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Ghosted: How American Women use the Gothic Genre to Haunt Oppressors

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

right align page numbers

Abstract.....	v
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Chapter II: Isolated Feminists as Ineffective Ghosts: An Analysis of Shirley Jackson's <i>We Have Always Lived in the Castle</i>	15
Chapter III: Vampire Nation: An Analysis of Anne Rice's <i>Interview with the Vampire</i>	29
Chapter IV: How Black Women Ghost their Oppressors to Gain Power: An Analysis of Toni Morrison's <i>Beloved</i>	44
Chapter V: Human Monsters: How Storytelling Becomes Salvation in Dorothy Allison's <i>Bastard out of Carolina</i>	61
Chapter VI: Spirits that Save, Racism that Haunts: An Analysis of Louise Erdrich's <i>Four Souls</i>	77
Chapter VII: Conclusion.....	94
Works Cited.....	98

Ghosted: How American Women use the Gothic Genre to Haunt Oppressors
Thesis Abstract – Idaho State University (2019)

The American Female Gothic (AFG) is, essentially, female authors' use of the horrifying to critique the patriarchal American society and shed light on women's experiences within it. AFG authors often describe injustice as part of the American experience — a reality that is discordant with the widely-propagated American Dream ideal. To further explore this genre and its implications about its society, I analyze five novels published after the mid-20th century — one for each of the decades from the 1960s to the 2000s. This analysis provides greater perspective on the recent evolution and current state of the AFG, as well as on American society and women's role within it. By paying attention to female authors — who have sometimes been treated as literary and social outsiders — uncomfortable truths are exposed as they render themselves as ineradicable parts of the patchwork quilt that is American culture.

Key Words: American Female Gothic, feminism, Gothic, Female Gothic

Chapter One: Introduction

America rose up from a cracked foundation. Born from rebellion against oppressors, the United States was touted as a country where every person had the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Reality told a different story – one that Americans have had to grapple with ever since. Slavery, assault on Native Americans and their culture, and general oppression of minorities have defined and shaped this country to a tragic degree. The ghosts of America's past continue to haunt, forcing citizens to reckon with past and current national sins. In this way, American culture mirrors its own Gothic literature. Nightmares – such as mass murder and oppression – resurface, and the past is unavoidable. This country's Gothic novels uncover past traumas and force its readers to confront them. This, as Gothic author Dorothy Allison argues, leads to “individual and cultural enlightenment” through an “awakening to horrifying truths” (“River of Names”).

Women writers in the Gothic tradition have carved out a special place in this genre. They have used it as a tool to decry slavery, racism, sexism, and other American demons. As women, they also claim unique anxieties. Their own homes, where society aims to confine them, can become nightmarish prisons. Their own bodies rebel against them with pregnancy, miscarriage, deformity, irregularities, and so on. Social institutions like marriage can terrorize them. To grapple with the anxieties that accompany being an American woman, they write. A consideration of American Female Gothic novels from the 1960s to the 2000s makes it clear that this genre is still prevalent because America has yet to reckon with its past and present, and its women continue their struggle to overcome their unique, embedded anxieties. While race, culture, and background make those experiences different for all women as individuals, it is clear that women still have enough similarities to unify their voices into a single genre — one that

reveals some of society's most uncomfortable truths. In this introduction, after considering the history of the American Female Genre, I will further explain the purpose, methodology, organization, and findings of my thesis.

The Evolution of the American Female Gothic Genre

The American Female Gothic — a term embraced by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock — has mutated and transformed in many ways since its inception. Ellen Moers first used the term in 1976. Moers defined the Gothic literary genre as “that which has to do with fear” (91). Moers analyzed the works of writers like Ann Radcliffe who had previously been ignored or undermined and noticed that Female Gothic works often include a young woman as a central figure “who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine” (91). In analyzing Mary Shelley's literature, Moers was particularly taken with her inclusion of birth and childbearing and wrote about how profoundly feminine *Frankenstein* is with its “motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences” (93). Shelley was unlike other prominent female authors of her time in that she was not a virgin or a spinster, but a woman with children who had also had multiple miscarriages (Moers 92). After further such analyses, Moers began to notice specifically female fears embedded into Female Gothic literature, such as “fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth” (Smith and Wallace 1). She considered these to be symptoms of dissatisfaction with patriarchal society that were expressed through the Gothic genre.

Critics like Kate Ellis have built upon Moers' ideas. Ellis argues that a central theme of Female Gothic literature is “the imprisonment and vulnerability of women within structures purportedly designed for or devoted to their safety” (qtd. Bailey 272). Jennifer Haytock adds to

this idea by noting that “the female Gothic has been defined as a specific mode and genre in which women’s lives are rendered as horror tales and the familiar and domestic are shown as threatening, especially in their normalcy” (3). American women writers like August Evans Wilson, Kate Chopin, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman have explored the theme of horrors in Female Gothic literature mirroring the horrors of life under a patriarchal system in their own writing (Bailey 278).

Over time, though, critics began to notice that works by diverse female authors in the Gothic genre were being dismissed or ignored in favor of works by middle-class, heterosexual white women. Poststructuralist theorists also pointed out issues with the idea of a “Female Gothic” genre as they “destabilized concepts of gender, and the genre came into question” (Smith and Wallace 1). That perspective generates more questions: for example, is a lesbian, bisexual, or transgender woman’s voice welcome in this genre? Are her perspectives and unique experiences considered? Such questions lead to divisions within the Female Gothic genre and the classification of new genres — such as “‘women’s Gothic’, ‘feminine Gothic’, ‘lesbian Gothic’, even ‘Gothic feminism’” (Smith and Wallace 1). This certainly demonstrates that the idea of the Female Gothic as one-size-fits-all is inadequate.

As a result, other groups have created their own niche within or outside of the Female Gothic. Queer Studies, for example, began to intersect with this genre because both “share a common emphasis on transgressive acts and subjectivities” (Smith and Wallace 6). Authors of lesbian fiction also seem drawn to the genre because it is “a vehicle through which the interrogation and problematising of mainstream versions of reality and so-called ‘normal’ values is made possible” (Smith and Wallace 16). This has led to a queer or lesbian gothic, as mentioned above. African-American writers have also made the genre their own. Vicent

Cucarella-Ramon writes that black female authors use the Gothic to denounce the system of slavery and aim to “counteract the derogatory stereotypes that rendered African-American women at the very bottom of the social ladder” (Cucarella-Ramon 24). In such literature, themes such as possession, imprisonment, retribution, sin, and guilt are recurrent. The genre becomes a tool to record “the scene of America’s greatest guilt: slavery” (Cucarella Ramon 25). In his criticism of works like *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, Cedric Gael Bryant uses a specific term for the concept: African-American Gothic.

The term Female Gothic has also been exchanged for terms uniting authors and characters by nation rather than by gender — such as the American Gothic. The first novel to be considered American Gothic (a term that developed in the late 1970s) was Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland; Or, the Transformation: An American Tale* (Bailey 270). Leslie Fiedler is one scholar who embraces that term and “famously identifies American culture itself as essentially Gothic” (Bailey 270). Indeed, certain Gothic elements do seem to be particularly American, such as the “inescapability of past, monomania, and falsehood of foundational tenets of American society” (Bailey 271). Those tenets include freedom from persecution based on difference, equality and opportunity, the possibility of self-determinism, and so on.

Does the Female Gothic as a genre have a purpose or is it obsolete? Laura Fitzgerald poses this question as she analyzes the history and progression of the genre. She links the Female Gothic to the rise of feminism in the U.S. in the late 1960s and 1970s (Fitzgerald 9). She contends that the Female Gothic rescued obscured works that were dismissed as “silly” and also was “instrumental in institutionalizing Gothic studies” (Fitzgerald 9). Feminist viewpoints provided a fresh take on the genre and made it a recurring focal point of scholars, when otherwise it may have faded out of prominence. “In naming the Female Gothic [Moers] initiated

women's claim to the Gothic and reclaimed women's lost legacy" Fitzgerald writes (14). Fitzgerald concludes that while the genre can be considered too much of an umbrella term, it "still has power to teach us an important lesson about the sway that the Gothic has had over readers, criticism and culture" (10). Furthermore, Moers "should not be put to the periphery of a field she helped define" (Fitzgerald 15). Smith and Wallace agree. They write that it is worth retaining Moers' term because despite how "much we problematise and qualify it, because it does act as a historical marker to the pioneering work done by her and others" (Smith and Wallace 7). Moers rescued authors like Radcliffe from obscurity, and deserves to be so preserved herself.

Where does that leave American female authors of the Gothic genre, then? How are their works classified, or how should they be classified? Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues for the term American Female Gothic, which he defines as "the use by American women of supernatural conventions as a form of cultural critique" (*Scare Tactics* 1). This form of fiction was especially prevalent between about 1850 and 1930 in America, Weinstock contends. Somehow, though, American women's use of the genre has been little noticed and rarely studied in comparison with their British counterparts (*Scare Tactics* 2). Weinstock writes that this is problematic because "understandings of the American culture out of which it arose and to which it responded are incomplete until the prominence of such fiction is taken into account" (*Scare Tactics* 2). Weinstock claims that the Gothic was prevalent during that time period because it was a "'respectable literary enterprise' that could enhance the reputation of the successful author and that ghostly tales are welcomed by American periodicals" (*Scare Tactics* 4). Other cultural events led to the rise of the genre as well, such as a religious crisis of faith in the wake of Enlightenment rationalism and subsequently Darwinism, biblical criticism, and the rise of

science; nostalgia for passing ways of life and a sense of uprootedness or disconnection in the face of modernity; the need for consolation after the devastation of the Civil War; and the ascendancy of Freudian psychoanalytic conceptions of the mind (*Scare Tactics* 5). Christmas ghost tales like Dickens' *A Christmas Story* also became popular. Spiritualism, the belief that the dead and living can communicate, took root in America in the 1880s and also contributed to the popularity of supernatural fiction (*Scare Tactics* 6).

Writers of the American Female Gothic between 1849 and 1931 tended to “emphasize the lack of control women possessed over their own lives and bodies and to present an underlying feminist critique of oppressive gender expectations” (*Scare Tactics* 16). In this way, women raised questions “about marriage, motherhood, domesticity, and sexuality, as well as to frame debates about ‘progress’ and the moral vision of the developing American republic” (Weinstock 18). Weinstock further notes that women’s work differed from men’s work in the Gothic genre because it was less horrific and focused instead on misogynistic social practices. “Oppressive gender codes turn out to be scarier than the ghosts,” Weinstock writes (*Scare Tactics* 19).

What happened to the genre after 1930? Weinstock argues that it declined because of a variety of reasons, such as women’s rights advancements, the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, a decline in the respectability of supernatural tales, the economic impact of the American Great Depression, and technology that resulted in a changed worldview (*Scare Tactics* 194). However, Weinstock admits that this view fails to take into account the supernatural output in the 1930s through the 1960s of American female authors like Shirley Jackson (*Scare Tactics* 197). He argues, “There is still work to be done on the supernatural fiction of American women in the middle decades of the twentieth century; it may turn out that there are substantially more

supernatural stories by women during the period than has been acknowledged, but also that this body of fiction may have its own set of recurring themes” (*Scare Tactics* 197). Weinstock also offers the possibility that the Female gothic resurfaces in the form of movies and TV.

Weinstock further notes the “resurgence of uncanny themes” at the end of the twentieth century by authors like Joyce Carol Oates, Toni Morrison, and Louise Erdrich (*Scare Tactics* 197). Weinstock cites scholar Kathleen Brogan who argues that the American Female Gothic did not disappear at all. Rather, it was “reclaimed most especially by contemporary ethnic women who put ghosts to work in late-twentieth and now twenty-first-century American literature to contest the ways in which minorities are “ghosted” (qtd. *Scare Tactics* 197). By defining the limits of his project, Weinstock has invited others to further investigate trends in this genre.

Many prominent contemporary American women authors have continued to engage with the Female Gothic tradition. As Weinstock notes, contemporary American Female Gothic (AFG) literature has been overlooked, which is unfortunate because opportunities are then lost to better understand America and its culture. Analyses of these women’s works demonstrate that America is still grappling with its past sins — such as slavery and the atrocities committed (and continuing to be committed) against Native Americans and other minorities. Furthermore, America is reckoning with recurrent traumas such as mass shootings, mistreatment of women, and oppression of minorities. Through their Gothic literature, American authors such as Morrison, Erdrich, and Allison seem to be forcing the country to face its faults. At the same time, they are uncovering uncomfortable truths about women’s experiences in a still-patriarchal society. While each author has a unique perspective on and critique of America, their voices are unified by their desire to cause their readers to confront reality — which is made possible through their Gothic literary works.

Considering Recent AFG works

To summarize the work of some of the theorists mentioned above – like Moers, Fiedler, and Weinstock – the American Female Gothic genre is, essentially, female authors’ use of the horrifying to critique the patriarchal American society and shed light on women’s experiences within it. “The horrifying” may mean supernatural beings, conditions, or events, such as ghosts, vampires, immortality, prophecies, or the use of magic. However, “the horrifying” could also entail very realistic beings, conditions, or events, such as abusive stepfathers, enslaving white men, non-conforming individuals, societal iniquity, pregnancy, slavery, or cultural oppression. The Gothic functions partly by placing abusive men and oppressive systems in the same narrative role as ghosts, sorcerers, vampires, and other supernatural creatures. This equates the real and imagined villains and may also be a way to disguise a discussion of social terrors that may not be heard otherwise. Either way, these writers invoke fear in their readers by asking them to confront distressing realities.

American women—in lived experience and in writing— must contend with their country’s specific brand of issues, including historical and current sexism and oppression of minorities such as African Americans and Native Americans, as well as failure to achieve quintessential American goals such as equality and liberty. AFG authors often describe atrocities like domestic violence, shootings, and sexual abuse as part of the American experience — a reality that is discordant with the widely-propagated American Dream ideal. To further explore this genre and its implications about its society, this thesis analyzes five novels published after the mid-20th century — one for each of the decades from 1960 to 2010. This analysis provides greater perspective on the recent evolution and current state of the AFG, as well as on American society and women’s role within it. The key questions I consider in this thesis are as follows:

What do trends and patterns in the American Female Gothic genre — from the 1960s to the present — indicate about American society? Why do women write dark and disturbing stories? Are any of the anxieties expressed in AFG literature specifically rooted in the characters' or authors' identities as Americans?

The novels I analyze to address these questions include: Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962); Anne's Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976); Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987); Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992); and Louise Erdrich's *Four Souls* (2001). I chose these novels because they represent a range of contemporary American Female Gothic texts. In order to consider patterns in the genre over time, I selected one novel for each decade between 1960 and 2010. These novels were also chosen due to their varied subject material; some contain supernatural elements and some do not; most are set in different periods of American history; and their themes are distinct — though patterns can be detected. In addition to choosing these books for chronological and thematic reasons, I also selected them due to the diversity of their authors. The authors include four white women, an African-American woman, and a Native American woman. Five of the authors identify as heterosexual and one identifies as homosexual. The authors also come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. A common critique of feminism is that it is too essentializing and represents only the viewpoints of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. This selection of authors, then, ensures that various female voices are included and considered. Furthermore, their diverse perspectives contribute to a more complete assessment of this genre and its implications about American society. As I consider each novel, I apply an array of theories from feminists and others, which I further describe below.

Application of Theory

One of the central theories I apply to my primary works is Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny. Freud writes that the uncanny has to do with that which is frightening, but he also works to define the term beyond that (219). He discusses the German translation of the word *unheimlich*, which literally means "unhomely". Homely means, in one sense, "belonging to the house or family" (Freud 222). Therefore, "unhomely" would be that which does not pertain to the house or family. However, in German, the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich* became synonymous in some uses — specifically when used to mean uncanny (Freud 226). The term the words denote can also mean that which "ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud 225). Following the etymology of these words, one can deduce that even what seems most familiar — home and family — can haunt in that they appear when (and how) they should not. When what is hidden and repressed resurfaces it becomes "uncanny," Freud argues, and some of those dark secrets seem to be hiding in the most familiar places. This theory certainly complements many of the traits of American Female Gothic literature, such as exposing the supposedly-safe domestic space as a place of horror.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque also provides a useful perspective to apply to American Female Gothic literature. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin specifically details the traits of a grotesque body. He writes that especial importance is placed on "those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (26). Such body parts include "the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (Bakhtin 26). The gaping mouth has special importance, he writes. The open mouth is associated with eating and swallowing, which he says is "the most ancient symbol of death and destruction" (Bakhtin 26). Special attention is also given to "all that prolongs the body and links it to other

bodies or the world outside” (Bakhtin 29). Body parts that outgrow the rest of the body are also significant because in “normal” society, “that which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off...is eliminated, hidden, or moderated” (Bakhtin 29).

I use Bakhtin’s special focus on the body to show how, as some critics have noted, a particularly American aspect of the Gothic is that it “included grotesque characters that, despite their mere humanity (or because of it), are able to generate real horror” (Bailey 271). The grotesque shows how people can become scarier than any supernatural being or force. This theory is useful when analyzing physical descriptions of characters who stand out, protrude, or fit any of the other above descriptions. The grotesque also demonstrates how perceived outsiders may be considered threatening or even terrifying by mainstream populations. I also use the grotesque to demonstrate how when Gothic characters try to judge others based on appearance, it sometimes backfires as those judgments are proved wrong. Gothic characters tend to use some form of “mask” to deceive those around them – and sometimes succeed in deceiving themselves as well. Sometimes these masks are literal –in the form of “cowls, cassocks, cloaks and veils” – and sometimes they are figurative (Wagner). Either way, the Gothic author attempts to reveal what is beneath the masks – or demonstrate that true countenances can never be defined for they are always exchanging one “mask” for another.

This thesis also draws on the theories of a number of feminists. Those theories include: Susan Bordo’s theory of female bodies as sites for rebellion; Barbara Smith and Toni Morrison’s theories about how black women’s stories are often ignored, forgotten, or excluded; Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity; bell hooks’ criticisms of feminism; Paula Gunn Allen’s theory of feminist tribalism; Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality; and Kathleen Brogan’s theory of cultural haunting. Applying such a variety of lenses to these texts helps me to

more fully consider the intersections traversed when women write Gothic texts. Furthermore, the diversity of these scholars — they include men and women of different races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sexual orientations — strengthens my claims by incorporating a multitude of perspectives. Uniting the range of texts and theories will be a key idea — reckonings.

Key Idea: Reckonings

The idea of reckonings is prevalent within this thesis. Avery Gordon introduces this term in an analysis of *Beloved*. Gordon writes: “Reckoning with ghosts is not like deciding to read a book: you cannot simply choose the ghosts with which you are willing to engage...To be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects” (190). Confrontation with ghosts – or shameful pasts – is not an optional or pleasant experience. However, it can be a useful experience because it provides the haunted with the opportunity for a “reckoning”. A reckoning, as Gordon describes it, means coping with ghosts rather than running from them (139). In the AFG, sometimes the ghosts are literal. Other times they are memories of murders or national sins such as the “lingering inheritance of racial slavery” (Gordon 139). Ghosts – in whatever form – force the haunted to face them and “confront an event in their past that loiters in the present” (Gordon 139). According to this definition, the American Female Gothic genre is rather ghostlike itself in that its writers try to create such confrontations between readers/society and what has been haunting them.

Findings

The American Female Gothic genre tellingly reveals hard truths about what it means to be a woman in the United States. To truly understand that position, one must first consider the myth and reality of America. America has always been painted as a place where equality and freedom reign and where every person has the same opportunities and chances for success as

anyone else. Its ideals have become enticing for many who have immigrated here through history: to arrive in America is to have a chance to realize one's dreams and to live in a place that preaches "liberty and justice for all." Yet, the myth America created about itself does not apply to many of its citizens. Consider the people who were already in America before it was colonized by European settlers, or those who were kidnapped from Africa and taken as hostages and slaves into America. Consider the women who read that troubling line in the American constitution — "all men are created equal" — and perceive its unabashed sexism. Consider the poor and the uneducated. For them, the American ideals of justice and equality can be as chimerical as a mirage. Yet America's ruling class — middle and upper-class white men — have often drowned out their voices and stories with their own constructed narrative about America. History books tell of the grandeur of America and its founders, but minimize the terrors upon which this country was built. Even today, though, that suppressed history refuses to be erased or silence and often comes out in literature, such as the AFG genre. Frederic Jameson describes this phenomenon: "If the modern reader is bored or scandalized by the roots such texts send down into the contingent circumstances of their own historical time, this is surely testimony as to his resistance to his own political unconscious and to his denial . . . of the reading and the writing of the test of history within himself" (19). This idea — that literature becomes an avenue for the oppressed to raise their voices and potentially reshape Americans' perhaps unconscious and often skewed perceptions of their own history and society — is at the root of many Female Gothic texts.

Women are among America's oppressed and have rebelled against their country's patriarchy and sexism throughout history. Waves of feminism have risen in response to oppression and are credited with an increase in women's rights. However, feminists have also

been criticized for reflecting only the experiences of white middle and upper class women — the counterpart to America's ruling class. Women of different races, from the lower class, and from the LGBTQ community have often been excluded. Of all the hushed voices, theirs have perhaps been the most silenced. Nonetheless, American women of all backgrounds have continued to fight to share their stories. The American Female Gothic genre has become an invaluable microphone for those muted voices.

To read those texts and listen to those voices is to better understand America, even if — or especially because — the stories told are often dark and disturbing. My study of the five aforementioned AFG novels demonstrates that this genre has not waned, as Weinstock suggests. Its authors still press on, and will likely continue to do so until American ghosts are confronted and American ideals become more tangible. A country without the proverbial “skeleton in the closet” and without oppression and prejudice is perhaps impossible — but that is precisely the reason for the AFG genre. As long as oppression lives on, so will it. Through literature, women will always illuminate hidden terrors in the hopes of acknowledging and beginning to address them. As long as women have frightful experiences in the United States, they will have frightful tales to tell. American women have turned AFG texts into ghosts that will forever haunt oppressors. By doing so, they raise their voices and empower each other. These conclusions become apparent after considering five AFG novels from 1960 to 2010, each of which I will analyze in chronological order.

Chapter Two: Isolated Feminists as Ineffective Ghosts

An Analysis of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

The familiar saying “home sweet home” seems perverse when considering Shirley Jackson's 1962 classic, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. In the novel, Merricat and Constance Blackwood are reclusive siblings outcast from society after Merricat murders four family members — her mother, father, brother, and an aunt — by poisoning their sugar during dinner one evening. The mass murder allows Merricat and Constance to live in a home that is entirely theirs. However, to keep it they must overcome a series of obstacles that leaves them and their house radically changed. *Castle* tells a story not only of two reclusive sisters, but also of American society and women's place within it.

Many scholars have analyzed this text and its implications about gender roles in the United States. Critics such as Dara Downey and Diana Wallace point out how homes can become both refuges and prisons, and how female gothic works such as this one often paint a portrait of the terrors of domestic life. Homes are refuges when they are female-dominated and prisons when they are ruled by patriarchs, Darryl Hattenhauer and Wyatt Bonikowski argue. Women who accept patriarchal order and the norms of their gender roles become passive angels, while those who stray from housewifery are demonized — they become witches, madwomen, and ghosts (if not all three) — according to critics such as Bonikowski, Avril Horner, Sue Zlosnik, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, and Marie Mulvey-Roberts. The theme of witchy women has become a way to diabolize and ostracize women who defer from societal conventions (Bonikowski and Fitch). Critics note that this is something Jackson experienced in her own life; they describe the parallels between Jackson and Merricat's witch-like qualities (Hattenhauer and Downey). They also note similarities between Jackson and Constance in that they were both

agoraphobic and were expert at domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning (Hattenhauer and Downey). This returns to the oxymoronic idea of polarized women — they are domestic cherubs; they are witchlike demons.

The frequent critical comparisons between Jackson and the two heroines (or perhaps anti-heroines would be more apt) of this novel seem to demonstrate how Jackson uses them to survive her own world. Whereas Jackson is constrained to an inescapable lifestyle of housewifery and motherhood, she seems to live vicariously through Constance and Merricat as they take the path she cannot; they stay single, they do not bear children, they disappear, and they escape American patriarchy. Yet their forlorn state at the end of the novel also seems to illuminate the hopelessness Jackson felt when considering the options for American women of her time; none allowed both female independence and social inclusion. As a female gothic text, this novel demonstrates a pervasive frustration with women's place in society. When this novel was published in 1962, significant achievements had been reached regarding women's rights, yet many women still felt anxious and angry about their lack of agency (Horner and Zlosnik, "Introduction" 1-2). Female Gothic texts contribute to what Horner and Zlosnik call an "an awareness of what it means to be a woman," and I would contend that this text indicates that even independent women are still disempowered by their society and by their own tendencies to isolate themselves rather than face the world.

This chapter takes into account and attempts to add new perspectives to the above critical readings of *Castle*. Critics often mention Constance's agoraphobia, but I will draw attention to Merricat's obsessive-compulsive tendencies and how both mental disorders are a form of social insubordination. I will also challenge the idea that the siblings represent polarized versions of womanhood (angel vs. witch). Rather, I contend that Constance and Merricat each contain both

goodness and evil and therefore demonstrate how women are complex beings who transcend any type of either/or dichotomy. This chapter will also uncover how even seemingly empowered, independent women become powerless and insubstantial within their own societies. More specifically, I will argue that this novel demonstrates the ineffectiveness of privileged, upper-class feminists who advocate only for themselves rather than for all women. *Castle* will be analyzed under the following lenses: Susan Bordo's theory of female bodies as sites for rebellion, Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory regarding food and eating as elements of the grotesque, and bell hooks' theory that feminist movements must include women of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds in order to be meaningful and effective. These analyses will make it clear that Merricat and Constance symbolize women who struggle to find purpose and happiness in a patriarchal world; they also symbolize the early failure of the feminist movement to advocate for the rights and equality of all women. In the end, Merricat and Constance's isolation and ghostlike recession from the world seem to represent the fate of all women who dissent from patriarchal rule but fail to stand up for communities beyond their own domestic sphere.

Mental disorders as rebellion

Susan Bordo argues that mental illnesses can be read as forms of rebellion against patriarchy. In her essay "Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body" she argues that "the bodies of disordered women . . . offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter — a text that insists, actually demands, that it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender" (Bordo 2365). Agoraphobics, for example, fulfilled the feminist stereotypes of the time; they are "childlike, nonassertive, helpless without a man" (Bordo 2367). Bordo writes that women's bodies become their last means of communication when their voices

are extinguished; pathology becomes an “embodied *protest* — unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an effective language, voice or politics, but protest nonetheless” (2369).

As an agoraphobic who will not venture past her backyard, Constance embodies all the ideals of a perfect mother and she seems to enjoy her roles of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of Merricat and their Uncle Julian (who survived the poisoning but is now disabled). How, then, could her agoraphobia be read as a protest? Perhaps the disorder is a way for her to ironically be a nonconformist by doing exactly what society asks of her. As Bordo writes, it is as if the housebound agoraphobic is saying: ““You want me in this home? You’ll have me in this home — with a vengeance!” (2367). Toward the end of the novel, Constance refuses Charles’ last attempts to woo her. Instead she chooses the family house — even though it is half destroyed after a fire — as a safer refuge than the marriage Charles offers.

Merricat is not agoraphobic but displays behavior that is symptomatic of obsessive compulsive disorder, in which a person “may be driven to perform [an] act not as an end in itself but as a means to produce or prevent some other situation, although he is usually aware that the two bear no logical causal relation to each other” (“Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder”). For example, Merricat feels the need to “guard” her home with certain superstitious practices: she buries a doll and several silver dollars that she believes will keep her safe as long as they remain in the ground, and she nails a book to a tree which she believes will protect her as long as it remains there. She obsessively checks the items each week to make sure they are in place.

The items — the doll, coins, and book — seem representative of what she fears losing. For example, the buried doll indicates her fear of losing her pre-adult lifestyle. To further explain, Merricat seems to have “died” in a symbolic sense after she murders her family

members. As Uncle Julian insists, “My niece Mary Katherine died in an orphanage, of neglect, during her sister’s trial for murder” (Jackson 93). Indeed, Merricat seems to have stalled in her emotional development. At age 18, she still acts like she is 12 — the approximate age when she poisoned her family members. As an infantilized woman, Merricat is able to avoid adhering to the societal conventions that accompany adulthood — such as marriage, childbearing, and housewifery. Therefore, perhaps as long as the doll remains buried, Merricat will not have to “grow up” and her position in life will be safeguarded.

Merricat also seems to fear losing the family wealth and the freedom and independence it allows. She perceives any potential suitors as enemies trying to gain her and her sisters’ property and wealth through marriage. When the Blackwoods’ cousin Charles suddenly arrives one day, he fulfills Merricat’s worst fears as he pursues Constance and, thereby, her money. The buried coins are an attempt to protect their fortune — which is kept in a safe in the house. Interestingly, Merricat believes that the items and ideals she seeks to protect are safer buried in the wilderness than kept someplace in the house, which demonstrates how she sees nature as a refuge from the patriarchal order often symbolized by houses (especially after Charles invades it).

Merricat, then, seems to think that she and Constance hold their power by rejecting the norms of womanhood, protecting their wealth, and maintaining control over their stories and voices — as symbolized by the book. One day, the book falls from the tree where it has been nailed. Merricat takes this to be a sign that danger is near, and sure enough Charles arrives shortly thereafter to challenge their matriarchal order. In his self-assigned role as the new head of the family, he refuses to discuss the family history and will not let others mention it either. He also silences Merricat and Constance when they voice their opinions or demonstrate resistance to his control. Therefore, the items Merricat superstitiously checks to guard the home’s safety do

indeed seem to represent what is under siege from patriarchal figures — a woman's freedom to reject social norms, a woman's right to her own property, and a woman's ability to tell her own story. As Bordo would contend, these sisters' mental conditions are last-resort rebellions against patriarchy.

Women as Saints and Witches

Merricat and Constance's extreme personalities could also represent the way that society unfairly polarizes the female identity, rather than recognizing the complexity and humanity of each woman. Horner and Zlosnik write that women are continually described with "patterns of antithesis such as good/bad, saint/sinner and virgin/whore; a continued use of stereotypes" ("Introduction" 1-2). Laurence Talairach-Vielmas adds other antitheses associated with women, such as "spectral/corporeal, angel/demon, anemic/bloody, and virginal/sexual" (34). Women, then, are warily regarded as "other" and "evil," yet are also expected to be warm, caring, and nurturing. In many ways, Merricat and Constance seem to embody this dichotomy. Merricat dresses and acts like a tomboy — playing in the woods, refusing to cook, and taking on the dangerous tasks like going to town — while Constance acts like a typical housewife who cooks, cleans, and tends to the needs of others. Merricat is also dangerous and unfriendly (she killed her family and is rude to guests) while Constance is docile and welcoming. Horner and Zlosnik write that this is one of the great contributions of the Gothic genre: "it exposes — often sensationally, sometimes sinisterly, occasionally comically and frequently horrifyingly — the extreme reaches of the cultural celebration and demonization of women" ("Introduction" 11). Women are at once honored as foundational to society and feared as potentially disruptive to patriarchy.

Patriarchal demonization of women has developed and changed throughout the years, but has some of its earliest roots in the Christian story of Adam and Eve. According to this theology,

Eve was made from Adam's rib "which aptly illustrates the ancillary nature of her role as help-mate or mere adjunct to the male. Through the fallen figure of Eve, woman has been represented as a temptress and the feminine identified with the serpent, a creature associated with evil, poison and lowliness as it slithers along the ground" (Mulvey-Roberts 106). Women have also been demonized with many negative monikers such as "succubus, harpy, witch, and any number of supernatural beings" (Mulvey-Roberts 106). Such deprecation has established women as more monstrous and animalistic than human, which in turn "has helped demote the category of woman in social and political hierarchies" (Mulvey-Roberts 106).

Toward the end of the novel, Merricat and Constance challenge female stereotypes by demonstrating their complexity — even as murderesses, they become pitiable. This occurs when the townspeople come to put out a fire at the Blackwood Residence only to start insisting that the siblings be found and be thrown back into the house while it burns, much like a hysteric mob crying for witches to be burned at the stake. At this point the sisters seem particularly victimized. Their house is half burned down, the villagers have demanded the sisters' deaths, their Uncle Julian has died in the fire, and the mob has run into their house and ransacked it, ruining a good deal of their property. Cousin Charles, who feigned romantic interest for Constance, has proven himself to care only about the possessions and money that he tries to salvage from the wrecked house.

These sisters have become both victims and victimizers. As the reader sympathizes with the sisters in this moment, it is important to remember that they both contributed to a quadruple homicide. "As is suggested by the blind terror that Merricat inspires," Downey writes, "it would be erroneous to interpret the narrative as establishing her and Constance as helpless victims of the villagers' persecution" (299). Again, this displays the sisters' dualistic nature. They are good

and evil, victim and victimizer, housewife and witch, obedient and rebellious. Once again, in so doing, they are both rebelling and conforming. They are also proving that women are complex individuals who cannot be defined by pervasive gender stereotypes.

Making the familiar frightening

Merricat and Constance undermine patriarchal order via their mental illnesses and by challenging female stereotypes. They also revolt by subverting places, tasks, and rituals that are supportive of the patriarchal order and representative of domesticated women — such as kitchens, the preparing of meals, and eating at the dinner table. The siblings take scenes that are supposed to be comforting and homelike and transform them into spectacles of murder, death, and destruction. For example, the dinner table where the family sits when they are poisoned becomes a sort of text that remains to tell the story of what happened that evening. One day, Uncle Julian eagerly shows it to a guest who has come for tea, explaining how they still use it every day but have left it unaltered: “We have been reluctant to disturb what is, after all, a monument of sorts . . . My brother, as head of the family, sat naturally at the head of the table . . . John Blackwood took pride in his table, his family, his position in the world” (Jackson 32-33). However, the order that a dinner table typically represents — the family unit with the father at the helm; family togetherness; idyllic domestic life — has been overturned. Now the table is a relic of murders and serves as an eerie testament to a past tragedy that haunts the present. As Martin Prochazka writes, “Material objects still exist but the people who used them are gone. Such places may be said to produce feelings of the suspension or even the end of time” (31).

When the table retained its alignment with patriarchal order — that is, before the murders — Merricat was often excluded from it. The day of the murders, she was also absent from the table — a punishment for her “wickedness” and “disobedience” (Jackson 34). When her family

prohibits her from sharing dinner with them, they are banishing her in much the same way that society has ostracized “wicked” women. To retaliate, Merricat undoes the safety associated with a family meal and transforms it into terror. Constance, the only person who thinks to bring her food or comfort her after dinner, is exempted from the poisoning (Merricat knows she never takes sugar). Interestingly, Merricat does not target just the men in her family; she kills her mother and aunt in addition to a younger brother and her father (she intended to kill Julian but he took too little sugar). This seems to indicate that Merricat strives to punish not just men, but anyone who participates in patriarchal order and strips her of her independence or freedom.

This pattern can be seen once again when Merricat eradicates two more men from her life: Julian and Charles. Both men, in various ways, attempt to assert patriarchal control over the sisters, thereby erasing their identities and independence. For example, Julian claims throughout the novel that Merricat died at age 12. He refuses to acknowledge her existence, even though he sees her every day. Julian is also working on a historical account of the family history, and considers Merricat to be insignificant to his account: “She is of very little consequence to my book, and so we will have done with her” (Jackson 93). His treatment of Merricat as an unimportant ghost demonstrates the way that her family likely minimized her presence and personhood before she took away theirs.

Charles also threatens Merricat’s lifestyle by constantly trying to control her and modify her behavior. “Charles is the Gothic intruder, the would-be usurper of the sisters’ inherited estate, the male seducer looking for sex from Constance and money from them both. He assumes the patriarchal position by moving in to the room of the sisters’ dead father and wearing his watch and chain” (Hattenhauer 175-176). As he begins talking of inflicting punishment on Merricat for her unruly behavior, she challenges him in various ways: filling his bedroom with

dirt and sticks, taking his watch chain (which used to be her father's) and nailing it to a tree, and ruining the watch. It becomes clear that Merricat fears Charles "as a patriarchal figure who will take her back into the past that she escaped when she killed her parents and brother and aunt" (Hattenhauer 183). As Charles' attempts to persuade Constance to punish and perhaps even send away her younger sister grow, Merricat takes one final action to destroy her enemy: once again while the family is dining, she causes destruction. She pushes Charles' pipe (which, again, had belonged to her father) into a wastebasket full of newspaper. She then descends the stairs, sits at the table, and feigns surprise when they smell smoke from a fire that has begun upstairs. The ensuing house fire leads to Julian's death and Charles' disappearance from the sisters' lives. Once again, Merricat has subverted the safety of a family dinner and the power of an encroaching male.

A Freudian reading of these scenes demonstrates how Merricat gains power by harnessing the uncanny. Freud's theory suggests that when what is hidden and repressed resurfaces it becomes "uncanny," and that some of the darkest secrets seem to hide in the most familiar places (225-226). Accordingly, Merricat takes what is familiar — a dinner table, sugar, blackberries, meals — and makes them eerie. Even the Blackwood house becomes terrifying to those in the community. It stands there haunted by two women who are still alive but are dead to the world. Thus, the home, kitchen, dinner table, and meal times have become sources of power rather than oppression for the Blackwood women. As Downey writes: "The Blackwood sisters in *Castle* reappropriate the home's dual status as fairy-tale refuge and Gothic prison, transforming it into an impenetrable if ruined fortress while transforming *themselves* into the very malevolent supernatural beings that terrorize more conventional heroines" (291). Merricat's fear mongering

creates a protective boundary around her home that will forever isolate her and her sister from the outside world.

Part of the way that Merricat instills fear in others is through eating, which — according to Mikhail Bakhtin — is “the most ancient symbol of death and destruction” (325). Bakhtin further writes that the open mouth is a significant symbol of the grotesque in literature, and it is one that Jackson certainly invokes in this novel as she links eating and terror. Wallace adds that, in the domestic Gothic, food is often used as a vehicle for death because it reverses “the nurturing associated with the domestic feminine. Family meals are often where the repressed underside of idealized family life is exposed” (83). For example, one day the sisters welcome their guest Helen Clarke to tea. Clarke comes once a week, but on this occasion, she brings an unannounced friend. The friend is terrified to drink the tea and eat the baked goods she is served, and certainly turns down the sugar that Merricat offers her with a mischievous smile. Similarly, when Charles comes to stay with the sisters he is very reluctant to eat the meals he is served. At various points in the novel, Merricat shows that while eating has become scary for others, it has become a source of strength for her. She makes comments such as: “I was thinking that you might make a gingerbread man, and I could name him Charles and eat him” (Jackson 75); “I am going to put death in all [the townspeople’s] food and watch them die” (Jackson 110); and “I wonder if I *could* eat a child if I had the chance” (Jackson 146). Simple, innocuous aspects of daily life such as eating, cooking, afternoon tea, serving meals, the home, the dinner table, etc. have now become fearsome, but also enable the Blackwood sisters to create and live in their own matriarchal world.

Feminist viewpoints

Constance and Merricat face some of the same patriarchal obstacles as those of women described in Betty Friedan's 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique*. Rebecca Munford writes that Friedan's book "represents a turning-away from the educational and intellectual rights won by an earlier generation of feminists and a return to the home and the trappings of domestic femininity," (125). Friedan's work ushered in second-wave feminism and describes women experiencing unhappiness in their roles as housewives. These women essentially felt a void in their lives and came to feel not truly alive — like ghosts. This spectral analogy demonstrates how "female agency and desire" become invisible in patriarchal domestic structures (Munford 13). Certainly, Julian and Charles make efforts to undermine Constance and Merricat's agency. Charles tries to take away Constance's control of the family home and wealth by marrying her. Julian tries to deny Merricat's existence and exclude her from the family history. Yet, even though the men themselves are erased by the end of the novel, Constance and Merricat still become invisible. No one sees the siblings again, and they have no real impact on the world around them — other than to scare and haunt. In this way that they become ghostlike. While these sisters escape the patriarchal mold, they do not help or empower others who are less privileged to do the same.

In *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, bell hooks writes about how women who isolate themselves in female-only communities are not fully engaging in the fight to end gender-based oppression:

Equating feminist struggle with living in a countercultural, woman-centered world erected barriers that closed the movement off from most women. Despite sexist discrimination, exploitation, or oppression, many women feel their lives as they live them

are important and valuable. Naturally the suggestion that these lives could be simply left or abandoned for an alternative "feminist" lifestyle met with resistance. (27)

After Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, some women responded by living in female-only communities as a form of rebellion against the patriarchy and in order to have a safe, comfortable living experience. However, hooks points out that the women who made that choice tended to be more privileged — they were white, middle class, unmarried, and educated. They had the option to live in such a community, while many other women did not. This seems to describe Merricat and Constance as well. They are wealthy, childless, unmarried, white, middle-class women who have the means to remain in their castle-like home for the rest of their days with all the money and food they will ever need. hooks criticizes such isolation as selfish and ineffective: “Feminist movement to end sexist oppression actively engages participants in revolutionary struggle. Struggle is rarely safe or pleasurable” (28). Merricat and Constance certainly do not seem to care about advancing anyone’s life but their own, and in that way perhaps they are also emblematic of the white women leading the second-wave feminist movement who failed to consider the effects of class and race on gender oppression and thereby excluded minority women from their cause.

Jackson seems to regard Merricat and Constance’s plight sympathetically and to present it as the only alternative to marriage and motherhood that society offers. The Blackwood sisters’ poor state is society’s fault, not theirs. The resolution of Jackson’s novel implies that society should embrace women who stray from gender norms. Yet hooks would likely read the sisters’ reclusiveness as proof that feminists are not effective when they lock themselves inside of small, privileged, matriarchal worlds instead of pushing for such change everywhere. Merricat and Constance’s goals are self-centered; they are not striving for female independence and equality

across the country. Merricat and Constance simply want their *own* independence and freedom, and that is part of their tragedy.

Because Constance and Merricat have made themselves invisible, they haunt their communities with questions that will never be answered: Why was the family poisoned? What or who drove the sisters to their desperate acts, isolation, and madness? Are they happy? Readers, too, will wonder. After all, the sisters are finally “on the moon,” as Merricat frequently calls the world she’s been dreaming of — where there are no men, rules, or pressure to conform. Yet the sisters have both contributed to the deaths of multiple family members, lost most of their home and their possessions, suffered from gripping anxieties, struggled to construct identity in a society that polarizes women, had to scare others to gain power, and finally had to seal themselves off from the world. “We are so happy,” Merricat frequently repeats at the end of the novel. However, her repetition seems to make the statement that much more questionable; their lot in life at the end of the book seems more tragic than celebratory. This ambiguity creates uncertainties: Is there no truly happy life available for women in America? Who is at fault for the women’s final, deplorable state — themselves, society, or both? Certainly most women do not have the means (and/or desire) to abscond from the rest of the world forever, and those who do will likely still be discontent. America, Jackson seems to be saying, has given women a terrible ultimatum: submit to patriarchy or become invisible in an effort to escape it. Yet there is another option, as hooks points out — to unite with other women. To ignore this solution is to become invisible. Isolated feminists become ineffective ghosts; their absentia allows them to escape patriarchy but also prevents them from truly challenging it.

Chapter Three: Vampire Nation

An Analysis of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*

A vampire is “one who lives by preying on others” (“Vampire”). America gained its life in large part through the enslavement of African-Americans and the decimation of Native Americans. One could argue, then, that America is a vampiric nation. Anne Rice explores this concept in her 1976 novel *Interview with the Vampire*. Louis de Pointe du la Lac, the novel's protagonist, narrates the novel by telling his life story to a young boy. Born in the late 17th century, Louis' history is similar to that of America. He begins his life as a slaveholder and lives on for several hundred more years, watching as he and his country transform. As he recounts his biography, he is filled with melancholy and remorse. This seems to indicate that American history is sad and troubling rather than a source of pride. In this novel, Louis and other immortal American men represent the country's outdated patriarchal society that endures even amidst modern-day social progress. These male vampires become emblematic of the United States' troubled and repressed history of ostracizing groups such as African-Americans and women. In this chapter, I will discuss how Rice constructs vampirism as a metaphor for the racism, sexism, and general oppression that ceaselessly live on in America.

First, though, I will consider the trends in criticism of this novel and explain how this chapter offers new insight to an already heavily-analyzed text. William Hughes, Charles Crow, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, and George E. Haggerty all note how *Interview with the Vampire* was published around the same time that the AIDS epidemic was taking place and conclude that the vampires represent homosexuality. Louis and fellow-vampire Lestat are essentially gay partners and fathers to Claudia. Rice thereby problematizes the conventional family, Gina Wisker, a prominent scholar of vampire fiction, writes. Wisker, Hughes, and David Punter and

Glennis Byron also analyze how Claudia is infantilized by Louis and Lestat and thereby by patriarchy. This chapter focuses more on the latter theories and applies both a feminist and postcolonial lens to Rice's work. I will especially apply Ken Gelder's theory of vampires as colonists and will consider how Louis and Lestat function to oppress women. Many critics have focused on the sexuality of Louis and Lestat; this chapter will instead concentrate attention on how Louis represents the undying prejudice and oppression that live on in America despite perceived social progress.

Slavery as vampirism

Slavery was a foundational American practice, and it and its associated shame and terror have remained linked with the history of this country and its people. The fact of slavery has also seeped into American literature, perhaps especially in the Gothic genre. In fact, Teresa Goddu writes that "the Anglo-American Gothic was forged in the crucible of an Atlantic history propelled by the slave trade and the institutions of slavery. The debates over slavery and freedom in the Atlantic world . . . informed the Atlantic Gothic's particular obsession with power and its anxiety over dispossession" (Goddu, "The African American Slave Narrative" 71). Even decades and centuries after slavery was abolished, its brutalities still impact modern desires and fears. Characters in Gothic works bring these perhaps repressed emotions to the forefront, forcing readers to encounter them as well.

For example, the narrator and protagonist of *Interview with the Vampire* spends his immortal life questioning his identity and value as he vacillates between slaveholder and slave, powerful and powerless. Louis begins his journey as a mortal slaveholder and plantation owner in New Orleans. He then meets Lestat, a vampire who turns him into an immortal bloodsucker like himself. Lestat bestows this "gift" upon Louis in order to gain his plantation and slaves as a

source of income. Louis' new vampiric perspective makes him question racist beliefs that had been instilled in him:

I did not realize at the time that these slaves would be the first, and possibly the only ones, to ever suspect that Lestat and I were not ordinary creatures. I failed to realize that their experience with the supernatural was far greater than that of white men. In my own experience I still thought of them as childlike savages barely domesticated by slavery. I made a bad mistake. (Rice 27)

It is these slaves who eventually discover that Louis and Lestat are vampires and drive them off their own plantation. As a vampire, Louis questions his superiority as a white man for the first time and experiences what it is like to be dispossessed.

Furthermore, Louis becomes a slave himself when he is made into a vampire. He at first exists to serve Lestat: to make money for him and to do his bidding, whatever it may be. Lestat has power over Louis because he knows what it takes to survive as a vampire and Louis does not. When Louis realizes he is a slave and confronts Lestat about it, Lestat is matter-of-fact: "That's how vampires increase . . . through slavery. How else?" (Rice 83). This line seems to clearly equate white slaveholders with vampires; they are both beings that derive their existence from the manipulation of others.

Louis becomes a contradictory character as he searches for his identity by questioning his beliefs. Is he a slaveholder or slave himself? Does he view African-Americans as property, or as people? Does he view them as a food source or as valuable individuals whose lives should be protected (the first person he kills is African-American)? Is he a murderer? There is a time when Lestat tries to kill and drink the blood of animals only, but he eventually succumbs to his instincts and primarily kills people. In this new role as a vampire, one person must die each night

in order for him to live. Louis' guilt over this fact haunts him throughout his life. He cannot reckon with who he has been and might have been, and who he might become. "Identity," Arthur Redding writes, "is . . . deeply haunted. It is deeply haunted by what is past, and it is deeply haunted . . . by a future, by what (it) might be" (37). Finally, Louis realizes that a life dependent upon the destruction of others is no life at all: "You cannot have love and goodness when you do what you know to be evil, what you know to be wrong," he tells his lover Armand one evening (Rice 336). In order to live as a vampire, Louis has had to become cold and evil to emotionally cope with murdering so many people for such a long time (several hundred years). He realizes that the only way to cease the evil he perpetuates is to let himself die. This lesson has taken him a long time to learn and to admit, though, because he has wanted endless life and to believe that he could still be good.

If Louis is representative of the white American patriarchy, then he demonstrates how when the powerful must exist at the expense of the powerless, that existence can never be righteous. Wealthy white men, for example, have oppressed racial minorities, the impoverished, women, and others in much the same way that vampires consume others' lives to continue their own. Goddu writes that "the violence, terror and dispossession of the racialized 'other' enables white subjectivity and liberty. Whether posed as a probing critique or as a fearful response, the Gothic registers slavery as the cultural contradiction that haunts the Atlantic world's myths of freedom" ("The African American Slave Narrative" 71). This contradiction haunts not only Louis, but all of America. Leslie Fiedler describes "the guilt of the revolutionary haunted by the (paternal) past he has been striving to destroy" as central to the collective American psyche (qtd. Hogle 6). Louis at first tries to kill Lestat — who he sees as the epitome of evilness in vampires — but realizes that he, too, must be destroyed to eradicate the unjust and parasitic nature of

vampirism. Similarly, Americans cannot just bury the past to end prejudice. We must also examine our own beliefs and practices.

Nonetheless, exploiting the powerless has been an American tradition. Ken Gelder describes vampires like Louis as colonizers who arrive, destroy, and conquer. This clearly aligns vampires with the colonists who founded America. *Interview with the Vampire*, then, could be read as a postcolonial Gothic. Such narratives, Gelder writes, often describe “lives that are simultaneously independent and hopelessly enslaved or exploited . . . Questions to do with legitimacy — one’s right to occupy one place and not another, the origins of one’s claims on property and the lives of others, one’s capacity to possess something or to be dispossessed of something — are also paramount” (196). This seems to perfectly describe the internal conflicts Louis faces throughout the novel: Where does he belong? Does he have the right to claim others’ lives to save his own? Is he owned or does he own others? What constitutes freedom? Perhaps, too, these questions visit the minds of Americans who know their country was built upon the oppression of African-Americans, Native Americans, and countless others.

Sexism as vampirism

Women have also been oppressed throughout American history, a truth that is reflected throughout *Interview with the Vampire*. This oppression is best symbolized by Claudia, a child who Lestat transforms into a vampire when she is only five. At the time, her mother is dead and she is an orphan. Louis is threatening to leave Lestat and so the latter immortalizes Claudia because he knows Louis will stay to care for her. This circumstance forever dooms Claudia to live a liminal life, in which she straddles borders but never truly belongs anywhere.

Claudia is so liminalized in large part due to the infantilization inflicted upon her. She must live her life forever appearing to be five years old, when in fact she might be 30, 95, or 180

years old. She appears innocent, young, prepubescent and unschooled but is actually the antithesis. Her entrapped body is forever in conflict with her mind. “Because it cannot age,” William Hughes writes, “the vampire child will always embody the superficial image of an innocence that has long been discarded by the intellect behind its unchanging visage. The vampire child must always be queer, then, for it cannot ally itself with either the childish or the adult worlds” (344). Such infantilization of women is common in Gothic novels, Armitt writes, as women become “ensnared in patriarchy’s refusal to let them mature” (61).

Surely, Claudia does not mature physically — but she does, nonetheless, become a woman at some point. This process can be painful in Gothic literature, Armitt writes: “Repeatedly, the Gothic girl child must undergo trauma on her journey towards womanhood, and blood, that fluid especially associated with the female adolescent, plays a particularly horrific role” in some narratives (72). For mortal girls, the physical transition to womanhood begins with puberty and menstruation. Claudia’s body will never go through these rites of passage, but blood still figures an important role in her development. Her childhood seems to end early when Louis draws blood from her neck. At first he has a moment of indecision about whether to bite Claudia’s neck, but she proves irresistible to him:

I couldn’t bear it, looking at her, wanting her not to die and wanting her; and the more I looked at her, the more I could taste her skin, feel my arm sliding under her back and pulling her up to me, feel her soft neck. Soft, soft, that’s what she was, so soft . . . I wanted her! And so I took her in my arms and held her, her burning cheek on mine, her hair falling down over my wrists and brushing my eyelids, the sweet perfume of a child strong and pulsing . . . She moaned now and that was more than I could bear.” (Rice 91)

The sexualized nature of this scene makes it akin to rape; Louis is forcibly taking a female against her will or understanding. Afterward, Claudia seems forever changed, as Louis remarks: “She was the most beautiful child I’d ever seen, and now she glowed with the cold fire of a vampire. Her eyes were a woman’s eyes, I could see it already” (Rice 93). Louis had intended to kill her, but Lestat instead makes her a vampire. Her first words after her transformation (into vampire and into woman) are to ask for her mother. Lestat responds that she is now their child, and Louis is left thinking about how “sensual” her voice is (Rice 93). Thus, in his desire to engage with Claudia’s physical body, Louis has deprived her of her childhood, her mortality, her chances at true womanhood, and her own body. He has also created an Oedipal relationship with her in which he fluctuates between father and lover and thereby disrupts socially acceptable familial bonds.

Claudia is essentially imprisoned by her own body, which represents her fulfillment of patriarchal desires. For example, American society often pressures women to look young forever — a burden Claudia certainly embodies. At one point, she meets female vampires with adult bodies who are — ignorantly — jealous of her youth and beauty (Rice 253). Claudia feels like she has been robbed, though, from many of life’s experiences and wishes she could have grown into an adult body. As it is, she will always be dependent on another, adult-figured vampire. Otherwise, a lone child renting an apartment or traveling the countryside, for example, would raise suspicions. One day, she cries out at Louis over what he’s done to her, now that she fully understands: “You haven’t tears enough for what you’ve done to me . . . Monsters! To give me immortality in this hopeless guise, this helpless form!” (Rice 261). By seizing Claudia’s body, Louis has made her completely dependent. This trope is familiar throughout Gothic literature. As Marie Mulvey-Roberts writes, “female powerlessness is epitomized by ways in which the

property and inheritance rights of the Gothic heroine could be seized by control of her body, whether through marriage, domestic violence or imprisonment” (107-108). By acting as her father, lover, and keeper, Louis exerts complete control over Claudia. This demonstrates how patriarchal figures govern women by infantilizing them. As a forever child, Claudia must always remain figuratively voiceless and invisible, as children have little power over society or even their own lives.

In keeping Claudia forever young and beautiful, Louis and Lestat are perpetuating dangerous, male-driven ideals about women. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik write that “negative images of female age continue to assert themselves in spite of social progress made in the west . . . not only is it unfashionable to be old, it is unforgivable to *look* old” (“No Country” 188). For Claudia, meeting this ideal of eternal youth has cost her her freedom, independence, and right to sexuality. She is a stereotypical construction who, as Gina Wisker writes, serves only to confirm “the disadvantages suffered by women: lack of property ownership; denial of rights to control their own sexuality, whether heterosexual or lesbian; disempowerment; idealisation matched with demonisation; infantilisation, relating to representations of them as hysterics and parasites” (“Female Vampirism” 163). All of these disadvantages apply to Claudia, and eventually she is demonized and murdered.

Claudia has existed as an “embodied oxymoron,” and is expected to be docile and childlike but also to be a mass murderer (Wisker 150). Her situation reflects the way that women are often polarized as saints and witches. In Gothic literature, women tend to be demonized as the *femme fatale* and are presented as threatening, which reflects the often misogynistic nature of patriarchal societies (Mulvey-Roberts 113). This occurs for Claudia when she meets Armand. Armand is the oldest-known vampire in the world, and thus is the ultimate symbol of a

patriarchal figure. He falls in love with Louis, and decides to kill Claudia so he can claim Louis as his own. Claudia has befriended a female vampire named Madeleine, and one day, Armand has the two kidnapped and burns them alive (Rice 304). Burning at the stake is a “traditional form of execution” for women accused of witchcraft, and thus Claudia and Madeleine are aligned with witches in their final moments (Abbott). Ironically, the crime for which Claudia is truly being punished — her dependency on Louis — was a condition inflicted upon her by Louis himself. Chaplin writes that such unjust treatment of women is commonly described in Gothic literature:

At the centre of these narratives is an abused woman lacking any capacity to protect herself legally against the machinations of vengeful men....Patriarchal, aristocratic systems of law . . . are thoroughly ‘Gothicised’, and what they inflict on the various female protagonists . . . might be read as a vivid Female Gothic representation of the law’s brutalisation of woman. (142)

Claudia and Madeleine are not killed under any formal law, rather it is the law of the vampires. Claudia has attempted to kill her maker (Lestat) and thus deserves to die, according to the vampires’ social norms. Of course, the reader knows this is only the surface reason for her murder. Nonetheless, this demonstrates patriarchal figures manipulating laws to inflict punishment upon a helpless woman.

Furthermore, Claudia’s death sharply juxtaposes the long lives of Louis and Lestat, who will go on to live for centuries. This seems to highlight women’s disheartening powerlessness in the face of men’s seemingly immortal power. Sandra Tomc writes about how in the 1970s when *Interview* was published, America’s patriarchal society pressured women to diet and have sticklike figures. For some women, this resulted in anorexia. In severe cases, women died from

the eating disorder, thus disappearing forever. Similarly, Louis and Lestat force Claudia to live in a too-small body until eventually she vanishes. “Her death literalizes the identities among satiation, womanhood, and vacancy” Tomc writes. “In a grisly echo of the paradigm of the vanishing woman’s body, nothing is left of Claudia when Louis finds her but her hair and her empty clothes” (104). Louis is *Interview*’s narrator, and therefore the story is filtered through his perspective. Similarly, men seem to direct America’s narrative and muffle other voices that would add to it or redirect it. As Tomc points out, Claudia is “unable to break free of paternal narrative” (155). Her death seems to demonstrate how men are unwilling to make room for women in the story of America. Tellingly, the only two major female characters in *Interview* die long before the novel ends.

In fact, the society of male vampires evolves to become one in which women are not needed at all. Louis and Lestat’s relationship is clearly homoerotic, and midway through the novel Louis abandons Lestat and finds a new male lover. Louis does seem to have a sexual attraction to Claudia when transforming her into a vampire, but his desires are just as easily – and perhaps preferably – satiated by men. Therefore, these male vampires do not need women for companionship or partnership. Male vampires also supplant women as life-givers. Vampires of any gender can create new vampires, and so the disappearance of women does not threaten the vampire species as it does the human species. Yet, women are needed to create the vampire’s food source (humans). Women, then, become synonymous with consumables. If male vampires are representative of patriarchy, then Rice seems to be exposing how patriarchy exploits women to strengthen itself, but does not seek to empower women or invite them into the male world of immortal power.

Throughout this novel, Claudia has been abused in a myriad of ways. She has been physically attacked, infantilized, sexualized, imprisoned, vilified, disempowered, and even murdered at the hands of the men in her life. This is representative of the oppression and “everyday horrors” women have faced throughout history and in contemporary times (Mulvey-Roberts 117). Ideally, “the Gothic female body functions as an ongoing critique of such gender inequalities” (Mulvey-Roberts 117). This seems to be the case in *Interview with the Vampire* as Rice forces readers to grapple with the way African-Americans, women, and others have been treated at the hands of a seemingly-immortal patriarchal culture.

Implications about America

As an American Female Gothic text, *Interview with the Vampire* definitely makes statements about the United States and its residents. This narrative begins in the early 1800s, when America was still forging its identity. This time period was filled with progress, but at some troubling costs, as Charles Crow writes:

In the decades between the American Revolution and the Civil War, the nation grew from a narrow strip of land along a largely unexplored land mass to a continental power. Nature was tamed, the frontier pushed far to the west. These accomplishments, celebrated by most Americans still, led to an optimistic belief in progress: the lives of Americans inevitably improved because of democratic values, righteousness, education, technology, and the free markets of an expanding nation. American Gothic presented a counter-narrative, undercutting the celebration of progress, inquiring about its costs and the omissions from the story. Gothic writers persisted in asking troubling questions about Americans and wilderness, and about Americans’ belief in themselves.” (17)

In this novel, Rice raises questions about the American experience: What does it take to become powerful? Are the costs worth it? During Louis' quest for power and immortality, he has murdered countless people, enslaved African-Americans, and disempowered women. Similarly, America's progress came at a terrible price. Both Louis and America are left guilty and haunted by their pasts (Mighall 58). Regions of America sometimes have specific ways of expressing that guilt; this is particularly true for the South.

The American South is known for its ties to slavery, its poverty, and related social problems. Crow writes that, because of this, it has become a region known for its Gothic literature: "The South had a great burden of history and myth, and a treasury of stories to tell, many of them twisted and tragic" (127). New Orleans is a city that seems emblematic of the south, and it is a recurrent setting throughout the novel. Louis begins his narrative there when he is a slaveholder. He travels the world, but eventually returns to New Orleans again to seek out his maker, Lestat. In doing so, he seems to be turning to his father and his homeland for an explanation of who he is and why. Upon returning to his hometown, Louis describes it as "beautiful and desperately alive" but "desperately fragile. There was something forever savage and primitive there, something that threatened the exotic and sophisticated life both from within and without" (Rice 323). New Orleans seems to encapsulate a delicate balance between civilization and wilderness. It could just as easily be savage as sophisticated, which is perhaps why Louis and other vampires have felt so at home there. They can murder someone each night, but still feel refined as they attend the theatre or dine at restaurants. As a country America seems to straddle this line as well — it is violent and cultivated as it oppresses people in the name of progress or power.

New Orleans doubtlessly seems haunted by its past. Mighall writes that it is “the repository of pastness, through its relative antiquity” and that it contains a “highly-charged atmosphere of ancient magic and buried guilt that rises up from the swampy terrain surrounding the city” (60). Interestingly, Lestat rises up from the swamp where Claudia dumps his body after poisoning him with absinthe and assuming he is dead. He somehow survives the ordeal and follows Claudia and Louis to Europe. His seeming resurrection from a New Orleans swamp makes him seem like “buried guilt” in an embodied form that comes back to haunt. This parallels with the way that America often tries to bury its regrettable past and its demons, only to have them come back to life. Slavery has ended and women today have more rights than ever, yet racism and sexism are tragically still rampant within America, much like how Louis and Lestat still haunt the streets they inhabited hundreds of years before. They are patriarchs who will not, cannot seem to die.

Even if the day came when Louis or Lestat chose to give up their lives, someone else would live on in their footsteps, making the same mistakes and repeating the same doomed history. At the end of the novel, Louis has finished the account of his life to the young boy who has been listening and recording the narrative. Louis has told him about losing all the people he ever loved, murdering thousands of mortals, living perpetually in darkness, and coming to the conclusion that his existence is evil. “Make me a vampire now!” the boy responds. The boy has heard a story of travelling, adventure, passion, and power and ignored all the atrocities and terror that enabled it. “If you were to give me that power!” the boy muses. “The power to see and feel and live forever!” (Rice 339). He is the next generation of blood-thirsty ambition. As Nina Auerbach comments, “children’s innate affinity with horror means that vampirism is, for the first

time, symptomatic of fear of the future, not the past” (159). If past horrors are only to repeat themselves endlessly, then the future becomes a grim prospect indeed.

The bookended nature of this narrative seems to satirize the relationship between Gothic reader and author. Louis represents an author trying to tell a dark story so that truth will be known and history will not repeat itself. The boy represents a reader who finds such darkness entertaining and attractive rather than atrocious and repellant. Perhaps with this frustrating ending, when the reader sees that the boy will become just another vampire, Rice is calling on her own audience to carefully consider what they’ve read and how they should react to it. The story may have been entertaining, but what dark truths did it contain? How might we avoid becoming vampires ourselves? A vampire, after all, lives by destroying others. Rice seems to argue that Americans should resist the urge to become powerful if doing so would require oppressing others. Authors can share their stories and illuminate buried truths, but ultimately it is the readers who decide whether to perpetuate America’s history of social injustice.

In this novel, the American male vampires who seem to live on forever — and who have new generations following their legacy — are patriarchy and prejudice personified. Louis’ transformation into a vampire makes him doubt the righteousness of white supremacy for the first time. While he never seems to have doubted the morality of slavery when he was the master, he does come to question it and realize its depravity during the many years that he serves Lestat. Nonetheless, he continues to live his life persecuting others to benefit himself. Among those that Louis oppresses throughout his lifetime are women, particularly Claudia. Although he seems to love her, he physically attacks her, infantilizes her, and forces her into dependence and helplessness. As Louis lives on, so does the racism, sexism, and general oppression of powerless groups that he has spent hundreds of years perpetuating. The young boy who is determined to

follow in his footsteps demonstrates that this oppressive cycle lives on as a tragic and recurrent part of United States history. Like vampires who will not die, social inequities still plague American society.

Chapter Four: How Black Women Ghost their Oppressors to Gain Power

An Analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Introduction

A Pulitzer Prize winner and one of the most “influential African American novel[s] of the second half of the 20th century,” Toni Morrison’s 1987 work, *Beloved*, has often garnered the attention of literary critics (Andrews). Many of these critics’ writings express common themes: that minority writers have reclaimed the Gothic genre to empower themselves¹; that African-American Gothic works tend to use reality rather than the supernatural to scare²; that past traumas must be remembered in order to heal³; and that minority authors use ghosts as symbols for forgotten and minimized people and cultures⁴. However, these critiques do not tend to focus specifically on how these themes apply to African-American women. In this chapter, I will explore the aforementioned themes through feminist lenses. I will also consider how the female body is paradoxical in that it is often used as justification for oppression (in its expression of gender, race, and even class) but also becomes a site for empowerment. I contend that the characters in Morrison’s novel rebel by using their embodied traits to reclaim their voices and visibility.

African and/or African-American women have been among the most persecuted of any population on United States soil. Their gender, class, and race have been used as justifications to oppress them in the most brutal and unthinkable ways. Oppressors have seen their bodies — in their femaleness and blackness — as reason to enslave, assault, silence, and harm them. Nonetheless, black women have risen up, persevered, and survived time and time again against the tireless machines of racism, sexism, and classism. Reclaiming their bodies and using them as a site for telling their own stories has been crucial to their empowerment. Feminist theorists

Barbara Smith and Toni Morrison write about how black women's stories are often ignored, forgotten, or excluded. When that happens, women's bodies sometimes become their mode of expression, Susan Bordo contends. In considering their theories and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque, it becomes evident that Morrison's novel *Beloved* demonstrates how black women's bodies are vessels for stories that cannot be silenced or stopped, even amidst the greatest efforts to suppress them.

The invisibility of black women and their literature

Africans and African-Americans have been a crucial part of American history. Yet their stories are often excluded from American narratives; this erasure has been propagated within scholarly circles as well. For example, Morrison writes that some literary historians and critics seem to believe that:

Traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States . . . There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. This agreement is made about a population that preceded every American writer of renown . . .

The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.

(*Playing* 4-5)

African-American history, experiences, and culture are central to any true understanding of America and its literature. This is true, Morrison argues, for *any* American story, regardless of

the author's or the character's race. The impact of black Americans on their country cannot be overstated, yet this population is often overlooked in critical discussions of literature. Whether this is in the form of a disregard for African-American theory or literature, it demonstrates how black voices and perspectives are often drowned out by the dominant white patriarchal class, Morrison writes.

Barbara Smith agrees with Morrison that the experiences and texts of African-Americans in the United States are often obscured and minimized. This is especially true, she asserts, for black women. In her 1977 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Smith writes: "Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the 'real world' of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown" (2302). Black women's marginalization extends to the literary realm, where Smith said their work tends to be ignored by theorists and critics, which is troubling. "For books to be real and remembered, they have to be talked about," she writes ("Toward" 2303). Without that scholarly discussion, women's texts lose their social significance and impact. It is not enough, though, for black women's writing to be read, discussed, and remembered; it also must be considered through an appropriate lens. "A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity," Smith writes ("Toward" 2304). It is the combination of these factors — gender, race, and class — that contribute to the black female experience and shroud them in an invisibility that is far greater than that experienced by black men or white women, Smith asserts. Applying such a reading to *Beloved* demonstrates how Morrison uses the novel to feature black women's stories — her own as well as those of main characters Sethe, Denver, Beloved, and the millions of

enslaved women whose voices were diminished because of their blackness, femaleness, and powerlessness.

Embodied narratives

To reclaim their voices, black women have had to resort to extreme measures. Sometimes that has meant employing the body as a storyteller. Susan Bordo establishes the theory of bodies as texts in her essay “Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body”: “The body — what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body — is a medium of culture,” she writes (2362). Bodies, then, have the ability to reveal truths about individuals and about societies at large. In her essay, for example, Bordo claims that women engaging in anorexia, hysteria, or agoraphobia are rebelling against their society. “It is as though these bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks around the corner,” Bordo writes. “A steady motif in the feminist literature on female disorder is that of pathology as embodied *protest* — unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an effective language, voice, or politics, but protest nonetheless” (2369). Women may not be consciously communicating via their bodies, but nonetheless their corporeality speaks to the difficulties they face as American females. Anorexia could be interpreted as a response to societal demands that women be thin; agoraphobia could be women reacting to demands that they be domestic; hysteria could be the rejoinder to claims that women are emotionally unstable. In these cases, women conform to the standards set out for them, but to such a degree that their actions become defiant.

The characters in Morrison’s *Beloved* seem to engage in similar bodily protest to demonstrate their rebellion against racism, sexism, and the institutions that support them. The novel’s protagonist, Sethe, spends much of her life with no control over her own body —

including who owns it, touches it, sees it, or ignores it — nor those of her children. This changes one day, though, when Sethe claims dominion over her and her children's corporeality and thereby their stories. Sethe resorts to creating an unforgettable story — that of a black woman who murders her own child rather than allow her to become a slave — to reclaim her voice. This indicates that bodies are linked to power and control, and women have learned to use them when their voices have been squelched. Sethe's story is traumatic for any audience, especially because it is based on the true story of Margaret Garner. The choices Garner faced and the decisions she made were not fictional; they were true horrors of the American institution of slavery. As Teresa A. Goddu writes, "Since the African-American gothic's horrors are actual, not fictional — written in the flesh as well as the text — any attempt to resurrect them can be painful and difficult" (*Gothic America* 154). Just as Sethe's community must decide how to respond to this infanticide, Morrison's readers are also left to consider the implications of the tragic death of Garner's infant. It is a story so terrible that it would be easier to believe it were fiction and that it never happened. At the end of the novel, Morrison challenges her readers to do just that, and almost seems to command them to forget it: This is "not a story to pass on," she repeats three times. Yet this line has widely been read as ironic because by writing the story, Morrison has indeed passed it on to others. Perhaps she is saying that the hardest stories are the ones that most need to be heard, and the owners of those most difficult stories often are those bearing the weight of some of the nation's heaviest prejudices — black women. Simultaneously, Morrison uses the novel and its difficult content to demand that her own voice — that of a black female writer — be noticed, acknowledged, discussed, and honored as important in academic literary circles and in society at large.

How oppressors violate bodies to silence victims

The oppressive figures in Morrison's novel seem to understand that gaining control of slaves' bodies robs them of their ability to tell their own stories — for those stories become unspeakable. Sexual assault is perhaps the most devastating form of that physical abuse as the emotional scars it leaves seem to run far deeper than those created from beatings or whippings. Many of Morrison's characters, at one point or another, face devastating sexual violence at the hands of white men. Pamela Barnett lists some of these incidents in her essay "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural":

Paul D works on a chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, where prisoners are forced to fellate white guards every morning....Ella is locked up and repeatedly raped by a father and son . . . Stamp Paid's wife, Vashti, is forced into sex by her enslaver . . . Baby Suggs is compelled to have sex with a straw boss who later breaks his coercive promise not to sell her child . . . Sethe's mother is "taken up many times by the crew" during the Middle Passage . . . And three women in the novel — Sethe's mother, Baby Suggs, and Ella — refuse to nurse babies conceived through rape. (419)

Many of these sexual assaults serve to silence their victims. Paul D., for example, locks up all the tragedies he has endured into a "tin heart" that is so closed off "nothing in this world could pry it open" (*Beloved*). He does not speak of the way white men sexually assaulted him on the chain gang or of any of the other traumatic events he has endured. Sethe's husband Halle is similarly traumatized when he sees several white men attack her, disrobe her, and force her to the ground while one of them sucks the milk from her breasts. Afterward, Halle is found at a churn with butter all over his face. He never speaks again.

The abuse that white men inflict on the enslaved is clearly intended to subvert them and make them feel subhuman. At one point when Sethe is still a slave, she overhears a white man

called schoolteacher giving his pupils a lesson on black people. One of the students is diagramming her, putting her human characteristics on one side and her “animal characteristics” on the other. Such “presumed monstrosity of Africans and persons of African descent helped justify the institution of slavery,” Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes, adding that “a convenient first step in running roughshod over someone is always to label that person or group as a monster” (“American Monsters” 42). In this novel, the oppressors overpower the enslaved by degrading them and animalizing them in any way possible — but often they do so via sexual assault and by forcing slaves to endure terrors too horrible to repeat.

Reclaiming bodies and voices

To escape the animalistic treatment, Sethe one day becomes that which enslavers have always considered her to be: a monster. In this way she rebels much like the women Bordo describes — she conforms so much to societal standards that her actions become dissent. She flees Sweet Home, the plantation where she and her family have been enslaved, and seeks refuge at her mother-in-law’s home in Ohio, where she is safe and happy for a time. One day, though, four white men from Sweet Home — including those who pinned her down and stole her milk — arrive at the home to reclaim her and her four children as their property. When Sethe sees them arrive, she runs to a shed where she attempts to kill all her children, but succeeds in killing only one — a toddler who later comes to be known as Beloved. When the white men enter the shed, they see a scene of destruction: two bloodied boys, a dead toddler, and an infant whose mother is trying to kill her by flinging her against the wall. Schoolteacher’s first thought is that there is “nothing there to claim” which is a shame in his mind because Sethe probably has “at least ten breeding years left” (*Beloved*). Schoolteacher tells his nephew that Sethe’s “gone wild” due to his beatings, explaining that it’s the same principle as raising horses — you can’t beat them too

much and then expect them to behave. This scene clearly demonstrates how the white men do not see themselves or the institution of slavery as barbaric. Instead, the infanticide reaffirms their racist beliefs that black men and women are animals. However, the scene also allows Sethe to remain free.

The bodies in that shed tell a story that makes the white men turn away in horror. Sethe thereby wrests power from the hands of her oppressors by becoming the author rather than the audience of gothic stories. Historically, white slave owners told traditional “scary stories” of witches, ghosts, vampires, and supernatural animals to control their slaves and “capitalize on [their] worst fears,” Geraldine Smith-Wright writes (243). These stories served to discourage slaves from leaving their homes at night or running away. White men would even dress up as ghosts “to create mayhem near the slave quarters” – a practice that would later become adopted by the Ku Klux Klan (Smith-Wright 243). White oppressors in this novel clearly use fear to control the black population. They fill their slaves’ memories with stories too horrifying to bear; this fear keeps them silent and obedient and makes them feel powerless and animalistic. With this horrific murder, though, Sethe has become scarier than her oppressors. She has become the instiller of fear.

Men, though, are innately haunted by women, Adrienne Rich writes. The fact that men are dependent on women for life is something that men are constantly trying to “compensate for” or “deny” (Rich 11). In their struggle for dominance, men and the patriarchal institutions they uphold try to ensure that women and their ability to bear children “remain under male control” (Rich 13). Clearly both men and women are required to create new life, but women do have more control over that life. They are the ones who carry the infant in their womb, make prenatal decisions that will impact the infant’s life, and breastfeed the newborn. Every person — man or

woman — began life within a woman. To counter this female power, men — including white slaveholders — have done much to assert their authority over women's bodies and the lives they create. In *Beloved*, the white male quest for power materializes in many forms. Since the white men in this novel cannot steal women's ability to bear children, they instead rob them of their opportunity to raise those children, whom they consider to be their "property" as soon as they are born. Barbara Hill Rigney writes that "the disintegration of family, the denial of a mother's right to love her daughter . . . is . . . part of the horror of the Black experience under slavery" (230-231). Sethe's mother, for example, is allowed to nurse her for only a few weeks before being sent out to the fields to work again. Sethe rarely sees her mother after that, but does remember one day when her mother shows her a mark burned on her chest of a circle and a cross. She wants Sethe to know how to identify her body should it become unrecognizable when she dies. Sure enough, Sethe's mother is hanged. By the time her corpse is lowered, her body is so disfigured that the brand can no longer be seen. Sethe's mother did what she could to communicate to her child through her body, but the slaveholders wielded too much power over her corporeality. Sethe, too, learns what it is like to lose her body to white men. When she is attacked and sexually assaulted by the white men who forcefully nurse from her, she is robbed of her ability to nurse her newborn — much like her mother before her. At the intersection of race, gender, and class, enslaved black women experience terrible degradation at the hands of powerful white men who do all they can to rob them of their motherhood.

Both Sethe and her mother, though, attempt to regain power over their children's lives. Sethe's mother, for example, is frequently raped on the Middle Passage as she is taken to America. Those rapes — at the hands of white men — result in several pregnancies and childbirths. Then, as a family friend tells Sethe: "She threw them all away but you . . . Without

names, she threw them” (*Beloved*). Sethe’s life is spared because she is born of a consensual relationship Sethe’s mother had with a black man. The white men who rape Sethe’s mother assert control over her body to an extent. By killing her own children, though, Sethe’s mother reclaims what power she can over her body, her life, and her children’s lives. Perhaps it is also her way of striking back at the men who have hurt her. Similarly, Sethe kills her own child to assert the last bit of control she has over the toddler’s life. This crime is not committed out of malice or for a lack of love for the child, as Stamp Paid tells Paul D one day. Rather, “she was trying to outhurt the hurter and spread it” (*Beloved*). When Sethe has no other recourse, no other way of rebelling or being heard, she uses her child’s body to speak out against slavery. By letting the world know that she would rather kill her own daughter than let her become a slave, she is attesting to the unspeakable atrocity of slavery.

Grotesque bodies

Grotesque bodies, like those of Sethe’s children in the shed, play an important role in this novel. Mikhail Bakhtin developed the theory of the grotesque, in which he examines the literary significance of bodies and their interactions with the world around them. To him, a grotesque body is displeasing to the eye and often involves “exaggeration of the inappropriate” (306). The orifices of a body are of particular importance because they are mediums for interchange with the rest of the world, whether this is through eating, drinking, defecating, sneezing, sweating, or sexual intercourse. Bakhtin also notes that “in the grotesque body . . . death brings nothing to an end . . . The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection. One body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image” (322). A key grotesque moment in the novel occurs when Beloved is seemingly reborn and returns to Sethe. She arrives by walking

out of the water near the house. When Sethe sees her, she immediately experiences her water breaking — although she is not pregnant. This is interesting because it links ghostliness with reproduction, as Sethe seems to be giving birth to Beloved’s ghost. Kathleen Brogan writes that women are considered to be “bearers of culture” and their bodies thereby become “the site of a struggle for control over lineage” (25). Because of this, women’s ghost stories are far more likely to connect haunting and reproductive issues. For example, ghosts may arise from “traumatic memories of rape, abortion, or miscarriage” or “ghosts themselves may appear as pregnant” as Beloved does toward the end of the novel (Brogan 25). Brogan would argue that this “pregnancy” “marks a continuity with the past over which one has little control: history lodges within, swollen bodies . . . give birth not to the future but to a nightmarish repetition of the past” (9). This scene demonstrates the grotesque because death does not end Beloved. She is reborn and brings the past back to life. In her body, death and life exist simultaneously. Furthermore, pregnancy is grotesque because the body is outgrowing itself and is in fact a “two-bodied image” (Bakhtin 322). Beloved’s “birth” clearly demonstrates women’s awesome power to create and end life.

Accordingly, water comes to be associated with women and symbolizes birth, baptism, and death and contributes to the grotesque tendency toward liminality. Sethe’s water breaking links water to birth. Beloved’s arrival by walking out of a nearby stream also equates water with baptism, especially since she christens herself shortly thereafter. Yet, the water also seems to signify death. For enslaved men and women, “the sea” often signifies the Middle Passage, which was the death of their liberty. Furthermore, Sethe’s mother “threw away” several of her children into the sea, where they met their deaths without names. The water also creates a link between those unnamed, murdered infants and Beloved, who arises from the water without a name (she

christens herself Beloved but no one can seem to remember what she was called when she was alive). In this way, water symbolizes the cycle of life — birth/baptism, Middle Passage, and death — and Beloved comes to represent many more people beyond herself.

In fact, Beloved seems to be a ghost of all former slaves. Morrison's epigraph to the novel reads "60 million and more" — a reference to all of the slaves that lived and died under American slavery. Beloved wreaking havoc in her community is thereby akin to slavery forever haunting the nation where it lived for so long. Beloved's ghostlike identity also reflects the "social invisibility and historical dispossession" of black women (Brogan 121). As Brogan writes, "the ghost can give expression to the ways in which women are rendered invisible in the public sphere" yet ghosts' strength and power reflect "the disruptive force of strong women in societies that restrict the expression of female power" (25). Since the black women in this novel do not have a voice, they express themselves via their bodies. It makes sense, then, that Beloved is a "substantial, fully-fleshed ghost" because she "illustrates this concept of unspeakable and therefore embodied histories" (Brogan 81). For Beloved to haunt as she does, she employs a grotesque body that can never be forgotten.

In the final scene of the novel, Beloved's body is exposed to all the community as an unforgettable monument to past tragedies that cannot be undone or erased. The black women in Sethe's community have come to help her exorcise Beloved from the house, at Denver's request (illustrating the "disruptive force of strong women" that Brogan mentions above). They arrive at the house in a large group, and their singing draws Sethe and Beloved to the porch. Naked and pregnant, Beloved displays many of the traits that Bakhtin ascribes to grotesque bodies. Her body is huge and exaggerated in its pregnancy. It is also perverse because the baby belongs to her mother's boyfriend. This again connotes women's power to create and end life and draws

attention to the fact that Beloved is supposed to be dead but is creating new life. As Bakhtin writes, the grotesque body “is a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception” (317). Standing there, Beloved — who represents the black community and its tragic past — is immortal and all-powerful.

She does not allow herself to be exorcised, though, before her image is imprinted on the mind of a white man. Edward Bodwin, a white man who is coming to the house to take Denver to work, arrives at the scene as Beloved and Sethe are there on the porch. Sethe sees him and begins charging after him with an ice pick, thinking he is coming to claim them as property. Beloved is left alone on the porch to consider the view before her of the black women, her mother, and the white man: “They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling. And above them all, rising from his place with a whip in his hand, the man without skin, looking. He is looking at [me]” (*Beloved*). This spectacle is representative of slavery and the white men who have destroyed the lives of so many Africans and African-Americans. Interestingly, Beloved refers to the man as “without skin” rather than white. The first generation of slaves who were kidnapped from Africa referred to white men in this way, for they had never seen such people. Beloved’s allusion to this description further reinforces the idea that she is representative of all those who suffered due to slavery. Brian Norman describes Beloved as a “ventriloquist’s doll,” speaking for all the enslaved ancestors that died before her (89). Accordingly, Edwin represents all the former slaveholders and white people who oppressed black people — the original ghosts or people “without skin”. Although Sethe is rushing to murder Edwin, he cannot stop looking at Beloved. In fact, he never even sees Sethe (who is stopped before she reaches him). The fact that he cannot look away from Beloved — even though a potential murderer is charging at him

— makes it clear that she is now visible. She and all that she represents will not be forgotten or erased; she will linger forever in the memory of oppressors.

Beloved disappears from Sethe's house after the exorcism, but she never truly leaves. In this way, her body becomes "cosmic and universal" and further adheres to Bakhtin's description of a grotesque body (318). Bakhtin writes that such a body stresses elements common to the cosmos, such as earth, water, fire, air, sun and stars. "This body can merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents," he writes. "It can fill the entire universe" (Bakhtin 318). After Beloved disappears from the porch, she seems to reappear everywhere forever. A young boy claims to see her running naked through the forest with fish for hair. Her footprints appear and disappear near the creek bed. Her image replaces those of ancestors in photos. Her knuckles brush the cheeks of those who sleep. She becomes the weather: "Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss" (*Beloved*). As the latter lines make clear, those who hear, see, and feel her in these cosmic ways try to deny it, to blame it on a natural occurrence, but it seems that they know the truth. The history and tragedy of slavery will never truly disappear. It will forever remain in the eaves of the American house, haunting all who live there.

Beloved's resurrection makes her grotesque, but it also makes her Christ-like. One woman describes her this way after seeing her on the porch: "Thunder-black and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling" (*Beloved*). That "Jesus" comment seems to be one of surprise or exclamation, but also equates Beloved with a Jesus figure who is arisen from the dead. Beloved, like Jesus, is sacrificed to save others and symbolizes forgiveness. For example, Beloved's death

saves her siblings from slavery. Furthermore, when the community of women exorcise Beloved they are also forgiving Sethe. It is as if Beloved came back to life to facilitate such forgiveness. At the end of the novel, Paul D and Sethe also seem to start forgiving themselves. Though oppressors caused the past tragedies of their lives, Paul D and Sethe seem to feel guilty and to blame themselves. After Beloved leaves, though, they begin to talk openly about past abuse — for the first time — and to realize that it was not their fault and that they have worth. At the end of the novel, Sethe is depressed over Beloved leaving, telling Paul D that “she was my best thing.” Paul D tells her: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” Sethe seems incredulous at these words and at the idea that she is valuable, but Paul D reinforces it. These black men and women are not defined by their past as slaves, by the mistakes they have made, or by the tragedies they have endured. They are defined by their humanity and inherent value.

African and African-American women who lived and died in the times of slavery — and their descendants — are among the most oppressed groups in American history. In this novel, Morrison shows what it takes for black women to fight against the invisibility and injustice inflicted upon them. In her own right, she demonstrates that black writers and theorists deserve to be acknowledged, read, and discussed. *Beloved*, for example, has gone on to be one of the most critically-acclaimed and highly-regarded novels of its time. Timothy Aubry describes the work as “universally beloved” and says that Morrison’s “unflinching portrayals of racism, sexism, and other kinds of oppression made reading itself feel like a socially responsible act” (483). Critics are drawn to *Beloved*, he writes, both because of “the dazzling salience of Morrison’s style” and “the strenuous political work” it performs” (483). In this novel, Morrison is both forcing America to grapple with its tragic history and urging literary critics to engage with black women’s work. Morrison wrote this book in a time when, as Barbara Smith said,

black women were ignored to the point of invisibility in literary circles. As a fiction writer, Morrison helped undo that erasure by producing a text that simply could not be ignored, much as *Beloved* does with the terrible story she embodies.

Within the novel, Morrison creates characters who spend their lives struggling against invisibility. Her characters use their bodies to convey difficult stories and to gain a voice. Sethe's mother attempts to use a scar on her body to maintain her identity after life; she sacrifices her own children to regain control over her body after surviving multiple rapes; Sethe uses her body and those of her children to rebel against a white master and the institute of slavery; *Beloved* uses her body to reunite a fractured black community and to memorialize the lives of the many black men and women who were enslaved, killed, and minimized. In this way, black women's bodies become the ultimate, ineradicable symbols of female power and independence. When black women are silenced and oppressed, their embodied stories speak for them. These stories become so powerful they cannot be ignored — instead, they are acknowledged as an integral and deep-rooted part of American history.

Notes

1. See “The African American Slave narrative” 82; Smith-Wright 144.
2. See *Gothic America* 154.
3. See *Gothic America* 154; Redding 40; Brogan 4-29
4. See Weinstock, “American Monsters” 48; Redding 43; Andrew Smith 147-155

Chapter Five

Human Monsters: How Storytelling Becomes Salvation in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*

In Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, there are no witches, vampires, or ghosts to drive fear or revulsion into the hearts of readers. Instead, family members, poverty, and social expectations become the stuff of nightmares. A single mortal man terrorizes Allison's protagonist, Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright, more than anything supernatural ever could. Bone's chief tormentor is her stepfather, Glenn, who beats her, berates her, molests her, and rapes her — all this before her 13th birthday. The end of the novel finds Bone devastated and abandoned by her mother — who chooses Glenn over her — and sitting on her aunt's porch, contemplating her past, her future, and her identity. In this haunting novel, which is semi-autobiographical, Allison demonstrates how humans can be more monstrous than the demons they invent. Gothic literature, she proves, does not have to be supernatural to be scary or disturbing.

Critics of *Bastard out of Carolina* often apply trauma theory to the novel as they analyze the dovetailing of Allison and Bone's experiences. Both the author and her protagonist struggle throughout their lives with devastating poverty and sexual violence. Peggy Dunn Bailey writes that Southern Gothic novels like *Bastard* seem fueled by "the need to explain and/or understand foundational trauma, the violation or loss of that which is essential to identity and survival but often irretrievable" (271). Bailey, Natalie Carter, and Rosemary Reisman also describe how the terrors Bone faces are shaped as much by the patriarchal world in which she lives as by her socioeconomic standing. Reisman especially lauds the novel for its "accurate and sympathetic description of a social class that has generally been described in unflattering terms, as "crackers,"

“rednecks,” or “white trash” (269). These critics have tended to focus on the intersection of class and gender and how it drives traumatic experiences and reactions to them.

In this chapter, I build on their findings to analyze how — specifically — sexism and gender performativity surface in the novel and how they function as oppressive social structures. I also consider the role of the Female Gothic genre as a form of healing and empowerment that arises in response to suffering and powerlessness. This novel in particular seems representative of a shift in Female Gothic works away from the phenomenal and toward the corporeal; it seems to signify a new authorial willingness to expose the absolute truth and to make it impossible to dismiss the existence of human monstrosity or to disguise it with ghosts, vampires, witches, or other imaginary demons and scapegoats. I will especially draw on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, bell hooks’ criticisms of Feminism, and Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality as I consider how Allison uses *Bastard* to tell unsettling truths about womanhood in America. In America’s patriarchal society, sexism and gender stereotypes often debilitate women and empower men, creating an unfair power dynamic that can tragically result in women suffering gruesome abuse at the hands of the men in their lives. For women in poverty, it is especially difficult to avoid or escape such debasement. However, the Female Gothic genre serves as an effective tool for empowerment and may provide oppressed women with an opportunity to transcend the prejudices they face. This becomes evident after considering the roles of gothicism, sexism, gender performance, and storytelling in *Bastard out of Carolina*.

***Bastard* as Southern Gothic and Female Gothic**

Bastard out of Carolina is a decidedly Southern Gothic text, as identified by critics and by Allison herself (Bailey 269). Southern Gothic literature distinguishes itself from other Gothic texts in that it is often non-supernatural and describes people as the “ultimate source of horror”

(Bailey 269). Its stories are set in a region haunted by its past as a slavery stronghold and plagued by social issues such as poverty, sexism, and racism. Though sometimes overlooked in favor of the more popular Gothic texts that feature supernatural characters (such as vampire stories), the Southern Gothic is lauded by its fans for portraying a harsh “but fundamentally cuttingly truer picture of the seemingly caring, comfortable securities of the domestic, the community, friendship groups, and pair-bonded relationships” (Wisker, “Contemporary Women’s Gothic” 435). Allison’s novel certainly earns the above compliment with its critique of societal norms in the United States and her unflinching portrait of what it means to be an American woman. As a Southern Gothic writer, Allison joins other white female authors whose works find a home in this genre, including Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers (Bjerre). Several black female writers have also written works categorized as Southern Gothic. Thomas Bjerre writes that “the African American version of (Southern) Gothic has found its zenith in Toni Morrison” and points out the Gothicism in Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Allison’s place among her peers in terms of this genre is nuanced; she contributes to a predominantly male niche of Southern Gothic that Bjerre refers to as the “Rough South” tradition, also called “Grit Lit,” in which violence plays a crucial part. While Allison’s works may fall into a niche, however, they are certainly not constrained by one.

Indeed, Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* expands beyond the Southern Gothic genre and also incorporates many of the characteristics of the Female Gothic. For example, Gina Wisker writes that Female Gothic works tend to challenge “complacencies about domestic norms, identity, and relationships” (“Contemporary Women’s Gothic” 433). Female Gothic authors are not afraid to tell the truth; they describe the domestic abuse, rape, sexual abuse, and general oppression that women are subject to enduring in the very places and social structures that are

supposed to be safe — their own homes and families. As Wisker writes: “Much contemporary women’s Gothic troubles investment in community and family, offering instead disrupted, abusive, oppressive family relationships; undependable romantic relationships; and dangerous domesticity” (“Contemporary Women’s Gothic” 444). In writing *Bastard out of Carolina*, Allison does exactly that. She rips away the facade of American households to show the world what happens behind locked doors and closed curtains, thereby revealing the hard truths of existence as a poor, white woman in the American South.

Instant Inferiority: Facing Sexism at Birth

Women can be impacted by gender stereotypes and sexism from the moment they enter the world. Bone’s birth story demonstrates this in many ways. Her 14-year-old, unmarried mother, Anney, is pregnant with her and in the passenger seat of a vehicle that Bone’s inebriated uncle is driving. They get in an accident and Anney flies through the windshield. She is taken to the hospital, goes into labor, and is unconscious as her daughter is born. Bailey writes that “Anney’s lack of consciousness during delivery of her first child prefigures her blindness” to the abuse her daughter will endure later in life (274). The situation also seems to foreshadow that Anney’s dependence on unreliable men (such as her drunk brother driving the vehicle) will lead to a passive and absent parenting style in which she puts her daughter’s life in the hands of impaired men. If Anney were more independent, she could provide a better life for her child. However, in the patriarchal world in which she lives, Anney constantly feels pressure to provide a father for Bone (her real father is never a part of Bone’s life) in order to fulfill society’s ideal of a nuclear family. Anney’s desire for a husband is also driven by Bone’s designation as a “bastard” at birth. The word is inscribed on Bone’s birth certificate while her mother is incapacitated, much to Anney’s chagrin when she awakes. She later goes to extreme lengths to

get the word removed from Bone's birth certificate. Because of the absence of a male figure in her life, Bone is immediately labeled as "less than." Anney writhes at the injustice of it, but cannot clear the label from her newborn baby girl; this again foreshadows the inevitability of sexism and oppression Bone will face throughout her life. It also demonstrates Anney's powerlessness as a woman; only a man could erase the epithet from Bone's birth certificate.

Bone's name also highlights the stereotypes attached to her at birth. Because her mother is unconscious, Bone is named by her aunts. They call her Ruth Anne — after an aunt Ruth and her mother. This name, though, is perhaps more of a curse than an honor. The women in her family are known for marriages to crude and cruel men, for teen pregnancies, and for poverty. As Bailey writes, "Bone's very name is a testimony to a dark Female Gothic legacy; from her birth, she seems destined to live, and die, as a Boatwright woman—a woman 'born to mother, nurse, and clean up after the men' (Allison 23)" (275). The name is worsened when Uncle Earl gives Bone her nickname by announcing that she is "no bigger than a knucklebone" (Allison 2). Bone then becomes "something to be possessed, broken, or thrown to the dogs" (qtd. in Bailey 275). Bone's name does more than objectify her, though; it also links her to the Judeo-Christian creation story of Adam and Eve, which portrays women as evil and inferior. According to this myth, Eve originates from one of Adam's ribs. This "aptly illustrates the ancillary nature of [Eve's] role as help-mate or mere adjunct to the male," according to Marie Mulvey-Roberts (106). Similarly, Bone's name establishes her as subordinate to men and emphasizes her smallness when compared to a man's hand — foreshadowing the beatings and abuse she will later suffer at the hands of men. Bone, like Eve, also becomes a scapegoat for a man's sins; her stepfather, Glen, tells her it is her fault he rapes her and beats her. Tragically, Anney's mother assigns similar blame by admonishing Bone after she is beaten: "Baby, what did you do? What

did you do? . . . Your daddy's having to work awfully hard these days . . . You girls be quiet when he gets home. Stay out of his way and let him rest" (Allison 105, 107). From the outset, society stifles Bone's potential by inflicting gender stereotypes upon her. Born to a single teen mother, she is a bastard. Born as a girl, she will never amount to anything more than the women before her and will always be inferior to men. For Bone, her gender stigmatizes her from day one. With this narrative, Allison aptly illustrates the hopelessness that poor women can face in America's patriarchal society.

Gender as Performance

In her well-known essay "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," Judith Butler writes that "gender is culturally constructed" (6). She means that societies teach men and women to act a certain way according to their sex. For example, American girls might be expected to like pink and purple, to play with dolls and kitchen sets, and to imagine themselves as princesses or mothers. American boys, on the other hand, might be expected to like any color *but* pink or purple, to play with guns, swords, baseballs, or others sporting gear, and to imagine themselves as warriors or star athletes. With such expectations in place, it is easy to play the part of a given gender. To do so is to reenact "a set of meanings already socially established . . . it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation . . . with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame" (Butler 140). Societies often expect individuals to abide by the "rules" assigned to their gender. Gender assignments, though, are often arbitrary and individuals are not biologically engineered to prefer pink over blue or vice versa. Therefore, gender expectations are "groundless" and can constrain individuality and free will (Butler 141). Although the aforementioned examples of gender expectations (such as color preference) may seem innocuous, such expectations can be far more troubling. For example,

what if society expected men to be drunk, abusive, misogynistic, and cruel? What if society simultaneously expected women to be passive, weak, silent, and inferior? This culturally-constructed binary would lead men to relentlessly tyrannize women. In Bone's South Carolina world, such disturbing gender assignments are not hypothetical.

The Boatwright men, for example, are known as violent drunks who cheat on their wives and girlfriends and often end up in jail or prison. For the poor "white trash" families in the South, it seems that to be a man is to fight, drink, and womanize. Bone's Uncle Wade displays such gender performativity after cheating on his wife Alma. Alma stops speaking to him, and he is indignant at first. Eventually Wade apologizes, but refuses to admit he's done anything wrong. He justifies his actions by saying, "A man has needs, and [Alma] was pregnant" (Allison 91). Wade rationalizes his cheating as a fulfillment of a biological need; he even goes so far as to blame Alma's pregnant state for his actions. Butler would argue that this is a display of gender performance. Wade is simply living by his society's prescribed double standards for men and women — that the former may make mistakes but the fault lies with the latter, and that men may cheat but women must remain monogamous. Conversely, Alma performs as a female when she takes back her husband and accepts that he will always cheat on her because he is a man. "I knew what he was like when I married him," Alma says. "I guess he an't no worse than any other man" (Allison 90). With this statement, she reinforces gender stereotypes that men sin and women take blame and forgive.

Such gender stereotypes can be damaging to both men and women. Cynthia Hendershot writes that men are often expected to be stoic and unfeeling. This "masquerade of masculinity" belies male fragility (Hendershot 4). This sometimes results in men expressing themselves through violence rather than tears. Glen, Bone's stepfather, is a prime example of this

phenomenon throughout the novel. For example, when he marries Anney, it is partly to join the Boatwright clan of men and to be known for toughness and fighting like they are. People say that to mess with a Boatwright is to “reap the whirlwind” and eventually they say that about Glen too (Allison 100). It seems he is partly motivated to act this way to gain acceptance into the Boatwright clan because he was never accepted by his own family. He acts violently, then, to cope with an emotional issue — the fear of rejection and desire for belonging.

Glen also acts out violently whenever he is frustrated or afraid of being abandoned. Multiple times throughout the novel, Anney leaves him after he beats Bone badly enough to require a hospital visit. However, each time he cries to Anney that he “didn’t mean to” and she forgives him and takes him back. The most searing example of this is when Anney walks in on Glen raping Bone. Bone recounts his childlike response: “‘Anney’ he whined like a little boy. ‘I don’t know what happened. I was just gonna talk to her, darling. I just want you to come home, for us all to be together again!’” (Allison 288). Anney ignores him and carries Bone out to her car to take her to the hospital. Glen follows, pleading for forgiveness. Desperate, he starts ramming his head into the metal door of his truck and yelling: “Kill me! Kill me!” (Allison 290). With this, Anney relents and goes to hold Glen in a long embrace. Meanwhile, Bone sits alone in the car – contemplating suicide while watching her mother console her rapist — anything but to “lie bleeding while she held him and cried” (Allison 291). This horrific episode demonstrates the strength of a 12-year-old girl and the weakness of a grown man — both illustrating the “groundlessness” of gender-based identity (Butler 141). In this scene, Allison provides a harsh criticism of society’s expectations for men to be strong and stoic and women to be weak and emotional. She also shows the horrors that can come from society allowing men to

use their sex drive as an excuse for their wrongdoings and for women to simply accept, forgive, and take fault.

However, not everyone in Bone's life adheres to gender stereotypes. Her Aunt Raylene lives alone on the outskirts of town with no husband or children. She wears her hair short, dresses in overalls, calls herself "Ray" and is known for having run off with the carnival when she was younger. As a lesbian, she tells Bone she fell in love with a woman once but has never loved a man or desired marriage. At first, Bone seems to think her aunt is freakish and fears ending up like her. Eventually, though, Raylene's home becomes her refuge and Raylene her protector. After Glen rapes Bone, it is Raylene who picks her up from the hospital and attempts to comfort her in the days that follow. Nonetheless, Bone still longs for her mother and Anney's absence plunges Bone further into depression. One day, though, Anney shows up as Bone is sitting on Raylene's front porch swaddled in blankets. Anney tells Bone she loves her, hands her a birth certificate that — finally — does not say "bastard". Then she leaves without explanation, but Bone knows she is heading across the country to live elsewhere with Glen.

At that point, Bone considers the women in her life and her own future. In eschewing social norms such as heterosexuality, marriage, and childbearing, Raylene is the freest, happiest, and most stable woman Bone knows. Yet Bone still sees Raylene as a social outcast and seems to conclude that belonging to society requires adherence to social norms. What will she choose, then — freedom and ostracism or oppression and acceptance? Sitting on the porch, Bone contemplates her mother's life — pregnant at 14, a mother at 15, married to an abusive husband by 21. Then Bone considers what her life will be like as she gets older: "I wasn't old. I would be thirteen in a few weeks. I was already who I was going to be . . . someone like her, like mama, a Boatwright woman" (Allison 309). Hopelessly, Bone gives in to what she sees as her fate — to

play her part in the family tradition of teen pregnancy and domestic abuse and to meet the expectations set for her as a poor white woman in the South.

An Unbreakable Cycle?

The end of the novel is heartbreaking as its protagonist succumbs to social expectations. Bone will not use her tragedy as fuel to become a better mother than her own; she will sink under it and become the same as the Boatwright women before her — just as her relatives expected when they named her Ruth Anne. However, while this seems like a choice Bone is making, does she really have another option than to follow in her mother's footsteps? Bailey writes that Bone's "rage and despair suggest an exquisite awareness of poverty and powerlessness as the legacy of the potentially chimerical nature of the American Dream for some Americans" (282). For Bone, America is not a place where any person — regardless of race, income, or gender — who works hard can achieve any given dream. Instead, it is a place where dreams and hopes are eternally crushed. Carter agrees with Bailey's assessment of the novel — that it demonstrates how Bone is traumatized not just by her stepfather's abuse "but also by the socioeconomic stigma that is attached to her literally from birth" (890). All members of society, then, are culpable for Bone's tragedy — even other women.

bell hooks writes that women like the Boatwrights — "women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually — women who are powerless to change their condition in life" — are the "silent majority" (hooks 1). Such women demonstrate their victimization by how "they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or rage" (hooks 1). Bone's grim admission that she will not escape the Boatwright fate demonstrates her helplessness. Society has pushed her into a corner where, because of her gender and socioeconomic status, she

has no escape. The more privileged women whose voices drive feminism tend to overlook the reality of women like Bone (one of hooks' core criticisms of the mainstream Feminist movement). Feminism and the American Dream — movements and ideals that other Americans might look to for hope — are simply meaningless abstractions to Bone.

Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality provides further insight into Bone's social status and disempowerment. In her foundational 1989 essay introducing the theory, Crenshaw writes that some individuals are "multiply-burdened" because they are minorities in more than one way (140). Black women, for example, must face racism and sexism, whereas white women face only the latter prejudice. In Bone's case, she is persecuted for her gender and poverty. Girls and women like Bone who face multiple forms of discrimination are more likely to be overpowered and overlooked. To ignore intersectional women is to contribute to their domination, Crenshaw writes (154). Privileged Feminists must listen to, include, and advocate for the underprivileged if they truly want to improve the state of American womanhood; otherwise they are part of the problem they are attempting to solve. The American Female Gothic genre has thus become a crucial crossroads for the powerful and the disenfranchised to come together, share, listen, learn, and perhaps even create a more productive and inclusive form of Feminism.

Storytelling as Salvation

While Allison's novel seems to question Feminism and the American Dream, she still makes clear that there is a way for the "silent majority" to escape and to disrupt the cycle. Allison knows because she is one such woman. Allison's story parallels with Bone's in many ways. She, too, was abused, molested, and raped by a stepfather before even reaching her teen years. She, too, came from a poor Southern family that others called "white trash." She, too, was

born a “bastard” to a single teen mother. Allison, though, escaped the world she was born into by writing. Storytelling, she says, saved her life.

Allison began telling stories when she was a young girl. “I tended to tell violent, scary stories” Allison told Melanie Grue in an interview (132). “It worked really well; it was distracting somewhat violent, scary cousins . . . Also, I knew things . . . I was telling secrets. Very dangerous” (qtd. in Grue 132). As Allison explains, her horrible stories served two purposes: to protect her and to empower her. Similarly, Bone tells stories to her cousins of murders, rapes, cannibalism, witches, and vampires (Allison 119). In doing so, she captivates their attention, stills their violence, and becomes powerful. The stories she tells seem inappropriate coming from a young girl, but they also demonstrate the incomprehensible traumas she has survived that are far beyond her years. Carter writes that such storytelling is a form of “scriptotherapy” — a concept developed by Suzette Henke that describes how ““writing about trauma can lead toward individual and collective healing and alleviation of symptoms”” (qtd. in Carter 888). Carter considers this theory when applied to *Bastard*:

Because childhood sexual abuse is a trauma which will almost unquestionably destroy the victim’s entire sense of identity, scriptotherapy is particularly useful because it offers the possibility of reinventing the self, reconstructing the subject ideologically, and reassessing the past; this pertains well to many fictional narratives that focus on protagonists, like Bone, who attempt to survive domestic abuse by creating enabling stories and self-concepts, thereby recovering a sense of self and agency in the face of devastating losses. (888)

Bailey writes that identity is inscribed on individuals through “cultural models of gender, class, and ethnicity” (271). Accordingly, Bone seems to think that part of her identity as a “white trash”

girl is to grow up to become an impoverished, unmarried teen mother. But amidst those feelings of powerlessness, she tells stories where she is in control of the men around her. This, as Carter writes above, demonstrates how Bone uses narratives to recover her identity and power. Allison did the same as a child, telling stories where the women, children and “people on the edge triumphed” (qtd. in 132 Grue). Justice endured whether through the use of violence, magic, or divine intervention. These happy endings — to which Allison did not have access in her own life — may have provided a temporary escape from her own unhappy world. In an afterword to the novel, Allison writes that fictional stories have a profound purpose; they can “tell a larger truth” than nonfiction (316). As an adult, she has continued to use storytelling to cope with her past and to reveal truths.

The Female Gothic genre has provided authors like Allison a forum to tell their stories when their voices may not be heard otherwise. As hooks writes in her foundational article “Feminist Theory from Margin to Center,” white, middle to upper-class feminists are often ignorant about the experiences of society’s most oppressed women — those who are of color and/or impoverished. The Female Gothic genre has provided a much-needed outlet for both its writers and readers — even the most overlooked — to engage in the dialogue about what it means to be a woman in America. Furthermore, the Gothic has “provided an approach to taboo subjects such as miscegenation, incest and disease,” and “for discussing some of the key issues of American society, including gender and the nation’s continuing drama of race” (Crow 1). Those taboo subjects and key issues, which also include “domestic violence, sexual assault and abject poverty,” can make for “uncomfortable reading” Carter writes (902). Yet she argues that that discomfort is essential.

Why do women tell disturbing stories? Why should audiences be uncomfortable? Is it simply to entertain and be entertained? Some might say Gothic stories are synonymous with ghost stories. While in some cases that may be true, the Female Gothic “ghost story” has gone beyond a form of entertainment to become “a powerful tool of critique, highlighting the various forms of disenfranchisement suffered by women in American culture,” Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes (“American Monsters” 48). “Such stories . . . highlight the terrors of the known, including abuse by fathers and husbands, economic dependency, the demands of motherhood, and circumscribed possibilities for self-actualization” (“American Monsters” 48). Gina Wisker would agree, and notes that contemporary American women’s Gothic writing “is likely to foreground elements of social critique and social values, and to focus on decay, derelict settings, flawed characters, and social issues such as poverty, racism, and family dissolution, using the ironic and the macabre to do so” (“Contemporary Women’s Gothic” 435). Other critics, such as Diana Wallace and Lynette Carpenter, similarly note how Gothic novels often feature home and family terrors, especially violence inflicted by men who are supposed to be women’s guardians and protectors (Wallace 75, Carpenter 207). Bailey astutely observes how the genre has increasingly focused on real-life terrors: “That Female Gothic literature may represent Female Gothic reality is a possibility suggested in nineteenth-century fiction . . . the “possibility” becomes less tentative, the suggestion more insistent, in the twentieth century” (273). Clearly, many critics believe the Female Gothic genre gives all women a place at the table and a chance to expose their audiences to harsh, often unspoken realities. By sharing their stories, these women are getting closer to revealing the truth of what it means to be an American woman. Those who read, analyze, and discuss these novels are thereby listening to the disenfranchised, the hopeless, and the silenced. Readers of the Female Gothic are becoming

more aware of the world and are perhaps developing more empathy for the downtrodden — or at least Allison hopes so.

Bastard out of Carolina is Allison's way of refusing to ignore traumatic experiences. To deny abuse, poverty, or sexual violence is to shame those who have experienced it, she writes. To talk about it is potentially to make a reader frightened, angry, compassionate — or all three. "That is of course what it means to read a novel and live in it for a while" Allison writes (320). "You are viscerally inside someone else's reality. You feel and understand things you have not known before, and that is both scary and exhilarating." This novel purposefully disturbs the peace and "everyone's sense of a just and reasonable world" (Allison 312). As she writes in her afterword to the novel, "Stories open the door to the darkened room. Language can carry us past the horror to the sense of purpose in a life that refuses to surrender to that darkness" (317). Allison hopes her novel demonstrates that rape survivors are not worthless or depraved. They are strong, innocent people who have had to endure an unjust world. By sharing their stories and refusing to hide them, perhaps society will begin to listen to, to care about, and to better understand the perspectives of oppressed women. Perhaps victims will start believing in their own worth, or will know they are not alone. Eventually, when enough words are shared and heard, when the voiceless become orators, the cycle of oppression might be broken. For contemporary Female Gothic writers, that seems to be a major goal: to inspire oppressed women to speak up and society to listen.

Conclusion

In this novel, Allison tells a truly disturbing story. She does so without invoking ghosts, vampires, witches, or any other supernatural elements. She simply describes what it is like to be a poor white girl growing up in the American South. The resulting tale is horrifying; it is made

more so by the fact that the reader does not have the convenience of minimizing its troubling content as purely fictional because Allison also experienced many of the same traumas that Bone did. Instead, the reader gets an uncomfortably close view of domestic abuse and sexual violence and the disturbing understanding that American women face such terrors everyday in their own homes. For centuries, these stories have been silenced or disguised with supernatural metaphors. In *Bastard*, though, Allison draws back the veil to show the true face of terror: people — people who inflict sexism, stereotypes, and violence upon others. She does so unflinchingly in this bildungsroman of an American girl who is oppressed by her poverty and gender, by her society, and by the adults in her life. Bone's story shows what it is like to combat sexism and poverty from birth. Her story shows what it means to tragically fulfill gender expectations and stereotypes that have been constructed by a patriarchal society. Yet it also shows how the Female Gothic genre is a powerful tool — one that can empower women by allowing them to tell and to hear even the darkest stories and the most disturbing truths. In so doing, women may be able to rewrite the oppressive narrative that has been scripted for them. For these women, the ending of their stories does not have to circle back to the beginning like Bone's, but may instead extend a new path forward and out of the cyclical patterns of powerlessness.

Chapter Six

Spirits that Save, Racism that Haunts: An Analysis of Louise Erdrich's *Four Souls*

In Louise Erdrich's *Four Souls*, the supernatural and spirits are indeed present. However, they are not sources of fear. Instead, racism terrorizes the novel's characters. The novel begins by following Fleur Pillager, a Chippewa woman, as she sets out to murder a white man who has taken her land. The man, John James Mauser, cuts down the trees on Fleur's land and uses them to construct his mansion. It is to this mansion that Fleur journeys, but when she arrives, her revenge plot takes a twist. Instead of killing Mauser, she ends up marrying him and bearing his child. Eventually, though, Fleur returns to her tribe where she at last reclaims her land and her Native identity. Interestingly, while Fleur's story is at the center of the novel, she never tells it herself. Instead, her story is narrated by others — including a white woman and Fleur's adoptive father and his girlfriend.

Many critics have focused on the novel's three narrators and their implications. Douglas Barnim, Summer Harrison, and Catherine Rainwater all conclude that the multiple narrators and their sometimes conflicting but always unique views lead readers to question history and to consider how a given perspective impacts the outcome of a story. Kathleen Brogan also analyzes the three narrators, but instead focuses on how their sharing of the storytelling reflects "the communality of Chippewa culture" (142). Additionally, Brogan develops a theory of cultural haunting in which ghosts are positive influences and explores how Erdrich's ghosts serve to connect the past and present. Finally, Danel Olson considers the ways in which Erdrich's novel is Gothic and how it draws on the works of earlier texts from that genre.

In this chapter, I will consider the three levels of narration and the novel's Gothic traits, but will mostly focus on Erdrich's use of extended metaphors and ghosts to illuminate the central

role of women in any given community, but especially in Native communities. I will largely draw on Paula Gunn Allen's theories of feminist tribalism and Brogan's theory of cultural haunting to analyze how Fleur transforms into a ghost of herself in order to torment her oppressors into submission and to reclaim her land, power, and identity. By regaining agency, Fleur represents how women are essential and powerful, and how they too can haunt. Ghosts and women become vital to melding together the past and the present and creating a viable future. Erdrich, like Dorothy Allison, eschews the supernatural as a source of fear. Instead, racism and the white people who propagate it are the most disturbing factors while any supernatural spirits bring about salvation. This becomes clear after considering the novel's place in the Gothic canon and Erdrich's use of symbolism and the supernatural to illuminate the importance of women and to subvert earlier Gothic demonization of Native people.

Gothicism in the Novel

Native Americans have been a central and defining aspect of the American Gothic genre and have helped to distinguish it from its European counterpart. As Teresa Goddu writes, America does not have Europe's "crumbling castles and antiquated traditions" but it does have the Indian as "a symbol of a ruined and conquered past" (*Gothic America* 55). Renee Bergland adds that "while European Gothic novels worked to show the destruction of traditional power structures, the American version works to show the formation of new power structures in the wilderness" (94). Those new power structures came at a terrible cost to Native Americans, a side of the story that is often neglected in Gothic narratives written by white authors. Native American characters helped to make the American Gothic unique, but white authors also used them to justify their aggression toward and decimation of native people (Goddu, *Gothic America*

56). In recent decades though, more and more Native American authors have begun using the Gothic to tell their own stories and to decry the terrible outcomes of American colonialism.

Native American Gothic writers have inverted the sources of fear; rather than characterizing Indians as villains, white people have become the antagonists. Native American texts “represent an effort to ‘write back’ to a colonialist tradition in which the Indian represented the repressed unconscious of the nation’s (and the continent’s) own violent history,” Michelle Burnham writes (226). Burnham further explains her theory with a metaphor. If the nation were a house, its landlords would be Native Americans and colonists would be the unwelcome tenants, which inverts “the traditional racial dynamics of American Gothic” as colonists become the “threatening presence” (Burnham 227). Other literary critics like Charles Crow and Carlos Gallego have reached similar conclusions, noting new voices emerging from groups who want to bring to light their marginalization and disenfranchisement “as exemplified in the strategic genocidal violence against Native Americans, the institutionalization of African American slavery and its Jim Crow legacies, and the ongoing domestication of women in general” (Crow 145 and Gallego 175). In Louise Erdrich’s *Four Souls*, she exposes hardships faced by Native American women and illuminates their significance and centrality. She thereby gives voice to an especially marginalized group of people.

In some ways, *Four Souls* is quite different from other Gothic texts. The supernatural elements it features bring about hope rather than fear. The women in the story are not victims or damsels in distress, but instead inflict fear and haunt others, thus demonstrating their agency and power. Furthermore, as Olson notes, *Four Souls* does not contain castles, dungeons, or moats. However, it does feature one eerie mansion “that continues to register horror and loss” (Olson 232). While this novel has some departures from other Gothic texts, it also demonstrates many

traditionally Gothic motifs, such as suspense, mystery, prophecies, supernatural events, visions, tense dramatic moments, and doom, Olson writes (231). The novel also demonstrates its Gothicism by alluding to dark and terrible pieces of American history, as Olson explains:

That Natives should have so much taken away — land, freedom, culture and life — and that more is still being demanded from them forms the cruelest irony of this hard land. Thus, racism, government persecution, forced reeducation, language deprivation, institutional swindles, killings, and the resulting revenge-and-reclamation fantasies make up the Native-American-meets-white story in America. But this chronicle of shame has seldom poured itself so hauntingly into a Gothic narrative until now. (228)

In *Four Souls*, none of the gruesome history of Indian people in this country is spared as Erdrich paints a portrait of what it is like for a Native woman to grapple with the past as she navigates her life. Erdrich goes even farther, though, than reminding readers of the terrible injustices Indian people have endured and still face. She joins other Native women writers who have “fought against stereotypical popular culture representations of Native women; . . . attempted to reinstate the importance of women to Native American cultures, and . . . contributed to the continuity and preservation of Native culture” (Van Dyke 100). Erdrich, a Chippewa tribe member herself, achieves these results by constructing extended metaphors, exposing women’s significance and power, and inverting traditional Gothic scare tactics.

Extended Metaphors

Throughout the novel, Mauser’s house serves as a metaphor for the nation and its troubled history. This becomes clear after two narrators provide contrasting descriptions of it. Fleur’s adoptive father, Nanapush, describes the home as a horrifying product of thievery, death, and manipulation:

They had this house of chimneys whose bricks contained the blood of pigs and calves so that a greasy sadness drifted in the festive rooms. They had this house of tears of lace constructed of a million tiny knots of useless knowledge. This house of windows hung with the desperation of dark virgins. They had this house of stacked sandstone colored the richest clay red and lavender hue. Once this stone had formed the live heart of sacred islands. Now it was a fashionable backdrop to their ambitions . . . In fact, there is no question that a number of people of all ages lost their lives on account of this house.

(Erdrich 7)

Nanapush, a Chippewa man, makes clear his disgust for this home, which contains felled trees that once were Fleur's. To add to this haunting portrait, the home is built on land where a Chippewa woman once gave birth and where "the earth made chokecherries from the woman's blood spilled in the grass" (Erdrich 4). In this way, the home seems to symbolize America, which similarly was built upon Indian grounds and constructed at the cost of many lives. Just as Nanapush sees the house and thinks of the blood spilled and lives lost at its expense, so might Native Americans think of all they have suffered for the United States to come to fruition. This metaphor is made even clearer when Polly Elizabeth, Mauser's sister-in-law (he is married to a white woman before marrying Fleur) describes the house in the next chapter:

On the most exclusive ridge of the city, our pure white house was set, pristine as cake in the window of a bakery shop. High on sloped and snowy grounds, it was unshadowed yet by trees. The roof, gables, porch, all chiseled and bored in fantastic shapes, were frosted with an overnight fall of gleaming snow. Clipped in cones and cubes, the shrubs were coated with the same lacquer, as was the fountain, frozen, and the white cast-iron lacework of the benches and the tea tables in the yard. (11)

What Nanapush sees as a monument to destruction and horror, Polly sees as an idyllic and perfect home. Similarly, Native and white people might see the founding of the United States differently. While many white schoolchildren are taught to be proud of American progress, they are not often told at what price that progress comes. The terrible treatment and near decimation of Native people are not often featured as children learn of historical figures like Christopher Columbus, George Washington, or Lewis and Clark. As Crow writes, “American Gothic presented a counter-narrative, undercutting the celebration of progress, inquiring about its costs and omissions from the story” (17). Mauser’s house, then, seems to represent the United States as well as the subjectivity of its history.

As previously mentioned, several critics have taken note of how Erdrich juxtaposes contrasting narratives in her novel, such as the alternate descriptions of Mauser’s mansion. “Four Souls uses this technique not just to provide different perspectives or first-person accounts but specifically to interrogate the processes that underlie the construction of stories” Harrison writes (40). In doing so, Erdrich highlights how history is more of a “constructed interpretation” than an objective and factual account (Harrison 40). Erdrich is not attempting to replace one narrative with another, rather she is “destabilizing both in order to undermine the validity of any totalizing narrative” (Harrison 51). Mauser’s house clearly serves to trouble perceptions of American history and to ask the reader to consider various viewpoints.

Just as Mauser’s home seems to symbolize the United States, Mauser himself seems to represent oppressors of Native Americans. When Fleur reaches his home, she gets a job there as a housekeeper and treats the home as her “hunting grounds” and Mauser as her prey. She finds out more about him in the process, such as the fact that in the past he pretended to love various Native women, married them, took the deeds to their land, then divorced them. In this way, he

has become extraordinarily wealthy. He obtains Fleur's land when she fails to pay property tax on her allotment during a famine and epidemic that sweeps her reservation. To Fleur, Mauser is just one of many white people who have used bureaucracy and legal systems to manipulate native people and steal their land. As Mauser himself says at one point, "I'm just one of an army of swindlers and scavengers" (Erdrich 126). In his serial and guiltless thievery and manipulation, Mauser comes to embody the white population that has oppressed Native peoples since its arrival on the continent. Joy Porter describes the terrible impact white settlers had on Native Americans: in the first century of contact, 95 percent of the pre-contact Indian landbase was expropriated; 70-90 percent of the indigenous population was destroyed; and extreme poverty and disadvantages afflicted the remaining Indians (40). Mauser similarly has taken all Fleur's land and will nearly destroy her before she leaves him.

If Mauser is representative of white oppressors, then Fleur seems to symbolize Native American women, their interconnectedness with the earth, and their ultimate power. Before she arrives on Mauser's doorstep for the first time, she braids her hair and changes into a brown dress, heavy boots, and wears a blanket as a shawl to deliberately appear as the "stereotypical Indian 'squaw'" (Harrison 56). Then she follows the pattern of other Native American woman by marrying this man, even though she originally intended to murder him. Furthermore, when Fleur is pregnant with Mauser's child, she develops alcoholism. It begins one day when Fleur is struggling to carry her child and fears losing him. A doctor arrives but refuses to treat an "Indian". Polly, Mauser's former sister-in-law who now dotes on Fleur, gives Fleur whiskey to calm herself and the baby. Eventually, Polly starts spooning out whiskey to her every hour. When the baby is born, Polly instantly gives him alcohol. "The child was born screaming and would not be soothed until I thought to dip my finger into the whiskey cup and lay it on his

kitten's tongue" Polly says. "Afterward, we painted Fleur's nipples with it so that the child would suck, although, by then, as she continued her medicinal drinking, I suppose he imbibed plenty at the breast" (Erdrich 68). Polly introducing Fleur to alcohol is clearly emblematic of how white people introduced alcohol to Native people, resulting in widespread alcoholism and addiction. Fleur certainly seems representative of Native struggles: she loses her land, is continually subverted by a white man, and becomes alcoholic. As Brogan writes, "The story of Fleur is inseparable from the larger story of the near devastation of Chippewa culture" (40). However, Fleur also departs from stereotypes of Native women and comes to represent their strength and their unbreakable connection to mother nature.

Fleur's ties to her land and trees are strong enough that she is driven to be reunited with them. As Olson notes, Fleur's land is taken around the same time she is raped (this occurs in Erdrich's earlier novel, *Tracks*; many of her novels feature the same host of characters). This clearly links Fleur and her land. This connection is strengthened when Fleur explains herself to Mauser. At the time, she is holding a knife to his throat and threatening to slice him open and hang his guts on the wall (she does threaten to kill him before deciding to become his wife instead). Mauser asks her who she is and Fleur replies: "I am the sound that the wind used to make in a thousand needles of pine. I am the quiet at the root. When I walk through your hallway I walk through myself. When I touch the walls of your house I touch my own face. You know me" (Erdrich 44). Fleur universalizes herself and makes herself seem a part of the woods that once thrived but now comprise Mauser's mansion. She also represents the Native people — women especially — that he and other white people have mowed down or even killed in the name of "progress," power, and wealth.

Although Fleur decides not to kill Mauser in that moment when her knife edge is poised against his throat, she does eventually get some form of revenge. While she lives in that home, Polly and Mauser learn more about her, her people, and the suffering they have endured at the hands of white people. At one point, Polly describes her revelations: “All the materials, the fabric, all the raw stuff of our opulent shelter were taken from Fleur’s people. She described her natal lands and informed me of their rapine treatment at the hands of white men, at the hands of Mauser himself . . . It occurred to me to imagine her as a person — as a woman with family and feelings for them such as my own” (Erdrich 67). Polly’s blatant racism is especially clear here, when it dawns on her for the first time to consider Fleur as an equal. Mauser also comes to have a better realization of his impact on others. “I’ve got the misfortune, perhaps, to have understood at last what I’ve done. She has let me know full well the misery I left behind . . . I had to get near something in her that I can’t know, some pure space, something that I went up north to have and only ended up destroying. It is the same with her” (Erdrich 126). Mauser and Polly at last begin to consider the plight of the Native people and to feel guilt and sorrow. Inflicting that guilt is not the only way Fleur gets revenge, though. After marrying her, Mauser’s wealth crumbles. His investments fail, his plants close, and his mines collapse. He will soon face bankruptcy and plans to flee the country. Fleur will not go with him, but instead plans to return to her reservation — with his prized car, any remaining money, the deed to her land, and his son. She has not succeeded in killing Mauser, then, but has perhaps done worse — leaving him heartbroken, destitute, and guilt-ridden. Mauser feels that even his son’s “abnormalities” and “strangeness” are his fault — the boy has apparently suffered from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and seems to be on the autism spectrum. “I have come to believe the boy’s backward traits are a judgment on the man I was,” Mauser tells Polly one day. “I did some terrible things in my younger days and was

always surprised and suspicious that luck seemed to reward rather than punish me. But now I think . . . the just desserts that skipped over me were visited upon my son” (Erdrich 90-92).

Mauser’s comments prove that his son and prior misdeeds have come to torment him.

Just as Mauser is representative of white men and Fleur of Native people, their son seems to represent their joint legacy — one that is binding and haunting. Polly observes one day that Fleur’s hatred of Mauser has changed to something like love — or pity. Mauser is now the father of her child, who she loves. She cannot then kill Mauser, and feels trapped. Mauser feels that Fleur’s demise at the hands of alcohol is inevitable and he cannot bear to watch it, especially since he feels responsible for it. Their relationship seems emblematic of the white-Native relationships that have always been part of America’s foundation; they are intertwined but fraught with complications. Accordingly, Fleur and Mauser’s son will serve as Fleur’s redemption and her revenge. At the end of the novel, the boy succeeds in winning a poker game to get back the deed to Fleur’s land from a man named Jewett Parker Tatro (Mauser’s deed turns out to be no good because he failed to pay property taxes; Tatro then bought the land). Yet the boy’s autism haunts his father. Olson describes him as a “partially lame heir” and says his inclusion is reminiscent of early Gothic works that contained inheritors who were sickly, “puny, addicted lazy, cowardly, slow, or otherwise unfit to defend the family’s honor, land, wealth and castle” (234). In some ways, Fleur’s son brings about victory for her — he hurts Mauser and helps her. As Olson notes, though, the victory is incomplete: “The boy apparently suffers from what has hurt a disproportionately high percentage of children....fetal alcohol syndrome. It is yet another great tragedy, and it is the novel’s new and sad twist on the old Gothic’s despair” (234). In this revenge plot, both parties are hurt and neither truly wins. Perhaps that, too, is the case for America as it grapples with its beginnings; earlier harms cannot be repaired and revenge will not

restore the past. Erdrich's symbolic tales of the mansion, Mauser, Fleur, and their son seem to create an allegory of white-Native relations and their troubling legacy. They also illustrate how Fleur defies stereotypes and upends her oppressor, thereby demonstrating female power and reversing common Gothic tropes of white heroism and Indian villainy.

Women as Supernatural and Central

At first, Fleur seems to fulfill stereotypes of Native American women as she becomes alcoholic and seems to fall prey to a white man. Yet Fleur eventually breaks all stereotypes as she demonstrates that women are not subservient or inferior — nor are they easily defeated. When Tatro devises his plan to steal Fleur's land, he refers to her derogatorily as “just a woman” (Erdrich 6). Fleur turns that phrase “just a woman,” into a weapon as she utilizes femininity to overpower her oppressors and come out victorious. In doing so, she demonstrates how women are central to Native American communities and culture.

Fleur's story reflects gynocentric tribal beliefs that are sometimes undermined by the dominant white patriarchal society. Scholar Paula Gunn Allen writes that women are at the heart of Native cultures. Women, like the earth, are the great backdrop against which all life exists — they are empowered and have agency; they are not damsels in distress. Paternalistic, male-dominant lenses for critiquing Native stories has led to a skewed “understanding of tribal life and philosophy” Gunn writes (2109). However, she says that applying feminist criticisms can reveal obscured truths in Indian literature:

Analyzing tribal cultural systems from a mainstream feminist point of view allows an otherwise overlooked insight into the complex interplay of factors that have led to the systematic loosening of tribal ties, the disruption of tribal cohesion and complexity, and the growing disequilibrium of cultures that were anciently based on a belief in balance,

relationship, and the centrality of women, particularly elder women. A feminist approach reveals not only the exploitation and oppression of the tribes by whites and white government but also areas of oppression within the tribes, and the sources and nature of these stories are always female-centered.” (2111 - 2112)

Such a feminist reading of Erdrich’s text makes it clear that Fleur is never a weak or objectified woman subject to terror imposed by white men like Mauser; instead she is the agent of change who drives him into regret and poverty and restores the identity and land that were stolen from her. Furthermore, her wise female ancestors and those of Margaret help the tribe to regain its balance and preserve its homelands. In this story, ghosts save and hauntings are earned.

In some Gothic stories, ghosts are represented as terrifying figures. However, in Erdrich’s writing, ghosts are welcome inhabitants who help to reunite the past and present and thereby preserve ethnic cultures and identities. Erdrich’s positive portrayal of ghosts reflects Chippewa beliefs. As Brogan writes, “Ancestral ghosts have, in the context of traditional Chippewa religion, powerful and positive connotations. For the Chippewa, as for many Native American cultures, the living and the dead participate in one integrated reality” (31). Erdrich’s tone toward ghosts is similar to that of other ethnic Gothic writers. Brogan calls this trend “cultural haunting.” Cultural haunting has more positive than negative connotations and tends to represent “continuity with the past” (31). In the case of contemporary Native American literature, “the retrieval of lost traditions . . . is signaled by the appearance of spirits,” Brogan writes (31). Ghosts are also linked to the female position in society and “give expression to the ways in which women are rendered invisible in the public sphere . . . the uncanny power of the ghost reflects the disruptive force of strong women in societies that restrict the expression of female

power” (Brogan 25). Erdrich seems to use ghosts for both purposes in her novel — to retrieve lost traditions and to express female power.

One of the novel’s three narrators is Margaret, Nanapush’s longtime girlfriend. Margaret has several significant interactions in the novel with ghostlike figures who impress upon her the importance of tradition and the power of women. When Margaret was young, her grandmother taught her about her female ancestors. She told stories about them, including painful ones like when white people forced them to change their Indian names and go to boarding schools, where they were required to forsake their culture and identities. Eventually that fate also befell Margaret, who was originally named Center of the Sky. The transformation of her name seems symbolic of women’s central role in their communities, and how white people’s patriarchal views undermined the significance of Native women. Nonetheless, these stories teach Margaret to revere her female ancestors — who one day come to her rescue. The spirits of those female ancestors visit Margaret in a dream as she is hanging from her neck and near death; she is caught in a trap her boyfriend Nanapush had set for a man named Shesheeb, who he thinks may be having an affair with Margaret (he is not). As Margaret is hanging from a rope tied to a tree, trying not to strangle to death, she is visited by the spirit of her grandmother, Medicine Dress. She tells Margaret the secret of the powerful dress she wore in life and instructs her how to make one just like it. If Margaret makes it, Medicine Dress tells her she will be able to “heal anyone” and “see things” when she wears the garment (Erdrich 117). Then, more spirits come to see Margaret: “I looked up into the sky, and there I saw a circle of women. I heard them dancing — their soft footsteps slapping the earth. I was pierced by the wish to live” (Erdrich 117). At that moment, Nanapush finds and saves Margaret — though it seems she has truly been saved by her ancestors. In this case, the ghosts of past women in Margaret’s family arrive not to haunt or scare

her, but to inspire, uplift, and rescue her. They also bring about tradition; after Margaret sees them she begins making the dress using old Chippewa customs. As Wendy Kolmar writes, the use of the supernatural is a way to recover the past: “Each ghost is a recovered story, and ghost seeing is storytelling. These ghosts, these stories, are claimed and embraced” (248). When Margaret sees the spirits of her ancestors, she remembers all the stories she heard about them and draws on their strength and wisdom. Eventually, the dress that Margaret makes will illuminate the significance of women and Native culture and inspire more stories to be told about the past.

In addition to those female spirits, Fleur becomes ghostlike as well. Before arriving at Mauser’s house, she gives herself a new name: Four Souls. The name had formerly been her mother’s and gives Fleur four lives. Again, women are seen here transmitting power to each other. When Fleur returns to the reservation, Margaret remarks that her four souls have fled and yet she still lives. Consequently, Fleur is a walking ghost. This ghostliness is deepened by imagery: Fleur is wearing an all-white suit and is driving a white car, prompting the locals to dub her “a restless spirit in a car.” She stalks the reservation in this same outfit and vehicle for weeks, waiting for an opportunity to recover the deeds to her land from Tatro, a white man who owns a local bar. Finally, after her son wins back her deed in a game of poker, Fleur rejoices. She has, at long last, achieved her goal. Yet the moment is not completely celebratory as she is still quite lost: her son has no Indian name, she is an alcoholic, and she has no sense of identity. She is still a ghost, and only the power of women is strong enough to make her human again. Margaret gives Fleur the Medicine Dress and tells her to go to a specific rock by a river — where her mother’s ancestors had traditionally fasted — for eight days. During that time, she will only drink water twice. Otherwise, she will have no food or water and no help but the dress. If she makes it through, a new name and identity will be hers: Medicine Dress. Fleur does so

successfully, thus earning a new name and regaining her identity. Brogan writes that “for authors who take as their subject the dynamic of cultural loss and recovery, the ghost offers an apt metaphor for the ongoing process of ethnic reinvention” (24). Fleur’s ghostlike return to the reservation symbolizes her loss of identity and culture. The spirits of women like Four Souls and Medicine Dress lend Fleur their own power so she can rediscover herself and regain her land. In this novel, ghosts function to centralize, unite, and empower women for their own sake and the sake of the greater community at hand.

The impact of women and their spirits extends beyond individuals when the Medicine Dress is used not only to save Fleur, but also to save the land on which the reservation rests. Nanapush is the tribal council chairman, and must attend a meeting to convince his tribe to vote against an offer to sell their tribal lands. That morning, though, he finds himself drunk off communion wine and wearing Margaret’s medicine dress. The night before he had argued with Margaret that she was not dancing well enough in the dress, so he put it on to show her how to do it better. They argued and he ended up leaving their house with the dress still on and making for the local church, where he snuck into the basement to drink from the kegs of communion wine. “In one night, I made up for all of the years of the blood of Christ that I had missed,” Nanapush says (Erdrich 154). Feeling poorly and dressed like a woman, Nanapush wakes up the next day just in time for the meeting over tribal lands and has no choice but to attend as is. Upon his arrival, he stands proudly and spins in a slow circle, showing off his outfit as everyone laughs at him. He, noticing that his audience is mostly women, then begins a lecture about the value of women. He says that in his dress, the earth spoke to him. He relates her words to his tribe: “You’re only here on my patience and on the patience of women. What would you do, the earth asked me laughingly, if all the women of the world closed their legs to men? Die out, that’s

what. So with my generous nature, I have given you all that you have. You owe your life to me. Now I ask you, what have you given to me in return?" (Erdrich 156). The story works, and the tribe votes against selling their land to protect the earth who has given so much to them. Nanapush realizes that the dress's medicine was the "sacred shame" it provoked in him.

In the above anecdote, Erdrich juxtaposes white man's medicine (the red wine/blood of Christ) with Native medicine and tradition (the dress). Clearly, the Native medicine is superior and saves the tribe from making a terrible mistake. Similarly, the white man's medicine (whiskey) that was administered to Fleur was far inferior to her people's medicine — the dress. Without ghosts and women, the tribe and Fleur would be landless and thereby deprived of culture, tradition, and identity. Crow writes that many Native American writers "have drawn on indigenous medicine, often contrasting it to the 'witchery' of Anglo culture." (148-149). The medicine dress is another demonstration of how Erdrich uses the supernatural to subvert demonized views of Native Americans and instead reveal the evil of white oppressors, while also emphasizing women's great impact on their societies.

Conclusion

America's foundation was built upon the oppression of Native American people. The horrors inflicted on the United States' indigenous populations have always been nagging at the nation's conscience, and so fittingly Indians have come to be haunting specters in American Gothic texts. In recent decades, though, more and more Native writers have reclaimed the genre to tell their own stories. Erdrich is one such author, and in *Four Souls* she reveals how this nation's sordid history still afflicts Native people. In this novel, she subverts traditional Gothic scare tactics that paint Indians as mysterious and dangerous figures and instead portrays white oppressors as the true source of terror. However, she does not present Native people — and

women in particular — as helpless and hopeless victims. Instead, she confirms that women are central to their communities and to maintaining cultural traditions and identities. Her use of extended metaphors and benevolent female spirits demonstrates how people are haunted by their own misdeeds, not ghosts. Instead, spirits become sources of unity between past and present that illuminate female strength and significance. In *Four Souls*, women reach through generations to ensure their stories and their power remain immortal amidst even the most unthinkable patterns of persecution.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

The United States is a patchwork quilt of cultures, races, and beliefs. The story of this nation is the story of how a diverse population of people came together over time and how they have fought and accepted each other. Even today that pendulum of love and hate, acceptance and rejection, empowerment and oppression, and equality and iniquity swings back and forth between various groups of people. Clearly, though, one group has held the most control over how, where, and when that pendulum swings: middle and upper-class white males. Their group founded the United States and has ruled it ever since, often at the expense of minority groups and women. That dynamic between the powerful and powerless has shifted over the years, but is still very much in existence. Those who are non-white, poor, uneducated, LGBTQ, female, or some combination of the above traits have been oppressed throughout American history, and that treatment continues even today. Yet the reality of this persecution is often suppressed. Instead, America is trumpeted as place of equality and liberty for all. This ideal is a worthy goal indeed, but to truly pursue it Americans must also acknowledge the ways in which its citizens and residents are aggrieved by the ruling class. The voices of the minorities must be heard and added to the story of America. Authors of the American Female Gothic genre have strived to do just that. They tell the dark and disturbing stories, the stories that people try to forget or hide. In doing so, they challenge Americans to both acknowledge and change the status quo of discrimination and disparity. As this analysis of five novels from the 1960s to the 2000s demonstrates, American women writers have created unsettling literature to combat the oppressive narrative that their patriarchal society has constructed for them.

In Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat and Constance Blackwood symbolize women who struggle to find purpose and happiness in a patriarchal world.

Their isolation and ghostlike recession from the world also seems to represent the failure of the feminist movement to advocate for the rights and equality of all women; the sisters help only themselves as their wealth allows them to do. Yet their reclusivity also seems to imply that women must submit to patriarchy or be outcast from society. Their plight and mental instability — Merricat murders her family to escape them and Constance covers up her deed — perhaps represent what can happen to women who are given such an ultimatum and demonstrates how patriarchy can have morbid results.

In *Interview with the Vampire*, readers see how patriarchy tends to infantilize women. Such infantilization literally occurs when Claudia is turned into a vampire when she is a young girl, meaning she will live out her life as a woman in a child's body and be completely dependent on the adult men in her life — Lestat and Louis. The latter vampires represent the country's outdated patriarchal society that endures even amidst modern-day social progress. These male vampires become emblematic of the United States' troubled and repressed history of ostracizing groups such as African-Americans and women (Louis and Lestat begin their journey as slave owners). Just as social inequality lives on in America, so do these white male vampires.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison demonstrates how bodies can become sites for empowerment and storytelling. When black women are silenced and oppressed, their embodied stories speak for them. These stories become so powerful they cannot be ignored — instead, they are acknowledged as an integral and deep-rooted part of American history. This is clear when Beloved returns to her mother's home as a corporeal ghost and the image of her pregnant, naked body from the novel's last scene is imprinted on the minds of all who see her — including the readers. Beloved is a monument to the tragedies inflicted by slavery and the many lives lost amid

its inhumane cruelty. She may be dead, but she will not be forgotten or made invisible — and nor will the women who came before her.

In the semi-autobiographical *Bastard out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison confirms how humans can be more monstrous than the demons they invent. Bone's story shows what it means to combat sexism, sexual abuse, and poverty. It is also a testament to the dangers that accompany gender expectations and stereotypes. At the same time, though, Allison uses the novel to establish that the Female Gothic genre is a powerful tool that empowers women and can help them to escape oppressive cycles. By raising their voices and telling their stories, the downtrodden can rewrite the stories and fates that have been scripted for them.

Louise Erdrich's *Four Souls* features Fleur, a Chippewa woman who battles racism and sexism to reclaim her land, power, and identity. She embodies the spiritual power that tribal women employ to restore tradition and strengthen the tribal community. In this novel, Erdrich inverts traditional Gothic scare tactics: white people become the dangerous figures instead of Native people, and ghosts become saviors rather than sources of terror. This makes it clear that people are not haunted by ghosts, but by their own misdeeds. Erdrich uses this novel to express the power of women, traditions, and culture and to raise questions about the history and future of the United States.

The heroines of these five novels are as distinct as the many populations within the United States. Merricat and Constance in *They Have Always Lived in the Castle* are privileged white women who isolate themselves by any means necessary in order to maintain control over their own lives. Claudia in *Interview with the Vampire* is a white woman who men freeze in a child's body and therefore eternally infantilize her. Sethe in *Beloved* is a black woman and mother who struggles to cope with the way slavery has darkened her life and the lives of her

children. Bone in *Bastard out of Carolina* is a white pre-teen who endures poverty and sexual abuse. And Fleur in *Four Souls* is a Chippewa woman who fights against oppression to regain her agency. They are very different but all have at least these similarities: their gender, their nationality, and the fact that they have each been oppressed. For them, it seems that to be an American woman is to be subjugated. The women in these five novels have experienced incredible tragedy in their lives: rape, slavery, murder, and other types of degradation. Yet there is still hope for American women. The American Female Gothic genre continues to wax on as a significant reflection of this country's story; it is a medium through which women can raise their voices and tell their own stories, and through which readers can better understand what it means to be an American woman. By sharing the dark experiences women have endured, Female Gothic authors help to reveal the truth and empower women by giving them voices. The texts they create ask readers to turn on the lights and illuminate what was hidden in darkness. They challenge readers to see America for what it is and to transform it into what it can become. Each of these novels is another ghost to haunt the American conscience and another call to action to make this country the place it claims it is: a bastion of equality and liberty.

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