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Ghosts here and there : spectral resistance and the ethics of ghosts in postcolonial literature

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Chapter II

The Ghost's Language and the Re-creation of Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

The ghost makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us effectively into the structure of feeling as a reality we come to experience as a recognition. (Gordon 63)

In today's world, ghosts invade our popular culture, literature, and academic and critical discourses. In contrast to the living, ghosts are a non-present presence. They are real, but usually invisible and inaccessible. Therefore, they have been employed as metaphors of absent presence or irreducible otherness in cultural imaginations.²¹ For instance, unlike the ancestors worshiped by Asians from generation to generation, ghosts have usually been feared and ignored. They represent something unspeakable or forgotten, such as family secrets and repressed memories, or someone who has been unknown to or excluded from the community, including strangers, foreigners, and social outcasts. In China, the term "ghost" is used to refer to those who are different and regarded as others, such as foreigners who are called White or Black Ghosts, while the despised are referred to as "Nasty" Ghosts. Likewise, in America and Canada, immigrants and homosexuals are usually depicted as

²¹ In Morrison's 1988 Tanner Lecture at the University of Michigan, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," she argues, "We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily 'not there'; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them" (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 11). The connection between this argument and the ghostly presence in Morrison's *Beloved* shows that a ghost can be employed as a metaphor of absent presence that has the power to haunt or draw attention.

being spectral or spooky because of their invisibility. In African-American culture, ghosts refer to the spirits of the black ancestors who suffered the brutality of slavery, and thus represent the traumatic memories of African Americans, which are ignored or oppressed by society.

Due to the similarities among ghosts in different cultures, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the functions of literary ghosts in representing the marginalized, the repressed, and the silenced other and history in literature, especially ethnic American literature. Avery Gordon argues that “to write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities” is “to write ghost stories” (Gordon 17). Brogan claims that the “enactment of commemorative ritual” is always taking place during one’s confrontation with ghosts (Brogan 138). Accordingly, ghosts play an important role in representing history and the voices of minority people from alternate and competing perspectives. On one hand, ghost stories are employed to consider the mechanism of spectralization and how such processes of othering are utilized by the ideologies of patriarchy, capitalism, nationalism, imperialism, and sexism to label someone or something as ghostly and so create or maintain inequality in the society. On the other hand, the haunting of ghosts in ethnic American literature speaks to “the potential emergence of a different story and a competing history” (Weinstock 64). Their presences not only represent “our desires for truth and justice,” but also “our longing for a coherent and ‘correct’ narrative of history” (64).

In order to learn or recognize “a different story and a competing history” the ghosts brought about, one needs to learn the ghost’s language or their ways of speaking. As Brogan argues, each literary ghost represents a specific form of “cultural hauntings” that reflect “the increased emphasis on ethnic and cultural differentiation in all social groups” (Brogan 4). Peeren and Horstkotte further claim, “Alterity is radically specified and differentiated: there is no singular alterity, but a plethora of forms of alterity, each of which interacts with identity in its own manner” (Peeren and Horstkotte 10). Since the figures of ghosts appear in different forms and interact with the living in different manners, a careful consideration of each ghost’s specific alterity in each literary work is needed. By performing a reading of ghost stories written by

three minority woman writers—Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975), and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), I will examine how the literary representations of female ghosts are used to reflect the problems faced by different ethnic groups and sexualities in North America, and how their specific ways of haunting—their distinctive ways of speaking—function to negotiate the past and revise individual and group identities.

Female Ghosts in Ethnic Woman Writing

Female ghosts are prominent in various cultural imaginations from folktales to works of literature. For instance, White Lady legends are popular in many countries. It is a type of female ghost reported to appear in rural areas in Great Britain, Ireland, and the United States. Common to many of them is the theme of losing or being betrayed by a husband, boyfriend, or fiancé. In addition, ghosts in Asian literature and cinema are predominantly female. They are usually angry and violent, returning to seek revenge against men who oppressed them during their lifetimes. Compared to the ghost stories in which the main characters are male, the stories of female ghosts are usually used to reflect the problems women encountered in their time. The *cheonyeogwishins*, the most renowned and ferocious virgin ghosts in Korea, who are portrayed as extremely scary ghosts with long, black, and disheveled hair but no legs, wearing white dresses, keep haunting the men of society. The stories of *cheonyeogwishins* were told because women in them suffered much under the domination of men and had no right to speak for themselves. However, through the stories, women could express their hatred toward the men who oppressed them.

Morrison’s *Beloved*, Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, and Kogawa’s *Obasan* function as the type of ghost stories in which the figure of female ghosts signifies the repression of histories and identities of minority women. They also serve as the stories of “cultural haunting” and represent various forms of alterity through the metaphor of the ghost. Morrison’s *Beloved* begins

with the baby ghost of Beloved haunting house No. 124. Beloved is Sethe's baby daughter, murdered by Sethe in a desperate bid to save her from the misery of slavery when her white owners tried to catch her and her children, and bring them back to Sweet Home. Connected to the oppression of African Americans, the ghost of Beloved represents the unspeakable past and the traumatic memories of slavery. She is "not only the spirit of Sethe's daughter," but also "the projection of the repressed collective memory of a violated people" (Heinze 179).²²

Subtitled "Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts," Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* begins with the story of the No Name Woman—the narrator's nameless aunt who became pregnant during the "starvation time," a period when "to be a woman, to have a daughter ... was waste enough" (Kingston 6). Moreover, the narrator notes that adultery, "perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the villagers needed food" (13). In order to punish

²² Much of the critical response to the novel involved the representation of Beloved, including her ghostly presence and her resurrection. In Sharon Patricia Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000), Morrison's *Beloved* has been conceived as "recuperating a black culture as were most of the nation's black subjects" by allowing "a BLACK FEMALE 'ghost' with agency to possess and destroy the house and sense of home" and "to tell the story of a death-in-life" (Holland 2-4). Several literary critics also have commented on the intersection between the figure of Beloved's ghost and the loss and recovery of African American history and identity. See Bernard Bell, "Beloved: A Womanist Neo-Slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past," *African American Review* 26.1 (1992): 7-15; Emily Miller Budick, "Absence, Loss and the Space of History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Arizona Quarterly* 48.2 (1992): 117-38; Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, "Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Woman's Individuation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *African American Review* 26.1 (1992): 51-60; Deborah Horvitz, "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*," *Studies in American Fiction* 17.2 (1989): 157-67; Sally Keenan, "Four Hundred Years of Silence: Myth, History, and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," in *Recasting the World: Writing after Colonialism*, ed. Jonathan White. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993. 45-81; Linda Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *African American Review* 26.3 (1992): 395-408; David Lawrence, "Fleshy Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*," *Studies in American Fiction* 19.2 (1991): 189-201; Barbara Hill Rigby, "'A Story to Pass On': Ghosts and the Significance of History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," in *Haunting the House of Fiction*, eds. Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar, Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1991, 229-35; Carol E. Schmudde, "The Haunting of 124," *African American Review* 26.3 (1992): 409-16; and Molly Abel Travis, "Beloved and Middle Passage: Race, Narrative and the Critics Essentialism," *Narrative* 2.3 (1994): 179-200.

the nameless aunt for “acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” and for creating a break in the “roundness” of the community, the villagers attack the family house. After they leave, the family curses the aunt: “Aiaa, we’re going to die. Death is coming. Look what you have done. You’ve killed us. Ghost! Dead ghost! Ghost! You’ve never been born” (13-14). Here the term “ghost” is used to signify shame and exclusion. Eventually, Kingston’s aunt commits suicide by throwing herself and the baby into the community well and becomes a real ghost, wandering endlessly alone with no family member willing to remember or worship her. Marked as a stain on the family history, the aunt is deliberately forgotten and silenced. Jennifer Griffiths claims that the aunt’s story acts as a “pedagogy of shame” (Bartky 225) that “instructs young girls to learn about the inherent danger and corruption of their bodies” (Griffiths 356). As such, the ghost of the nameless aunt represents the suppression of womanhood in a patriarchal society in general and more specifically, the oppression of Chinese American women in the United States.

Although ghosts are not directly represented in Kogawa’s *Obasan*, the absent mother frustrates and haunts the protagonist, Naomi, from the beginning of the novel: “But we’re trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead—all our dead—those who refuse to bury themselves” (Kogawa 30). She continues, “When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles ... and the old question comes thudding out of the night again like a giant moth. Why did my mother not return?” (30-31). Later, the text reveals that Naomi’s mother left Canada to take care of Grandma in Japan, but was killed during the bombing of Nagasaki. In order to protect children from the sorrowful truth, the family erases these facts from the family narrative. The silencing of the mother’s death not only symbolizes repressed family memories, but also represents the historical absence of Canadian Japanese during War World II.

These three novels demonstrate the ways in which ghosts expose the individual traumas as well as racial and patriarchal oppression of minority people in North America. In addition, they show the deep connection between

the silencing of the ghost and the loss of identity of other protagonists of the community. The voices or the stories of the female ghosts in all the novels are either suppressed or fragmented. The absence of the ghosts' voices illustrates that the dominant narratives, whether attempting to oppress, warn, or protect someone, repress the shameful and traumatic past. And the act of forgetting or silencing seems to prevent the living characters from developing a sense of certainty about their identities.

However, the ghosts don't merely represent metaphors of erasure or repression. In her 2003 essay about the Chinese diaspora in Australia, Wenche Ommundsen employs a term, "tough ghosts," mentioned by one of her interviewed subjects, to describe the resilient yet spectral presence and power of cultural traditions among the immigrant community. What she suggests is that the ghostly presence doesn't always lead to disturbing or destructive consequences for the diaspora; in some cases it may help to preserve elements of the cultural past in the face of pressures or struggles of identification in a patriarchal and racial society. By portraying the strong presence of female ghosts and their vivid interaction with living characters, the three writers also employ ghosts as a powerful medium that enables healing of the traumatic past and re-creation of a more communal identity.

So far, less attention has been paid to how female ghosts manifest themselves to the living when their voices are silenced. If words or the symbolic order are the sources of oppression, what kinds of alternative language do they use to convey their otherness? Putting these questions in a more specific way: what is a ghost's language? What is the difference between normal language and ghostly language? How does this alternative language function in the revision of suppressed memory and identity? In order to investigate the role and function of literary representation of ghosts in these minority novels, this chapter will explore the mechanism of spectralization—the ways in which the minority others are created and maintained in the system of demarcation and exclusion, as well as the language of ghosts—the ways ghosts interact with the living. I divide the chapter into three parts. The first part investigates the relationship between the construction

of dominant narratives and the loss of history/identity in minority experience. By illustrating different forms of linguistic oppression, especially the practices of silencing and forgetting, I elaborate how these narrative practices silence the voices, histories, and identities of minority people. The second part explores two kinds of ghost's language that the female ghosts employ to manifest themselves to the living. This part examines how each language functions to reconstruct suppressed memories and identities. In the final part, I summarize the key ideas that I discuss throughout the chapter and assert a ghost as a narrative figure of diversity that plays a vital role in re-creating a more inclusive and communal future for minority people.

The Violence of Language and the Silencing of the Other

King-kok Cheung claims, "Language issued by the powerful ... can constitute a form of speech act, commanding performance" (Cheung 128). When it is turned into a social discourse that intends to assume the wholeness and authenticity of the dominant, biases and oppression become unavoidable. Morrison has spoken of the oppression that exists within language. She claims in her Nobel lecture that language, especially racial discourse, "limits knowledge" by "hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek" and locks "creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness" (Morrison, *Lecture* 18). Rather than functioning as a "device for grappling with meaning, providing guidance, or expressing love," language acts as something she calls "tongue-suicide" (15). It has been used "to impose, enforce and naturalize apparently essential differences, denying or preventing the possibility of multiplicity within divisions" (Jones 218). In order to discipline literal foreignness, racist language makes efforts "at producing foreignness" in its representation of the other by its "simultaneous exploitation and repression of linguistic foreignness" (Saunders 215).

The three texts in this chapter demonstrate how dominant people employ language to establish the binary hierarchy of self and other. In *Beloved*, Schoolteacher and his pupils use their writing to define black bodies as animals

in order to produce a superior self. In *The Woman Warrior*, the protagonist's boss at an art supply house uses the term "nigger yellow" to address the Chinese American in public in order to confirm the imagined superiority of White Americans (Kingston 48). Naomi also finds that the public narratives during the Second World War constructed Japanese Canadians as the despised other. She says: "None of us ... escaped the naming. We were defined and identified by the way we were seen. A newspaper in B.C. headlined: 'They are a stench in the nostrils of the people of Canada.' We were therefore relegated to the cesspools" (Kogawa 139-40). By naming the other and securing its "one meaning," the one that seems "so obvious that one cannot see how it could be otherwise," the discriminative discourse produces a negative identity of the other, and naturalizes conceptual boundaries between self and other (Fish 277).

The performative reiteration of dominant narratives not only conditions the drastic display of power upon minority groups, but also frames their negative conception of themselves. On one hand, the authority employs a constructive discourse as a powerful medium in the acts of dominating the others. Such a discourse causes the sufferings of subordinated groups. For example, in *Obasan*, the Canadian government enacted racism during the war through official speeches that assigned Japanese Canadians as others and enemies. It also whitewashed the prisons as "interior housing projects" and the internment camps as relocation camps through their construction of duplicitous discourse. Under such linguistic oppression, Naomi's family was forced to fall apart and move from their home into remote and unfamiliar places.

On the other hand, the reiteration of dominant discourses impels the dominated people to accept the dominant criteria in shaping their identities. Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa claims, "When we, the objects, become the subjects, and look at and analyze our own experiences, a danger arises that we may look through the master's gaze, speak through his tongue, use his methodology" (Anzaldúa xxiii). This adoption of the master's language and cognitive frame always dissociates the oppressed subject from constructing his or her identity. Young Maxine's valorization of speech conveys her unquestioning acceptance of the Western notion of silence as the absence of

brain and lack of personality. When she bullies the mute girl in her school, she says, “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality” (Kingston 180). It reveals not only her belief in the power of words, but also her preference for the Western criteria. However, she is unable to stick to the values of white society. When she criticizes her Chinese culture from the white perspective, she is also continually “reminded as an other in the dominant culture” (Cheung 93). Her assimilation of both white racism and Chinese patriarchal oppression of women confuses her and makes it difficult for her to develop a sense of confidence and assert her identity.

I will now specifically explore one of the important narrative practices in the act of domination—the silencing of the other. Addressing it as “a direct consequence of prohibition,” Cheung argues that the process of silencing takes at least two forms: collective oppression and individual repression (Cheung 3). Collective oppression includes the official’s construction of dominant narratives, the community’s act of forgetting, and the family’s hiding of shameful secrets. Individual repression is associated with a personal repression of traumatic memories or the deliberate denial of one’s past due to a sense of guilt. Both forms of silencing lead to the absence of language that is related to the loss of memory and the lack of subjectivity.

In *Beloved*, the histories of black slavery are perceived as an unspeakable knowledge. They are suppressed in official, communal, and even individual narratives. For instance, the story of Beloved’s death is silenced and forgotten by the community and Sethe. Though Sethe chooses to live with Beloved’s ghost, she refuses to remember the tragic event—the memories of her life at Sweet Home and murder of her own baby. Both collective and individual acts of denying and forgetting the past prevent Sethe from establishing connection with other members of the community. By allowing herself to be haunted and devoured by the angry baby ghost, she can’t help feeling a sense of uncertainty and almost loses her life.

In *The Woman Warrior*, both the white authorities and her family silence the second-generation Chinese American heroine, Maxine. When the immigration authorities threaten to send the Chinese immigrants back to China,

Maxine is forced to stay silenced in front of the white Americans. She states, “We had so many secrets to hold in ... There were secrets never to be said in front of the (white) ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China” (Kingston 182-83). In addition, since she and other children “had been born among the (white) ghosts, were taught by ghosts and were ourselves ghostlike,” their parents usually keep the secrets from them. When Maxine has no access to the family history, she is unable to remember and tell her own story. She says, “How could I have that memory when I couldn’t talk? My mother says that we, like the ghosts, have no memories” (Kingston 167). Duncan explains further, “She cannot remember because she cannot speak; she cannot speak because she cannot remember” (Duncan 186). Finally, her lack of memory and speech turns her into a ghost like her nameless aunt. Her muteness is “suggestive of the repercussions of being unnamed, misnamed, or distorted through stereotypical representations in the United States” (25).

Besides, by withholding the aunt’s story from young Maxine and forbidding her to talk about it, the family silences both the voices of the female ancestor and the young protagonist. Exiled by her family, the nameless aunt has no opportunity to tell the story of her past, her lover, or her silent birth. Similarly, the family tries to prevent the young Maxine from telling the story of her aunt as it acts as a threat to the security of the family. Warned repeatedly by her mother, “You must not tell anyone,” the protagonist begins to believe that “sex was unspeakable” and that her aunt would do her father “mysterious harm” (Kingston 3). Through her silence, she keeps punishing her aunt and leaves her aunt alone in solitude.

The silencing of her aunt results in young Maxine’s subjugation of her desire, creativity, and identity. It reminds the young protagonist of the corruption of female sexuality. By internalizing the gaze of the hostile witness to female sexuality, she develops a sense of negativity toward being female. She keeps claiming, “I am not a bad girl ... I’m not a girl” (Kingston 46). In addition, she regards her creativity and the adventurous person in her head as expressions of her imminent insanity. She says, “I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would it be at

our house? Probably me” (189). Rather than appreciating her sensitivity to the arts, she interprets it as a symptom of mental weakness and insanity.

In *Obasan*, the Canadian government’s silencing of the experiences of Japanese Canadians in dominant and historical narratives not only causes undesirable collective amnesia, but also leads to the loss of identity of Japanese Canadians. Naomi says:

We are hammers and chisels ... the fragments of fragments that fly like arrows from the heart of the rock. We are the silences that speak from the stone. We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera, and every means of communication ... We are the Issei and the Nisei and the Sansei, the Japanese Canadians. We disappear into the future undemanding as dew. (Kogawa 132)

Rendered voiceless or anonymous, Japanese Canadians are regarded as a species that never existed. “Dew” can be read as a metaphor of fragility, evanescence, and something that can be easily wiped out. It signifies that the histories and identities of Japanese Canadians are ignored under the linguistic and social oppression of the Canadian government. Thus, when Naomi revisits the ghost town of Slocan, the place where her brother, Obasan and she had lived during the Second World War, she can’t find any traces of their presence there. Instead, she finds “the site of an erasure, a significant absence” (Jones 219). She doubts, “What remains of our time there” (Kogawa 139)? Without leaving any traces in the place and passing down any documents of their internment, Naomi and many other Japanese Canadians lose their memories, voices, and the certainty of their identities.

In addition, the family’s suppression of their traumatic experiences and Naomi’s repression of her personal trauma are acts of silencing that lead to the fragmentation of Naomi’s memory and identity. Since Naomi’s family was forced to separate and her mother was killed in the atomic bombing during the war, the family thinks it’s better to keep silent about these memories in order to

protect Naomi from the sorrowful truths. The narrator says, “Everywhere I could hear the adults whispering, ‘Kodomo no tame. For the sake of the children’” (Kogawa 26). Naomi’s memories of her mother “were drowned in a whirlpool of protective silence” (26).

Naomi also becomes silenced due to her guilt and shame, which were generated by her own traumatic experience of sexual abuse. Cheung notes, “Most victims of rape seal their lip in shame” (Cheung 143). After being sexually abused by Old Man Gower, Naomi dares not tell her mother about it. She feels that she becomes “other—a parasite on her body, no longer of her mind” (Kogawa 77). She claims, “If I tell my mother about Mr. Gower, the alarm will send a tremor through our bodies and I will be torn from her.” (77). After her molestation by Old Man Gower, Naomi’s mother leaves for Japan and never comes back. Continuously asking if her mother has abandoned her, but getting no answers from the adults, she is burdened by a sense of guilt. She imagines that her mother disappears because of her complicity with Old Man Gower. She is afraid of telling the truth. Accompanying her sense of guilt and shame, the family’s silencing of her mother’s story turns her into a child “forever unable to speak” and who “forever fears to tell” (291). Her inability to speak prevents her from achieving a spiritual union with her mother. She says, “Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction” (291).

These three minority novels direct our attention to the effects of a narrative practice in the construction of hierarchy, memory, and identity, namely silencing. The process of silencing prevents minority people from constructing their histories and identities. Many critics have associated speech with freedom and social changes, assuming that “it must be through speech that we locate freedom and subjectivity” (Duncan 78). One of the strategies of minority people against the hegemonic discourse is “to assume the symbolic armor, to name the law and attack it using the same laws” (Jardine 231). Aunt Emily in *Obasan* employs this strategy to resist both the physical and narrative oppression of the Canadian government upon Japanese Canadians. She is “a word warrior,” “a crusader, a little old gray-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor

of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes” (Kogawa 39). However, her words are not effective in representing the radically incommensurable material history of the sufferings. A traumatic history always refuses to be translated into the symbolic order that tries to discipline and repress linguistic foreignness and uncertainty.²³ Therefore, Naomi argues that few of her aunt’s worded protests have been converted: “Like Cupid, she aimed for the heart. But the heart was not there” (49). She claims that her aunt’s “little black typewritten words,” “like scratchings in the barnyard, the evidence of much activity, scaly claws hard at work,” are “not made flesh” and do not respond to her prayers (226).

Cheung states that words or speech “can convey only partial and subjective realities” (Cheung 136). Accordingly, I suggest that words should not be regarded as the most powerful medium to counter the dominant narratives and effectuate revision of the repressed history and identity. In the second part of this chapter, by investigating the specific ways in which the anonymous and silenced female ghosts manifest themselves to and interact with the living characters in the three novels, I will elaborate the concept of “ghost language” as a useful narrative tool for the minority woman writer to resist the racist and patriarchal oppression in society, and recreate their ethnic and sexual identities. It is worth noting that I use the term “ghost language” in an arbitrary and ironic way. I suggest that “ghost language” has nothing to do with human language or any linguistic system that is constructed in a rational or orderly manner. Instead, I would like to argue that “ghost languages” are ways of expression outside a linguistic and cognitive frame and even beyond human knowledge. Because the ghosts are different in various social and cultural contexts, there are multiple kinds of ghost language. I will elaborate two kinds of “ghost language”—two different ways of haunting, namely the

²³ In Ernst van Alphen’s analysis of the historical trauma of the Holocaust, he argues that trauma is “failed experience” that “has not come about and that shows negatively symptoms of the discursivity that defines ‘successful’ experience” (Ernst van Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity” 25-26). He argues for the impossibility of integrating the “experience” into narrative because the cause of trauma is precisely “the impossibility of experiencing” or framing an event.

ghost's madness in *Beloved* and its uncanny silence in *The Woman Warrior* and *Obasan*. By investigating the ferocious or uncanny way in which the female ghosts haunt the living, demand attention and justice, I intend to suggest that ghostly otherness has plural forms. Through its diverse alterity, the ghost can be regarded as a metaphor of empowerment which not only functions to represent resistance to the closed and logo-centric narratives that trap minority people in the erasure of subjectivity, but also invokes a re-imagining of a new, communal, and transcultural identity in contemporary racial and patriarchal society.

The Language of Madness in *Beloved*

For several centuries, madness has been “relegated to the female gender” in western social discourse and literature (Mcneal 12). Imposed by patriarchal thought, madness and mental instability in women turn them into inferior people and victims. In most of Morrison's works, female protagonists are portrayed as mad or mentally unstable people undergoing severe exploitation. For instance, Sethe's murder of her child and denial of her motherhood function as symptoms of madness. However, madness cannot merely be regarded as a symbol of the unstable nature of women. It also relates to acts of resistance that “give voice to those who are traumatized by oppressive social and familial forces” (Vickery 91).

In *Beloved*, the baby ghost appears malevolent as it marks the brutal history of slavery, genocide, racism, and infanticide of African Americans. But I would like to argue that the baby ghost's violent emotions and behavior can be understood as a positive kind of madness. Brogan argues that, during “the intermediary period between provisional and final burials” the ghost often appears “malicious” and “troubling” (Brogan 22). I suggest that the malicious way in which the improperly buried ghost invades the affairs of the living is the language of madness. In some ways, it can be understood in terms of Julia Kristeva's concept of the preverbal semiotic, obeying the maternal instead of paternal law. It also acts as Irigarayen “hysteria” that refers to “a non-verbal

language, a mode of physical communication that broadcasts a coded message” (Parker 2). In other words, it is intuitive, wordless, and often related to the female body and emotions. Going beyond human language, such madness creates gaps and holes in dominant discourse and provides an alternate means of expressing the other’s history. Moreover, acting as a mode of intervention, it urges the traumatized subjects to remember the repressed past and reconstruct their identities.

The ghost of Beloved uses the language of madness to articulate herself. Her madness is represented in several forms, including anger, desire, and violence and by means of fragmented narratives. First, she manifests herself through acts of violence. Because she died before she was two years old, Beloved is unable to speak of her hatred and discontent. Therefore, she shows her rage by spilling things, smashing furniture, and attacking the dog. She turns house No. 124 into a place with spiteful feelings full of “a baby’s venom” (Morrison, *Beloved* 3).

Beloved’s madness is also expressed through her infinite desire, which Cixous links to hysteria. Cixous claims that a hysteric says, “I want everything” (Cixous and Clement 155). The metaphor of consumption plays a key role in the possession of the ghost. For example, because Beloved still has no voice for her painful memories after she returns in physical form, she conveys her feelings through her craving for sweets and her mother’s love. She devours honey, wax, sugar sandwiches, slugy molasses, lemonade, taffy, and every dessert that Sethe brings home from the restaurant. She also hungers for Sethe’s love and develops a cannibalistic appetite toward her. She never takes her eyes from Sethe. Her gaze devours Sethe metaphorically: “Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes” (Morrison, *Beloved* 68). In addition, she urgently desires to fuse with Sethe. She says: “I am Beloved and she is mine. I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too” (248). Becoming greedier and greedier, Beloved finally “ate up her [Sethe’s] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (295).

Beloved's fragmented voices during the possession are another expression of her madness. Speaking in a chaotic and fragmented way during her possession of Sethe, Beloved conveys the repressed voices of Sethe's slaughtered daughter, the black ancestors suffering in the Middle passage, and African-American women exploited in slavery and contemporary America. Distinguished by "its repetitiveness, fragmentation, unhinging of vocabulary," and "by its wily resistance to conventions of narrative organization," her voice succeeds in manifesting her otherness to the paternal symbolic order that is ordered, regulated, and marked by its denial of gaps and holes within its structure. By violently disrupting Sethe's and Denver's lives with her fragmented narrative, Beloved confronts them with the unspeakable thoughts of the dead—the traumatic history of slavery—which are suppressed in the patriarchal linguistic frame.

As a representation of Kristeva's concept of maternal semiotic, Beloved's madness marks "a dissatisfaction with the established order" (Parker 4) and represents "the traumatic nature of experience" (Brogan 75). By urging the living to reconstruct their memories and historical accounts of slavery, it impels them to re-create their individual and collective identities. Shu-li Chang claims that Beloved "signifies not what one already knows about the past, but the part of one's traumatic past that one doesn't yet know" (Chang 125). The white girl, who helped Sethe deliver Denver, says, "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison, *Beloved* 42), and "Can't nothing heal without pain" (92). Based on these statements, I suggest that the returned baby ghost brings back the painful memories and, by living through them, the living characters are compelled to face their repressed past and work through their traumatic symptoms.

For example, Beloved's madness confronts Sethe with what she denies remembering and leads to her revision of the traumatic past. At the height of the possession, Beloved's voice is mingled with Sethe's and Denver's voices. Stamp Paid describes the sound as "a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom," as something "nonsensical" and indecipherable (202).

Though it appears as eerie noises to the outsider, the indecipherable dialogue of different voices invokes a transgenerational interaction among the traumatized subjects. It turns the haunted house into a surreal world, a place of “no-time,” where the denied memories of personal and collective traumas are pressed into the present (225). The boundaries between the living and the dead, present and past, self and other, are eliminated. Sethe finally mingles with Beloved and confronts the denied memories of the past.

However, Sethe’s complete retreat to the haunted house with Beloved’s ghost almost destroys her. Beloved’s madness transforms her into a cannibalistic figure that consumes the present with intrusive memories of a traumatic past. It locks Sethe into a repetitive enactment of the past “without relevance to present realities” (Brogan 10). Kristeva claims that “complete withdrawal into the semiotic leads to psychosis or even death” (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 82). When Sethe submits to the indefinite desires or madness of Beloved, she forgets to eat and almost loses her life.

Recognizing Beloved’s severe threat to Sethe’s life, the black community feels an urgency to exorcise the ghost. Thirty neighborhood women organize an exorcism in order to save Sethe and re-establish the boundary between the living and the dead. At the climax of the exorcism, they converge upon No.124, singing a pre-linguistic song. This wordless song represents “the lost language of Africa and Sethe’s mother” (Rigney 62). The narrator says, “In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (Morrison, *Beloved* 305). Turning to the communal experiences of African ancestors, the women of the community employ the song as a strategy for reshaping their relationship with the ghost and saving Sethe from self-destruction.

Feeling relived and connected to ancient African spirituality in the “word-breaking wave of sound,” Sethe finally frees herself from her time-bound and traumatized identity (Brogan 85). By mistaking her white neighbor Bodwin for School Teacher, Sethe reenacts the murder of 19 years ago. But this time, she turns the ice pick toward the white man instead of desperately killing her own children. Her action successfully revises the

traumatic past as she escapes from reenactment of the traumatic scene of murdering her own children. It is also in this scene that Beloved disappears. The communal wordless song not only successfully transforms the dangerous ghost into a safer presence, saving Sethe from the threat of being locked into her traumatic experience, but also prompts Sethe to call a new self into being.

By undertaking the exorcism of the ghost, the women of the community take responsibility for the crisis and re-construct their collective identity. Their performance marks the community's support, which was absent at the time of the original murder. When they approach No. 124, they remember the day when they refused to warn Sethe about the coming of the slave catchers. Through rememory of the traumatic past, they undergo "cultural memorization," which Mieke Bal defines as "an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future" (Bal vii). They realize that the ghost of Beloved is not merely "one traumatic return" for Sethe but "a conflation of all these traumas and repression" of the community (Berger 201). By asserting Sethe's inclusion in the community and answering the call of the ghost, the women of the community not only revise the injustices of the past, but also achieve emotional healing.

However, ghosts can never be exorcised completely because of their in-assimilability and multiplicity. In Morrison's novel, although the non-verbal exorcism of the community temporarily chases Beloved's ghost away, it fails to properly bury the dead. After Beloved disappears, the community members intend to forget the unspeakable past. For them, "Remembering seemed unwise" (Morrison, *Beloved* 324). However, the more the community hopes to forget it "like a bad dream," the more the ghost resists the act of forgetting (323). The narrator says, "Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper ..." Down by the stream of No. 124, people find the ghost's footprints coming and going (325). After the exorcism, the slim traces of the ghost mark the continued presence of the traumatic past. The ghost of Beloved never really disappears. Rather, it exists silently in a liminal and marginal space

and appears repetitively to remind the living of their unfinished mourning as well as their historical amnesia.

Morrison argues, “The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again” (Morrison, *Interview* 68). Her statement reveals some important qualities of a ghost, including its uncanny haunting and multiplicity. By continuously confronting the living with its diverse atrocities, a ghost keeps calling for a proper answer to repression and injustice. In the following, I will explore how the ghost’s uncanny silence represents another kind of ghost language that invokes textual commemorative rituals of the repressed past and re-creation of the minority women’s identity in *The Woman Warrior* and *Obasan*.

Uncanny Silence in *The Woman Warrior* and *Obasan*

In her well-known book about the role of silence in Asian Woman Writers’ novels *Articulate Silence*, Cheung argues that “words can liberate, but they can also distort and wound, and while silence may obliterate, it can also minister, soothe, and communicate” (Cheung 128). Her statement complicates the notion of the contradiction between silence and speech. It implies that silence is not merely the absence of speech, but a productive way of communicating. Isabel Hoving explores both negative and positive meanings of silence and argues that silence can be regarded as “the inability to make an authoritative use of dominant or even nondominant discourses,” or as “an inarticulated blabbering and madness,” as well as “an instrument to find a new voice” (Hoving 23). It helps to open up a space where “counterdiscursivity” and “the plurality of identity” can be expressed (23). Likewise, Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests that silence is “a means to gain a hearing,” and “a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right” (Minh-ha 83). Relating these concepts of silence to the ghost’s uncanny silence in *The Woman Warrior* and *Obasan*, I will argue that silence should not only be perceived as “undesirable silences” that mark absence, muteness, and the lack of subjectivity in minority experiences

(Cheung 20). It also functions as “enabling silences,” a way of telling that effectuates minority people to revise the dominant narrative and to re-create their identities.

In *The Woman Warrior*, by creating gaps in the closed family narratives full of silence, the ghost of the protagonist’s nameless aunt conveys its repetitive and uncanny effects on the protagonist. It is a paradoxical situation. Since No Name Woman bears the unspeakable shameful history, the family makes efforts to veil her story. Brave Orchid not only forbids young Maxine to mention the nameless aunt, but also withholds most of the story. However, the more the family tries to contain the aunt’s story through denial, the more fascinating her ghost appears in the shaping of the passed-down narratives. Her silence creates holes within the hegemonic discourse, encouraging the protagonist to question the established narratives and create new versions of the story.

Cheung states, “This haunting silence is precisely what gives wings to the niece’s imagination, allowing Maxine to test her own power to talk story and to play with different identities” (Cheung 85). Haunted by the absence of truth, Maxine feels the urgency to perform the rituals of mourning by rewriting her aunt’s story, devoting “pages of paper to her” (Kingston 16). By inventing new memories of her aunt, she breaks the family’s secrecy surrounding the shameful past and gives voices to the women who have been excluded from the dominant narratives. Being a woman is no longer shameful. Her new version of the story challenges hegemonic sexual and patriarchal discourses and releases her from the burden of a woman’s body.

Maxine also recreates her identity by establishing kinship with her aunt’s ghost. In her revised version of the nameless aunt’s story, she imagines the aunt as a vengeful ghost and actively reanimates “the aunt as a forerunner” (Brogan 138). She says, “She (the aunt) was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost ... waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute” (Kingston 16). By taking the ghost’s rebellious nature as an inheritance, she has power to challenge the constraints of dominant narratives and invent a new

identity—"a new Chinese American tradition"—that negotiates two contrasting cultures (Cheung 85).

By reinterpreting the Chinese legend of Ts'ai Yen in the concluding story of the novel—"A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe"—the narrator represents a new language/norm that is open-ended for its interethnic harmony. She illustrates that, during the exile, Ts'ai Yen creates a song that connects her mother tongue and the barbarian music for her children:

Then, out of Ts'ai Yen tent ... the barbarians heard a woman's voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes ... Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger ... She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well. (Kingston 209)

Ts'ai Yen's song acts as a kind of translation between two cultures, bridging the past and the present, the ancestral roots and the foreign culture. It evokes what Duplessis calls a "both/and vision," the one "born of shifts, contraries, negations, contradictions and linked to personal vulnerability and need" (Duplessis 276). Such a vision is able "to criticize, to differentiate from, to overturn the dominant forms of knowledge and understanding with which they are saturated" (285).

The "both/and vision" of the song marks the possibility of transcending the ghost's silence and recreating a communal and trans-cultural identity. The narrator says, "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (Kingston 206). The novel begins with Brave Orchid's story of the No Name Woman who is silenced by the family, and ends with the story of Ts'ai Yen, who, instead of being nameless, "achieves her mortal fame by singing about her exile" (Cheung 95). By using her story as a revised narrative to

coincide with her mother's, Maxine achieves a symbolic return to her community and re-creates her bicultural identity. She says, "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs" (Kingston 53). The words at the back of the swordswoman symbolize her greatness in taking her father's responsibility for the country. Similarly, by taking her words and stories that bridge her bicultural resources as a weapon, Maxine emulates the legendary swordswoman and reconstructs "a composite self" as a heroin (Cheung 100). In sum, the ghost's uncanny silence not only functions as a source for her imagination, but also leads to a new narrative strategy that propels her to recreate a new and communal identity for Asian American women.

A similar haunting of silent ghosts occurs in *Obasan*. The more Naomi avoids the memory of her experiences of sexual abuse and racial oppression, the more the ghosts haunt her in a silent and repetitive way. She says, "Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery" (Kogawa 30). Although the ghost's silence represents the suppression of memories, its uncanny implication still reaches Naomi in her dreams and memories and on a subconscious level. For instance, during the wake for Uncle, Naomi feels "Uncle's absent voice that speaks even more urgently and that I must attend." The voice bids her to "care for Obasan" and to "keep her safe" (56). Without speaking a word, the ghost of Uncle delivers his message to Naomi and makes her act.

The ghost of Naomi's mother, though continuing "her vigil of silence," also invokes a cyclic repetition of images and senses in Naomi's dreams and involuntary memories (Kogawa 283). From the beginning of Chapter 15, the memories she intends to forget flood into her consciousness involuntarily. Naomi begins to narrate the story of her family, "It is three decades ago ..." (132). In addition, images of oriental women connected with the fragmented memories of her silent mother keep appearing in her dreams. Those images act as a medium through which her mother's ghost returns "with all the immediacy

and power of Benjamin's 'lived life,'" threatening to displace the present (Cook, "The Penelope Work of Forgetting" 61). They direct Naomi's attention to the untold stories, the stories that resist being remembered, such as that of her mother's death in Japan during the war. In other words, the ghost's uncanny silence functions as an intriguing enigma that urges Naomi to listen to the dead and look for "corners and rooms" she has never seen in her "childhood house" (Kogawa 95).

By responding to her mother's uncanny haunting, Naomi overcomes her denial of the traumatic past and begins to accept Aunt Emily's idea that "the past is the future" (Kogawa 51). She decides to listen to the words in Grandma Kato's letter. When Nakayama-sensei reads the letter, he begins, "Naomi ... Stephen, your mother is speaking. Listen carefully to her voice" (279). The letter describes Naomi's mother's story during the bombing of Nagasaki and unveils her family's unknown past. Upon learning the reason for her mother's disappearance, Naomi seems to gain access to the absent voice of the ghosts. She claims, "Gradually the room grows still and it is as if I am back with Uncle again, listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as I have done all my life" (288). At that moment, she gives in to the unfamiliar presence of the repressed memory, a sigh of "remembered breath, a wordless word" (289), and rebuilds a spiritual and emotional connection with the dead.

In the epigraph of the novel, the narrator says, "The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence." By attending to the hidden words in this "amniotic deep," Naomi recaptures a sense of wholeness. Naomi's acceptance of the dominant notion of binary thinking before prevents her from achieving a stable identity. Rufus Cook claims that "the polarization values ... that pits speech against silence, gratitude against protest or resistance, the necessity of remembering against forgetting" afflict Naomi with the fragmentation of her self and restrict her to "a time-bound phenomenal existence" (Cook, "The Penelope Work of Forgetting" 54). Being torn by conflicting claims, Naomi questions her mother's love and suffers the feeling of her legs being "sawn in a half" (Kogawa 77).

However, after she gives in to the unfamiliar absent presence of her mother, she no longer blames her for her absence. On the contrary, she realizes that the Grand Inquisitor's accusatory "demand to know," with which she unconsciously complies in her nightmare, is "both a judgment and a refusal to hear" that separates her from her mother (Kogawa 273). This insight frees Naomi from the phallic authority of the symbolic order that constructs the dominant notion of phenomenal distinction between speech and silence. Naomi finally escapes from the temporal and logical world and reunites with her mother: "I am thinking that for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps it is because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here" (292). She reaches a universe where she is able to "swim full circle back to that other shore and her mother's arms" (17) and re-creates her identity by having "her leg become the grounded family tree for a future generation" (Tourino 146).

Naomi's spiritual integration with her mother enables her to learn a new communal language associated with love and double vision. Before she learns her mother's story, she has an instructive dream: "What the Grand Inquisitor has never learned is that the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence. To hear my mother, to attend her speech, to attend the sound of stone, he must first become silent" (Kogawa 274). The dream foreshadows a new language or identity, which marks the connection between silence and speech. When her mother's "wordless word" is uncovered on the night Grandma Kato's letter is read to her, Naomi experiences both verbal and nonverbal expressions of love in Mother and Obasan's silence and Emily's words. She says, "The letters tonight are skeletons. Bones only. But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves" (292). Thus, she begins to think about the complementary relationship between two ideographs for the word "love": "The first contained the root words 'heart' and 'hand' and 'action'—love as hands and heart in action together. The other ideograph, for 'passionate love,' was formed of 'heart,' 'to tell,' and 'a long thread'" (273). According to Cheung, the two ideographs represent different kinds of love enacted by Naomi's two aunts: "Obasan's serving hands" in silence and Aunt

Emily's "passionate thing" through words (Cheung 165). Naomi's awareness of the loving intentions of both Obasan and Emily enables her to achieve a "transcendent empathy which conflates words and silence, presence and absence, and testifies to the presence of an absent mother's nurturing love—yasashi kokoro" (McFarlane 405).

At the end of the novel, Naomi symbolically achieves a "transcendent empathy." Taking Aunt Emily's coat, which is associated with the aunt's love for her, Naomi returns to the coulee, which she and Uncle visit on every anniversary of Nagasaki's bombing. According to Tourino, Naomi's return to the coulee "creates the effects of cyclical return" (Tourino 149). By comparing the similar language of the closing passage of each visit, she claims that the coulee is transformed from "the protective womb of silence and stillness" into a site of second birth where Naomi senses "new possibilities for communication" (149). Since Naomi realizes the truth about her mother's death and the love embedded in Emily's words that can be represented by the coat Naomi carries to the coulee, she experiences an epiphany during the second visit to the coulee. She says: "Above the trees, the moon is a pure white stone. The reflection is rippling in the river—water and stone dancing. It's a quiet ballet, soundless as breath" (Kogawa 296). I suggest that the moon and a stone here signify the silence and stillness valued in Japanese traditions. The imagery of stone and water dancing "a quiet ballet" represents a harmonious vision that incorporate silence into communication, stillness into action, Japanese tradition into western culture. By employing this double vision in the process of cultural revision and self-invention, Naomi brings the stories of her family and the repressed history of Japanese Canadians to light and symbolically experiences the second birth of self.

Conclusion

If it—learning to live—remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life or in death alone. What happens between two, and between all the "two's" one likes,

such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some ghost [’sentretenir de quelque fantome]. So it would be necessary to learn spirits ... (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* xviii-xix)

As an enigmatic and liminal figure between the living and the dead, present and past, a ghost acts as a productive means for ethnic writers to cross the figurative boundary between presence and absence, dominant and subordinate, self and other. One way of knowing spirits is to learn their languages, their ways of speaking. By investigating the effects that the ghost’s madness and uncanny silence produce in the three minority texts, I conclude that the literary representation of ghost’s otherness functions as a narrative strategy for challenging hegemonic discourse and revising the traumatic memories and identities of ethnic minority. In *Beloved*, the baby ghost’s fierce emotions and chaotic expression represent the voices of African Americans in a position of resistance to the racist and patriarchal logos. In *The Woman Warrior* and *Obasan*, the ghost’s uncanny silence leads to the evocation of the repressed memories to which the second-generation Asian-American heroines respond by means of a creative process of historical recovery and ethnic invention. In sum, being sometimes invasive and sometimes uncanny, the ghosts ceaselessly confront the living with the denied and silenced past and urge them to listen and reply to their calls. By learning the ghost’s languages and communicating with them, the traumatized subjects are not only able to redefine their relationship with the past, but also can develop a new, open-ended and communal language to reconstruct new, composite, and plural identities.