imprinted with stories that underwrite myths of

sexuality and race. The narrator of the novel comments upon the stories but is none the smarter for it, lost in the same quagmire that attaches sexualized meaning to race and racist meaning to sex.

Jazz finds an antecedent, one that is full of ghostly whispers, in *Tar Baby*, which more directly announces in its title an interest in investigating myth. Morrison has said that “the exploration of the Tar Baby tale was like stroking a pet to see what the anatomy was like but not to disturb or distort its mystery” (“Unspeakable” 394), and a sign that she has in fact preserved the mystery may be seen in the many interpretations of the novel and its central trope of the Tar Baby. In thinking of it as haunting *Jazz*, this chapter focuses on the vision in the Paris supermarket, one of the shortest scenes and most minor characters to ever receive such intense scrutiny from scholars. My own offering in this chapter sees the Parisian woman as a seed for considering the novel’s many challenges to heteronormativity and a scene that disrupts its own interest in representing lesbian desire, albeit fastening it upon myths of blackness and desires for authenticity and community.

In chapter 8, “Whiteness: *Tar Baby* Haunts *A Mercy*,” I return to *Tar Baby* and flip the coin over to examine its representation of whiteness as both fundamentally ghostly, unable to hold its power through strategies of invisibility, and provocatively queer even as it performs heterosexual privilege with ease. Valerian, as Morrison has stated in an interview, is a center of sorts, but the novel has many centers and it wastes no time in orchestrating the challenge from the supposed margins. Valerian, furthermore, grows more complex as his centrality gives way to other centers, and the novel ends with him almost indistinguishable from a ghost, a victim of his own self-displacement from the details of life. His helplessness, which results in his reliance on his trusted servant Sydney, may be seen as a counterpoint to an early scene in the novel that positions him as the outrageous “date” for Son, who seems decidedly less like a surrogate child to Valerian and more like a provocative partner, one who gets sexualized but ultimately proves himself to be unwilling to perform as an exotic black male, certainly not in order to hold up fictions of whiteness.

In considering *Tar Baby*’s representation of whiteness as a ghost before its time (i.e., a living and rather queer ghost), I see it as a seed for Morrison’s most overt homosexual pair in *A Mercy*. Although most readers will readily accept Scully and Willard as queer, I am interested in how Morrison extends her considerations of whiteness to these white indentured servants, clearly the center of little more than their own

worlds and a representation of whiteness far different from that of Valerian Street. And yet Willard and Scully not unlike Valerian have their ghosts. They appear in the novel almost as reminders of the decentering of whiteness, which already happens if any one of the chain of signifiers, such as heterosexuality, is missing. They are, therefore, paradoxes of whiteness, male but homosexual, white but indentured. Not surprisingly, Morrison associates them with the dead and the living, able to see the ghost of Sir and yet also instrumental in bringing Sorrow's child into the world. Unlike the critique of whiteness that underwrites *Tar Baby*, whiteness in *A Mercy* has an overtly queer face, one that makes homosexuality a direct theme while only associating white queerness with specters and not making it the embodiment of ghostliness. Nevertheless, the two themes are intertwined and invite us to consider Morrison's evolving exploration of race, spirit, and sexual dissidence.

In a career devoted to considering the very limits of love, Morrison, as I have been arguing, often turns to the intertwining tropes of queerness and ghostliness to express those limits or, rather, the erasure of those limits. It is fitting, therefore, for such an argument to culminate in its own risks, and so in chapter 9 I pursue what I consider to be one of our culture's greatest failings—our inability to love, understand, and embrace others, those people whose varied identities have increasingly been included under the umbrella term “transgender.” A recent study “brings to light what is both patently obvious and far too often dismissed from the human rights agenda. Transgender and gender non-conforming people face injustice at every turn: in childhood homes [and in every other aspect of life].”⁹ Although the rates of poverty, suicide, and abuse are high for all transgender people, transgender people of color dominate the lists of victims memorialized every year during the Transgender Day of Remembrance and through websites like “Honoring Our Dead.”¹⁰ Chapter 9 wishes to honor those victims by asking how our most important living novelist registers a cultural anxiety about transgender bodies, perhaps directing us to the very limits of our understanding of gender.

Although there is no population that more powerfully represents our culture's failure to love, understand, and embrace, I do not hope to convince anyone that Morrison has represented this embattled figure directly or even suggestively, but in this chapter I ask whether *The Bluest Eye* and *Home* wrestle with the mutability of bodies in such a way as to invite readers into the very conceptual terrain of the transgender experience and by extension the wider public discourse about such nonconforming, transgressive, undisciplined bodies. Part of this

public discourse questions the authenticity of such an existence and levels charges of imposter, fake, and neither/nor. This discourse effectively erases transgender identities even as those marginalized people seek presence, voice, visibility. It is the question of visibility that makes transgender identity all the more vexed within the African American narrative tradition, a tradition that has been so profoundly involved with questions of visibility.

In this last pairing of novels, I do not merely argue that Morrison addresses the mutability of bodies, conceiving this as related to race and gender, but I also read this theme of mutable bodies against an African American literary tradition interested in exploring what it means to be rendered invisible. This chapter, therefore, risks calling forth the dismissed transgendered body in relationship to a tradition of erased black bodies in both narrative and in life (i.e., the passing figure, the invisible man, the zoot suit, the lynched corpse). If this is the queerest ghost in a study of many queer ghosts, it is not just because it may evoke the greatest sense of disbelief or provoke the greatest resistance. It is because it will haunt with its disturbing incompleteness, incoherence, and insubstantiality. And yet, I hope to prove that Morrison's explorations of ghosts cannot help but call forth such a contested cultural site of newly racialized, sexualized, and gendered bodies.

This, then, is a study of Morrison's engagement with the present, a shifting present of the 1960s when she began writing *The Bluest Eye* and a very different world that forms an implied backdrop to her most recent work. Even as she "rips the veil" from fictions, evasions, and ignorance of enslavement and Reconstruction periods in her most famous novel, *Beloved*, she registers—as Kathryn Bond Stockton, Sharon P. Holland, and others have powerfully argued—a very specific politics of the present. History, of course, is not over, and it is interesting to place Morrison's excavations of the past into direct conversation with her engagement with the politics of the present. Whether exploring the 1600s in *A Mercy*, which a *New York Times* reviewer called "her deepest excavation into America's history," or tackling the more familiar late twentieth century in *Love*, Morrison has always had her pulse on the present.¹¹ Certainly, as many scholars have already amply and powerfully explored, Morrison's work reveals the many ways that history is not dead but alive, or, in William Faulkner's phrasing, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."¹² It is the goal of this study to fully investigate the way the contemporary politics of sexuality, race, and gender fully engage with the ghosts of four centuries of American history as powerfully articulated in Toni Morrison's work.