CHAPTER 11

Literature Calls Justice
Deconstruction's "Coming-to-Terms" with Literature

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On the penultimate page of *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida describes a "fault" (*faute*) repeated in the Occidental tradition that "comes at a great price – for humanity," and this fault is the failure to begin where one ought to have "been able to begin," namely with haunting.[1] He adds: "In order for there to be any sense in asking oneself about the terrible price to pay, in order to watch over the future, everything would have to be begun again."[2] The last paragraphs of *Specters of Marx* conclude with the quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that plays a crucial role throughout the book: "Can one, in order to question it, address oneself to a ghost? To whom? To him? To it, as Marcellus says once again and so prudently? 'Thou art a Scholler; speake to *it* Horatio. Question *it*.'"[3] Derrida explains:

> The question deserves perhaps to be put the other way: could one *address oneself in general* if already some ghost did not come back? If he loves justice at least, the "scholar" of the future, the "intellectual" of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always *there*, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet.[4]

As the book's title makes clear, Derrida sets out not to repeat the mistake or fault of Marx, Freud, Heidegger and other predecessors, whose work, nonetheless, as he underlines time and again, is indispensable for his own scholarly path. After dedicating the book to Chris Hani, the popular hero of the resistance against South Africa's apartheid who had been assassinated twelve days before the original version of *Specters of Marx* was given as a lecture at a conference in Riverside,[5] Derrida writes in his "exordium":

[1] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 220.
[2] Ibid. [3] Ibid. [4] Ibid., 221. [5] Ibid., xv–xvi.

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"If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of *justice*." "No ethics" and "no politics" are "possible and thinkable and *just*" without the recognition of "those others who are no longer" or those "who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born."[6] Among those others, Derrida enumerates "victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism."[7] To "live otherwise . . ., not better, but more *justly*," will be possible only "*with them*": "to learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts . . . No *being-with* the other, no *socius* without this *with* that makes *being-with* in general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations."[8] Justice and any concept of a tomorrow are inextricably linked to "this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present":

> To be just: beyond the living present in general – and beyond its simple negative reversal. A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present). We are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant that is not docile to time, at least to what we call time. Furtive and untimely, the apparition of the specter does not belong to that time, it does not give time, not that one: "Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost" (Hamlet).[9]

"To be just" and to address oneself to the other require both, and categorically, if this adverb can be used for a deconstructionist approach, the invitation of ghosts. The reason why Shakespeare's *Hamlet* plays a decisive role in Derrida's book is that the play not only begins with the ghost, but Horatio and Hamlet (both "scholars") are exhorted to speak with the ghost and, what is more, invite the ghost to speak. Otherwise put, they offer to listen to a voice not "presently living."

According to Derrida, no justice will have any chance to occur if we do not learn from the ghost how to address him or her. There is no pursuit of justice without beginning "everything again" under the auspices of haunting. If, as Derrida asserted in 1989, "deconstruction is

[6] Ibid., xix. [7] Ibid. [8] Ibid., xx. [9] Ibid., xix.

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justice,"[10] and "justice" is the only concept that cannot be deconstructed,[11] then deconstruction can be described as the practice, the discipline of transposing ontology, ever so slightly, but ever so radically, into a hauntology: the practice and discipline of learning how to address oneself to ghosts, the discipline of learning how to invite ghosts to speak. This is the main reason why, I contend, Derrida defined deconstruction as a "coming-to-terms with literature."[12]

If philosophy and other scholarly discourses are bound in the Western tradition by modalities of time related to "being" and presence, and if they are bound to the coherence of non-contradictory discourse, literature does not know of these limitations: the temporal continuum can be broken, and language may be required to "get out of the way."[13] And whereas philosophy and other scholarly discourses are obliged to engage in generalization, analysis and explication, literature has the potential of highest historical, political, linguistic, psychological (to name just these) condensation and singularity. Derrida writes:

> A text by Joyce is simultaneously the condensation of a scarcely delimitable history. But this condensation of history, of language . . . remains here indissociable from an *absolutely* singular event, an *absolutely* singular signature, and therefore also of a date, of a language, of an autobiographical inscription. In a minimal autobiographical trait can be gathered the greatest potentiality of historical, theoretical, linguistic, philosophical culture – that's really what interests me. I am not the only one to be interested by this economic power . . . The "economy" of literature *sometimes* seems to me more powerful than that of other types of discourse: such as, for example, historical or philosophical discourse. *Sometimes*: it depends on singularities and contexts. Literature would be potentially more potent.[14]

The potency of literature is linked to its ability to offer a "condensation of history" that is not subject to being "docile to time, at least to what we call time." Moreover, this "strange institution called literature" is "in the West . . . linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy. Not that it depends on

[10] Derrida, *Force of Law*, trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 243.

[11] Derrida, "A Discussion with Jacques Derrida," *Theory & Event* 5, no. 1 (2001), https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/article/32615.

[12] James Creech, Peggy Kamuf and Jane Todd, "Deconstruction in America: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Critical Exchange* 17 (Winter 1985): 9.

[13] Toni Morrison, "Foreword," in *Beloved* (New York: Plume Books, 1998), xviii.

[14] Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 43.

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a democracy in place, but it seems inseparable to me from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy."[15] Literature, then, is inseparable from the promise of justice, and of a democracy to come. This is so, because it calls justice to contest, in singularity, each time, every time, one by one, one story, one poem, one novel at a time and the law of the land to respond to the claims of justice (always "impossible" in Derrida's sense, explained later), each time, every time, one by one, one story, one poem, one novel at a time.

As Derek Attridge and others have noted, "there has always been an ethico-political dimension to Derrida's writing,"[16] which, however, has nothing to do with a moralizing agenda:

> Derrida's writing on literary texts arises from a strong response to them which is also a strong sense of his *responsibility* toward them, the registering of a demand which they and their signatories make, of a call that seems to come from somewhere outside the orbit within which we comfortably go about our intellectual business – but an outside which cannot simply be classified as exterior ... Responsibility for Derrida is not something we simply "take": we find ourselves summoned, confronted by an undecidability which is also always an opportunity and a demand, a chance and a risk. Highlighted in Derrida's readings of literary texts are those aspects which make most demands on us, which are most difficult to write about in the conventional discourse of criticism because they shake the foundations of that discourse.[17]

Literary texts that "make most demands on us" because they "shake the foundation" of discourse within the academy but also possibly in the society in which they intervene can be works like James Joyce's and Stéphane Mallarmé's, that is texts that resist, stage and suspend concepts such as "mimesis, reference, form, content, genre, origin, intention, ... showing them to be other than the self-consistent, controlling categories they are usually taken to be."[18] According to Attridge, those are the literary texts that attracted Derrida's interest first and foremost. But there are literary texts whose "demands" on the reader and language (both the discourse of criticism, but also language in general) are differently pressing. Fiction writing, to use a felicitous formulation by George Lipsitz, functions "as a social force, as a repository of memories that are too brutal, too debilitating, and too horrifying to register through direct historical or

[15] Ibid., 37.
[16] Derek Attridge, "Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature," in *Acts of Literature*, 5.
[17] Ibid., 5–6. [18] Ibid., 4.

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social science narratives."[19] It is this "demand" and this upheaval of "foundations" on which I focus here; here, like perhaps nowhere else, ghosts are invited to speak.

Derrida was drawn to literature because like no other textual genre its very institution (and literature is an "institution") is inspired by what could be called a practice of the impossible: to testify to the uniquely singular in necessarily generalizable language (in Attridge's formulation, the "structural interconnectedness of the absolutely singular and the absolutely general"[20]), to defend the openness and fragility of a "living together" over and against an understanding of community as a symbiotic (naturality, birth, blood, soil, nation) or conventional (state, juridical) cohesiveness or totality,[21] and precisely for that reason, to invite the voiceless, the ghosts, to speak, while also, *at the same time*, insisting on justice for the (presently) living, that is, performing the labor of a democracy-to-come. This concrete "labor" is underlined by Derrida throughout his oeuvre and throughout his political stances: "justice, however unpresentable it remains, does not wait. It is that which must not wait."[22]

> Justice, in the name of which one deconstructs the law, is not deconstructible. So you have two heterogeneous concepts, if you want, two heterogeneous ends, the law and justice. Yet, despite this absolute radical heterogeneity between the two, they are indissociable. And, in different contexts, I reformalise: the relationship between two terms, the two poles of this structure, which are absolutely, radically heterogeneous and nevertheless indissociable. Why? Because if you want to be just, you have to improve the law.[23]

To "improve the law," it will be necessary to get to work. While, as Christoph Menke writes, the "deconstructive unfolding of the tension between justice and law" occurs "in the name of an experience that no political stance can capture," such an unfolding "nevertheless affects any politics as its border, and therefore as its interruption."[24]

[19] George Lipsitz, back cover of Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[20] Attridge, "Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature," 26.

[21] See Jacques Derrida, "Avowing – The Impossible: 'Returns,' Repentance, and Reconciliation," trans. Gil Anidjar, in Elisabeth Weber, *Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and Peace* (New York: Fordham, 2013), 18–41.

[22] Derrida, *Force of Law*, 255. It is in the spirit of such urgency that Derrida was an active and outspoken critic and commentator on issues such as South Africa's apartheid, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the bloody civil war in his native Algeria, human rights abuses, French immigration laws, the death penalty and the so-called war on terror.

[23] Derrida, "A Discussion with Jacques Derrida."

[24] Christoph Menke, *Für eine Politik der Dekonstruktion*, in *Gewalt und Gerechtigkeit*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 286.

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Derrida was drawn to literature, because it materializes an "unfolding of the tension between law and justice." Like no other discursive practice, insisting on justice for the living and their ghosts, literature can welcome what Derrida describes as "the law of the phantom, the spectral experience and the memory of the phantom, of that which is neither dead nor living, more than dead and more than living, only surviving, the law of the most commanding memory, even though it is the most effaced and the most effaceable, but for that very reason the most demanding."[25]

Like no other discursive practice, literature gives voice to the "most effaced and most effaceable" memory, even though and because it is the "most demanding," even "commanding." This may also explain why one "striking feature" of Derrida's responses to literary texts, as Attridge observes, is "their predominantly affirmative mode: they affirm what they take the texts to be doing in their most challenging operations, they bring this quality or movement out into the open (as far as it is possible to do so), they celebrate it, they put it to work, they invite a further response to it. By contrast, the mode of his writing on philosophical texts may seem neutral or even antagonistic."[26]

In contemporary American literature the "potency" and "economy of literature" understood along Derridean lines is at play and at stake with breath-taking strength and equally powerful tenderness in Toni Morrison's novels. Even though to my knowledge, Derrida never published a text on Toni Morrison's oeuvre, her writing, as I show in what follows, corresponds in a singularly germane way to a number of traits that Derrida reflects on in his thinking on "literature." In Morrison's novels, "the most effaced and the most effaceable" memory, the multilayered and suppressed memory of slavery, returns as the "most commanding" and "demanding." A conversation between Derrida's reflection on literature and Morrison's writing is thus productive and promising, as, for example, Jeffrey Weinstock has shown.[27]

Morrison states categorically that a certain "living together" and a direct address guide the entirety of her writing:

> If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about

[25] Derrida, *Force of Law*, 259. [26] Attridge, "Introduction," 20–21.

[27] In this chapter, I consider only a small selection of the vast number of scholarly analyses of Morrison's work. Jeffrey Weinstock's essay offers a lucid reading of Morrison with Derrida, to which I return. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Ten Minutes for Seven Letters: Reading Beloved's Epitaph," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 61, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 136.

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> anything, I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams – which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted . . . It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.[28]

If the "best art is political" and is "about you," it is, by definition, concerned with the community, with the question of how to live together well. That means that far from being an idle pastime, literature, fiction, a novel has work to do. According to Morrison, a novel "should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also *work.* It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe."[29] It is neither a sociological study nor a philosophical or moral treatise. It is able to disrupt the present and presence and their (chrono) logical discourse. Morrison's fiction ventures into such disruption in order to confront the aforementioned "terrible price" and in order to invent other modes of "living together" from which the "needy dead"[30] would not be banished. The immense challenge is to confront a past so violent that it is "deliberately" suppressed, while also, at the same time (again, one might say, an "impossible" task), "inviting" not only the readers but the author herself.

In her "Foreword" to *Beloved*, Morrison explains:

> The terrain, slavery, was formidable and pathless. To invite readers (and myself) into the repellant landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts . . . The figure most central to the story would have to be her, the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it. She could not linger outside; she would have to enter the house. A real house, not a cabin. One with an address, one where former slaves lived on their own. There would be no lobby into this house, and there would be no "introduction" into it or into the novel. I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book's population – just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense.[31]

[28] Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 64.
[29] Ibid., 58–59. [30] Morrison, *Beloved*, xix. [31] Ibid., xvii–xviii.

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The encounter with the ghost: an impossible undertaking that fiction can nonetheless create in the *aporia* (a figure Derrida explored over and over again), elsewhere impossible, of an invitation to a kidnapping. Morrison elaborates with the help of further *aporias*: "In trying to make the slave experience intimate, I hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way."[32]

Language must get out of the way to create the language ferociously committed "not to lie" about slavery: "I consider that my single gravest responsibility . . . is not to lie."[33] At the same time, "language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable."[34]

Before returning to the "reach toward the ineffable," let us consider Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In her foreword to a 2007 edition of the book, Morrison captures *in nuce* the aporetic tension between singularity and generality. The novel, Morrison writes, explores "a unique situation, not a representative one."[35] To explore such uniqueness, however, a language is needed that on one hand answers to and bears responsibility for the unique, the singular, while *at the same time* being recognizable, which in the end is necessarily in some ways generalizable: "Singular" as the main character Pecola's life was, Morrison writes, "I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls."[36] The singular, unique situation does not preclude relating to it. The devastating woundability of a black girl living in the "unique situation" of utter neglect, poverty and, to paraphrase Kafka, a condemnation that precedes all guilt, this unique woundability of which the text bears witness, has traits that are "lodged in all young girls." The task of the literary text is to endure the aporetic tension between uniqueness and relatability and to bring it to expression in such a way that the reader is not "touched," but "moved." This is one of the "impossible" demands the literary text addresses to the reader.

[32] Ibid., xviii–xix.
[33] Morrison, "The Site of Memory": "I consider that my single gravest responsibility . . . is not to lie." *What Moves at the Margin*, 72.
[34] Toni Morrison, "Nobel Prize Lecture," NobelPrize.org, last modified 2001, www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html.
[35] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, "Foreword," xi. [36] Ibid., xii.

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Morrison cautions that "centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying" the violated girl "rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing."[37] She considers her solution of this problem in *The Bluest Eye* ("break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader") a failure: "it didn't work: many readers remain touched but not moved."[38] Again, the notion appears that a novel has work to do. The task, the work of the novel, is not just to "touch" the readers, but "move" them, which, along the lines of Morrison's argument that the best art is political, would include moving them to a different commitment for the community in which they live.

What is at stake is to move readers, which is similar to Gayatri Spivak's description of what "education in the Humanities attempts to be," namely "an *uncoercive* rearrangement of desires."[39] Such a rearrangement is all but guaranteed. It is more improbable than likely. It is "impossible" in the sense Derrida uses this word: highly questionable, impracticable, unpredictable, incalculable. Seen from what already "is" and what is considered "possible," it *is not*. Literature, however, is a privileged place for the impossible to happen because its labor lies in conjuring a "rearranged" desire into occurrence through the invention of language. For Derrida, the promise of literature lies in the fact that in the process of allowing language to "get out of the way," it may not only change language, but also, "in changing language, change more than language":

> Even if that isn't a moral or political duty (but it can also become one), this experience of writing is "subject" to an imperative: to give space for singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language, or which, in changing language, change more than language ... In his or her experience of writing as such, if not in a research activity, a writer cannot not be concerned, interested, anxious about the past, that of literature, history, or philosophy, of culture in general. S/he cannot not take account of it in some way and not consider her- or himself a responsible heir, inscribed in a genealogy, whatever the ruptures or denials on this subject may be.[40]

[37] Ibid. [38] Ibid.

[39] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 526. Spivak continues: "If you are not persuaded by this simple description, nothing I say about the Humanities will move you."

[40] Derrida, "This Strange Institution," 55.

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Literature, then, is the form of discourse that *performs* something "impossible": to provoke an "uncoercive rearrangement of desires" through "kidnapping" the reader into extremely "inhospitable terrain" such as the vast "terrain" of slavery and its legacy.

Derrida's "hauntology" has potentially far-reaching consequences for a political theory and practice. His reflection on the "final solution" can be justly invoked for the immense question of what Avery Gordon has called the "lingering inheritance of racial slavery," in Jeffrey Weinstock's words, a "social trauma that lives on in American culture"[41]:

> I ask myself whether a community that assembles or gathers itself together in order to think what there is to be thought and gathered of this nameless thing that has been called the "final solution" [and one could justly invoke here "slavery" or "the Middle Passage"] does not have to show, first of all, its readiness to welcome the law of the phantom, the spectral experience and the memory of the phantom, of that which is neither dead nor living, more than dead and more than living, only surviving, the law of the most commanding memory, even though it is the most effaced and the most effaceable, but for that very reason the most demanding.[42]

Morrison's fiction makes "demands" on the reader by "kidnapping" him and her, throwing him or her "ruthlessly into an alien environment" that is hospitable to the "chaos of the needy dead,"[43] and thus to the ghosts that haunt our present, but also the ghosts that haunt the ghost herself.

"Beloved" is, in Morrison's novel, the name on the tombstone of a dead girl, of whom the reader never learns the living name. As Caroline Rody succinctly writes, the term "expresses at once the greatest anonymity and the dearest specificity"[44] (a feature Derrida explores repeatedly in his

[41] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 139; Weinstock, "Ten Minutes for Seven Letters," 136. Weinstock also engages Gordon's book.

[42] Derrida, *Force of Law*, 259. [43] Morrison, *Beloved*, xix.

[44] Caroline Rody, quoted in Weinstock, "Ten Minutes for Seven Letters," 132. Weinstock continues: "It is the private name each person gives to his or her most intimate relations and personal treasures. However, in addition to serving as 'an address conferred by the lover on the object of affection,' the term 'beloved' also names everyone in the impersonal rhetoric of the Church and, as noted by May G. Henderson, is 'used in matrimonial and eulogistic discourse, both commemorative, linguistic events: the former prefiguring the future, the latter refiguring the past' (67). In the 'Dearly Beloved' of the marriage ceremony and the funeral eulogy, the term 'beloved' unites the celebrants or mourners in a present moment of anticipation or commemoration. In its public contexts, it functions simultaneously in two capacities, marking both the specific relationship of the affianced to each other or the bereaved to the deceased, and the general relation of the Church to all. In its various uses, the term thus connects public with private, the intimacy of the individual love relationship with communal gatherings of both celebration and grief. The term also structures a tension between the timeless present of one's most intimate encounters and the communal marking of time through the rememoration of significant events in the lives of individuals – particularly the joining of marriage and the passing of death. The use of the term, at least in its

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reflections on the proper name). The violence of Beloved's death and the brutality of slavery that caused it make her haunt the lives of her mother, her brothers, and of all their relations. It is of her, the returned and disappeared ghost, but also of the ghost that haunts the ghost, that Morrison writes: "Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name?"[45]

Beloved's memory is, indeed, "the most effaced and effaceable," and, as Morrison's book powerfully shows, "the most demanding." So unbearably demanding that, in the end, her apparition is chased back into invisibility: "It was not a story to pass on."[46] The challenge that Derrida's thought and Morrison's fiction address to us is to realize the need to "learn," from the other, from the nameless, from the phantom, how to address ourselves to her; how to learn her name with the keen awareness that looking for that name and learning it bears in itself the risk of "losing," forgetting, betraying it in its singularity.

As Avery Gordon and others have shown, in the novel *Beloved*, "Beloved the ghost's double voice speaks not only of Sethe's dead child but also of an unnamed African girl lost at sea, not yet become an African-American. (The book's memorial dedication reads simply 'Sixty Million and more.') However, neither Sethe nor the others can perceive that the ghost that is haunting them is haunted herself."[47]

Jeffrey Weinstock succinctly summarizes the task, linking it to Derrida's *Specters of Marx*:

> The question that Derrida raises here – and that *Beloved* forcefully engages – is the question of how to live with these spirits, victims of brutal violence, victims of the Middle Passage. How does one live with a history or an inheritance that is too painful or shameful to be remembered – one that an individual or a community or an entire culture desperately wishes to forget – and yet which is too important to be forgotten? How can one do justice to the dead and, if this is the task that is required to live justly, or to learn to live at all, is learning to live even possible? For Derrida, the opening of the future as something other than a repetition of the present is dependent precisely upon the work of mourning, and, importantly, on mourning that never succeeds fully in working through or domesticating the trauma of loss, mourning that fails in "introjecting" the absent loved one. The absence of the other remains

public contexts, thereby marks a vacillation, a wavering in time, the fullness of a present marked by a past – and an openness to a future beyond the event." Weinstock, "Ten Minutes for Seven Letters," 132.

[45] Morrison, *Beloved*, 274. [46] Ibid., 274–75. [47] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 140.

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> and this absence, this loss, can never be filled with words, can never itself be articulated completely.[48]

There is absence, and there is the ineffable, there is silence. But for Morrison, the writer's responsibility is to "shape a silence while breaking it."[49] There is silence by the millions – as *Beloved* reminds the reader even before the first page, "sixty million and more" – one by one. For them, the destruction *is* absolute. To a certain degree, the "shaping" of such silence is a betrayal of the victim, because it runs the risk of soothing and thus undermining the absoluteness of the destruction. Literature, then, witnesses to that betrayal too. There is no room here for the "comfort of pity." But the silence stemming from Pecola's "psychological murder" whose damage is "total"[50] is *shaped* in order not to lose them and her to utter oblivion.

While *The Bluest Eye* chronicles Pecola's "journey to destruction" ("Couple the vulnerability of youth with indifferent parents, dismissive adults, and a world, which, in its language, laws, and images, re-enforces despair, and the journey to destruction is sealed.") and stepping "into madness," leaving her at the end of the novel "searching the garbage,"[51] *Beloved* starts after the sealed destruction, the murder of a child, chronicling the surviving of "memories that are too brutal, too debilitating, and too horrifying to register through direct historical or social science narratives," in both senses of who or what survives and who or what is survived.

The novel, again, has some work to do. As *Beloved* shows with powerful and heart-breaking tenderness, to use a formulation by Derrida, "even if one wanted to, one could not let the dead bury the dead."[52] Beloved cannot bury herself as the murder victim, and she cannot bury the dead by whom she herself is haunted: the nameless and uncounted "sixty million and more."

To quote *Beloved*'s narrator, "somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver [Beloved's surviving teenage sister] got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve."[53] Something, then, needs to be done. In the case of *Beloved*, most importantly two things need to be done, as Avery Gordon elaborates:

> First the ghost that haunts 124 Bluestone Road in 1873 will have to be evicted so that home can be moved finally from Sweet Home to 124. The ghost is

[48] Weinstock, "Ten Minutes for Seven Letters," 140–41. [49] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, xiii.
[50] Ibid., x, 204. [51] Ibid., x, 206. [52] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 174.
[53] Morrison, *Beloved*, 252.

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> not living in the spirit world. It is living, and not too graciously at that, in the real world of day jobs, burnt toast, sibling rivalry, sought-after love and companionship, adjudging neighbors, and something will have to be done about that … The second task involves confronting the trauma of the Middle Passage, confronting what reaches down deep beneath the waters or beneath the symbolics of emancipation, free labor, free citizen. This trauma links the origin of Slavery with a capital S to the origin of modern American freedom, to the paradigmatic and value-laden operations of the capitalist market. This is a market whose exchange relations continue to transform the living into the dead, a system of social relations that fundamentally objectifies and dominates in a putatively free society. The Middle Passage is the decisive episode that establishes the amnesiac conditions of American freedom: emancipation as enslavement. In order to manage this "remembering which seems unwise," it will be necessary to broach carefully and cautiously the desires of the ghost itself. The ghost's desires? Yes, because the ghost is not just the return of the past or the dead. The ghostly matter is that always "waiting for you," and its motivations, desires, and interventions are remarkable only for being current.[54]

In Morrison's book, it is the community of women who exorcises the ghost. It remains open how successful the exorcism may be for Sethe, her lover Paul D and her daughter Denver. As Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*, exorcism would need to occur "not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome – without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of a concern for *justice*."[55]

US history post-Reconstruction and into the twenty-first century shows blatantly that the exorcism as described by Derrida has not yet successfully occurred in American society and politics. Again, Gordon's succinct analysis is helpful:

> The ghost is not other or alterity as such, ever. It is (like Beloved) pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding. This something to be done is not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present, a reckoning with that which we have lost, but never had. The ghost always also figures this utopian dimension of haunting, encapsulated in the very first lines of Jacques Derrida's book on specters: "Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally*."[56]

[54] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 168–69.
[55] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 220.
[56] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 183–84.

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What Gordon calls the "utopian dimension of haunting" and Derrida the desire to "learn to live finally" materialize as "our responsibility to recognize just where we are in this story, even if we do not want to be there."[57] When *Beloved*'s narrator identifies the legacy of slavery not as "the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place," but "the jungle whitefolks planted in them," when the "secret spread of this new kind of whitefolks' jungle" is described as "hidden, silent, except once in a while when you could hear its mumbling in places like 124,"[58] she challenges the reader to recognize the "secret, that whites have already been touched and invaded as if from the outside by a world of their own making," and that they are in this story, that "we are in this story, even now."[59] Even now: the "untimeliness and disadjustment of the contemporary"[60] are blatant now, without doubt, today. At the condition of such "reckoning" and recognition, the revenant, as Derrida writes, "may already mark the return of the specter of a promised living [*le retour du spectre d'un vivant promis*]."[61] A promised living and a promised living-together – Toni Morrison's fiction is the medium for the specter of a future.

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[57] Ibid., 188. [58] Morrison, *Beloved*, 198–99. [59] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 190.
[60] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 99. [61] Ibid., 99. Translation modified.

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