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Teaching *Beloved*: From a Pedagogy of Séance to a Pedagogy of the Clearing

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Abstract
Drawing on the experiences of teaching *Beloved* in an elite, college preparatory context, the following research paper works towards alternative approaches to teaching trauma and difficult histories. After exploring some of the limitations and applications of the education as séance approach, this paper constructs a framework for teaching difficult histories modeled after Toni Morrison's description of The Clearing, a place of embodied, radical subjectivity, and personal transformation within a community of love and support.

Keywords Secondary Education · Social Justice Pedagogy · Literature · Classroom practices

In my three years of teaching Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as part of a Modern Novel course for a trimester long English elective at an elite private school, the bleak winter imagery of post-slavery Ohio, a lonely house shrouded in cold and filled with the menacing spirits of the dead, has eerily coincided to the overall mood of mid-January Seattle —short, overcast days, darkness. Throughout the long, gray winter break a sort of specter hangs in the back of my mind—the normal anxieties of curriculum development, planning, returning from break, yes, but something more.

Obviously with the daunting task of teaching *Beloved*, I am first and foremost haunted, like all readers or "snatched" (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. xviii) into 124 Bluestone, the house where a dead baby's ghost resides, and along with it—the floods of painful Rememory. Morrison plunges readers into a fragmented and fractured reimagining of the life of Margaret Garner, her escape from slavery, and the abuses she endured that led her to a desperate act of infanticide.

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But this year, as the winter trimester approached, as the specters of 124 lingered in the back of my mind, a different haunting troubled me. This year, a new revenant came hovering in my consciousness. Not Beloved, the harbinger of the troubled histories of slavery, racism, violence, and rape, but Schoolteacher—the white revenant, who began somehow to symbolize my increasing distress with the task of teaching *Beloved.* The more I read, the harder it became to ignore this ghostly image of myself in the text, not only for my identity as white male, the inheritor of the social, economic, and historical benefits of white supremacy, but as *teacher*, alas, as schoolteacher. Paul D's warning to Denver, "Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher" began to feel like a direct address (p. 324).

Normally, with each successive year of teaching a text, the curriculum begins to feel more comfortable, cohesive, and effective. The accumulation of materials evolves into a more robust and well-organized treatment of a text. The lessons, insights, and failures from the previous iterations offer signposts for a more confident way forward. With Morrison, not so. Rather, the experience of reading and teaching *Beloved* continually spiraled into compounding uncertainties and ambivalence. In the end, I began to feel more and more like Stamp Paid, the skittish passerby at 124 Bluestone, "with the voices surrounding the house, unrecognizable but undecipherable… the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (p. 235). And somehow, at the center of this disorientation, a glimpse of a hat, a pale rider of apocalypse: schoolteacher, "teaching us things we couldn't learn" (p. 226).

In my effort to attend to the ghosts and bedevilments of teaching Morrison's masterful but deeply challenging novel, I turned to colleagues, to research, to writing, and ultimately back to Morrison and the novel itself. I offer the following meditations from within the "midst" of the classroom, as teacher-researcher, and amid the complex matrix of historical, cultural, economic, and racial forces that surround the secondary classroom (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). Rather than the quantitative or empirical, I have constructed my thinking and practice out of the hauntings, fragmentations, and historical traumas with which Morrison composed *Beloved*. In the absence of formula and certainty, I have employed the novel itself as a theoretical framework, taking the metaphors, the characters, and the otherwise unsettled experience of trauma narrative as a starting place for a new approach for thinking about difficult texts and histories that do not easily fit the traditional structures of secondary education classrooms.

To begin, I will review a framework of séance as one possible but ultimately dissatisfying approach to opening the worlds of haunted texts and classrooms. From here, I hope to show the way that *Beloved* resists séance as an effort to control and contain, making its own unpredictable and uncontrolled demands on students, classrooms, and teachers alike. In her scholarship on trauma narrative, Vickroy (2002) notes,

> Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study. They internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures. They reveal many obstacles to communicating such experience: silence, simultaneous

> knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression, among others. (p. 3)

So too, this paper necessarily internalizes some of those same structures. I hope that readers might note their own impulses to resolution or discomfort that arise from their encounter with the ghosts of *Beloved* and the prospect of teaching trauma in the classroom or the precarious and often unresolved projects of justice-oriented pedagogy.

At last, after reviewing some of the shortcomings of the misguided attempts to invoke ghosts and the complications that arise for students and teaches alike, I borrow from Morrison's concept of the Clearing as alternative vision for how to attend to, bear witness, and rethink the possibilities around teaching haunted (troubled/difficult) texts in the secondary classroom.

Limitations of Séance

Undoubtedly, trauma narratives and other texts which might be categorized as difficult or haunted histories have become increasingly relevant as objects of cultural and critical attention. Kirss (2013), for example, has noted how "theories about haunting, spectrality, and ghosts have become a richly provocative source of theoretical metaphors and models in literary and cultural studies" (p. 24). Some scholars have even conceptualized haunted encounters with difficult histories as a type of education as séance (Ruitenberg, 2009).

For Ruitenberg (2009) in the metaphor of education as séance, the teacher and curricula serve as conjurers of the dead, a "threshold between absence and presence, a threshold on which the ghost can linger" (p. 305). Essentially, certain texts or curricula open spaces for ghosts to enter the classroom, as vehicles for encounters with "those parts of our histories that we – or some of us—would rather not acknowledge and that, when we do, threaten to disrupt the comfort of our everyday assumptions and make our moral hair stand on end" (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 297). Certainly, ghosts are pregnant with pedagogical issue and séance provides a possible template for discourse with haunted histories. Here, however, I suggest that séance in itself, the conversation with ghosts, the invitation to dialogue with the specter, also has definite limitations.

In the opening of *Beloved*, after drawing readers into the unsettled world of the haunted family where a baby ghost has scared off two of Sethe's sons and terrorized the dog, Here Boy, Sethe and Denver attempt a séance of their own:

> Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help. So they held hands and said, "Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on. (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 4)

In this attempted séance, the conjurer, Sethe, does not invite the ghost in order to listen but to explain, hoping to impose and absolve herself. But the ghost refuses. Here the failed conjuring points to lingering questions about curricula as séance and

the classroom as hallowed space of ghostly encounter. Perhaps the spectral do not obey the commands of the living; they might not have any interest in "an exchange of views" or desperate explanations (p. 4). In fact, it might be just the opposite.

From the very introduction of the haunting, Morrison complicates our orientation to the ghost, accenting the limitations around understanding, commanding, or relating to the undead. Through her uncanniness, Beloved disrupts traditional ways of knowing, subverts the expectations around the guest, blurs the boundaries between the living and dead, past and present. Alas, not only do we not command or "conjure up" (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 300) the ghost, instead, ghosts conjure us. Just as Beloved continually resists being known or reduced to metaphor, the novel itself continually resists being read, unsettling and disorienting readers through a heteroglossia of haunted voices, and a landscape of troubled Rememories, shifting perspectives, stories told, retold, partially told—descending into a disembodied, undecipherable "roaring" (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 213). All efforts to discourse with the past become discourse about the past.

From Séance to Invasion

Much later in the novel, after Denver has momentarily freed herself from Beloved's allure and reached out to the surrounding community for help, Ella, her neighbor, offers the following meditation on the extent to which she might abide the ghost:

> As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place—shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such—Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came into the world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion. (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 302)

Yet, perhaps in considering séance as metaphor, or haunting as pedagogy, invasion is exactly the point. The séance to conjure a disconnected, metaphorical encounter with *Beloved* in the classroom gives over to the embodied invasion of the specter. That is, we will not meet the dead on the easy, abstracted grounds of the figurative but in the uneasy tangle of flesh and bone.

Earlier still, in a strangely sexual and disturbing scene, Beloved offers Paul D. the following cryptic dictate as seduction, "You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name" (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 137). Her demands are at once physical and emotional, immediate and transcendent, of the present and past, and most importantly, they are embodied: The ghost demands both honest recognition, careful naming, and physical intercourse. The past will not remain suspended in abstraction, wisped in the ether of the intangible, not content to be séanced, reduced, or theorized but demands to be touched.

Out of all these frustrations: the inability to name, touch, comprehend, or command Beloved, a series of questions emerge: How to name and speak unspeakable histories, how to allow the spirits of haunted texts speak on their own terms, in their own time, for what purpose, and on whose behalf? And where, in this necromancy,

do we distinguish between communication with the dead and invasion of the dead—which is more necessary in the conception of education as séance, in the project of "bearing witness" (Simon, 2014, p. 25) to historical trauma? What ethical responsibility do teachers carry when they curate a curriculum which might bring students into crisis (Spear, 2014)?

Ultimately, complicating the metaphor of séance creates an uncomfortable atmosphere in the classroom. Despite the great effort to enclose a haunted text, neither teacher nor student knows the ghost, what it might utter, or how and when it might arrive. Even more, if ghosts do arrive, do we have the ability or capacity to name them; are we willing to be commanded by the ghost—to move through haunting, to face the past in order to see and transform the present?

Further Troubling the Classroom Séance

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, the practice of séance in the classroom complicates a number of assumptions about reading and bearing witness to trauma narrative. Now I want to examine a few other possible unintended consequences specific to the task of teaching the generational traumas of slavery in a private school context and a classroom of mostly non-black students.

In a field study examining the effectiveness of social justice pedagogy in an elite private school, Swalwell (2013) raises concerns about how students actually take up the goals of justice-oriented pedagogies. She notes the possibility that "students may capitalize on their understanding as a way to increase their marketability rather than engage in more meaningful, critical self-reflection" (p. 3). To Swalwell's (2013) original inquiry, one scholar adds the following critique:

> Unless economically privileged individuals are willing to examine their own sense of entitlement and challenge their own privileged ways of knowing and doing, being in solidarity with less fortunate others will be about improving themselves. (Gaztambide-Fernandez & Howard, 2013, p. 4)

In this view, students may become Denver-like in their orientation to the specter, longing selfishly without any connection to the past which the ghost embodies: Sweet Home, infanticide, the terrors of slavery. This way of being with the ghost easily equates with spectacle, ahistoricism, or naivete—postures which inarguably beset the many secondary classrooms.

So too, students, especially smart, capable, perceptive students, might exploit the hauntings in curricula for their own benefit. They know, recognize, and understand the landscape of the social-justice classroom and the ways in which knowledges and languages of progressive education offer a type of social capital, a currency they will exchange to "write a much stronger college essay or leverage required community service hours with those less fortunate in order to pad a resume" (Swalwell, 2013, p. 3).

In a related study, Gaztambide-Fernandez (2011) names the tendency to perform school while simultaneously defending one's privilege "bullshit as resistance" (p.

581). As students contend with the demands of an elite school experience, "Learning how to bullshit is not just about bluffing your way through a class. It is also about mastering a particular language and about learning to "play" a particular game" (p. 583). Students have internalized the rules of the 'bullshit' game. As an (un)intended consequence, even when presented with an opportunity for genuine engagement with a particular text or the themes of racial violence and inequality that continue to plague society, they resist, reduce, or co-opt the ghost as cultural capital.

In addition to the pitfalls of performance or exploitation, Tuck and Yang (2012) offer another distinct challenge to the project of critical consciousness in what they deem settler "moves to innocence" (p. 3), a set of practices that allow settler colonizers, settler scholars, and presumably settler students to substitute "conscientization" (p. 19) (the awareness, sensitivity, and languages of social justice) for material or tangible actions:

> We don't intend to discourage those who have dedicated careers and lives to teaching themselves and others to be critically conscious of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, xenophobia, and settler colonialism. We are asking them/you to consider how the pursuit of critical consciousness, the pursuit of social justice through critical enlightenment, can also be settlers moves to innocence- diversions, distractions, which relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility, and conceal the need to give up land or power or privilege (Tuck & Yang, p. 20).

From this perspective, the séance, as an extension of a critical or social justice pedagogy, constitutes a move to innocence.

In his examination of the comment books at a pair of museum exhibitions featuring the lynching photographs of *Without Sanctuary*, Simon (2014) also raises a similar concern. He writes, "The risk is falling victim to one's own good performance allowing the photographs seen, to become about us (our shame, our sadness)" (p. 169). The classroom, likewise, can suffer the same pitfalls of inauthenticity, performance, and guilt.

It is unrealistic and unfair, however, to place the responsibility for these consequences onto the shoulders of students. Afterall, as Shantz (2012) observes, "new social relations do not spring into being fully formed from nothing. They must be taught, learned, played with, experienced, revised, and relearned" (p. 135). Therefore, to simply expect that introducing a radical text such as *Beloved* into existing school structures which reinforce "disembodied and individualized academic performance" will transform deeply entrenched classroom habits does not fully account for larger social and structural impediments (Jeppenson & Adamiak, 2017, p. 224). In almost every way, the sanitized, florescence of the classroom signals an atmosphere antithetical to the possibilities of the unknown, to processes of discovery, or the voices of the dead.

Schoolteacher as White Revenant

Even more, to place all the responsibility on students or existing institutional structures gives an incomplete picture of the shortcomings of séance, the slow drift towards bullshit. It is equally necessary to analyze the role of schoolteacher within the false dream of séance –a neutral, apolitical, or controlled space in which ghosts might be commanded and curated. Though not a ghost per se in the novel, certainly, the memory of schoolteacher continually haunts the characters in the text, and by extension, returns to readers (certainly teachers) as a type of white revenant and becomes indispensable to any thoughtful critique of the education as séance concept.

As the novel progresses, schoolteacher emerges as a totalizing force for the characters in the novel who lived under his sadistic hand. At one point, Sethe offers the following understatement: "Nothing to tell except schoolteacher" (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 44). Embedded within this irony, the specter of schoolteacher represents both absence and presence, nothing and everything. Just as the mystery of Beloved continues and complicates throughout the novel, as her haunting becomes more strange, more sinister, and more parasitic, the story of schoolteacher likewise unveils and intensifies.

At one point, Sethe describes schoolteacher as a sort of amateur phrenologist, a practitioner and proliferator of scientific racism, noting, "And the questions he asked was the biggest foolishness of all" (226). For this analysis, the leap between phrenology and contemporary examples of the ways in which education, research, scholarship, and knowledge production can also dehumanize is not too great. Sethe's lament connects easily to Morrison's (1995) list of dominating languages charted in her Nobel Prize speech, including, "the language of surveillance disguised as research" (p. 320). To this list, we might also add the language of the classroom disguised as critical inquiry—séance disguised as social justice.

In the world of the novel, schoolteacher is a sadistic slave holder, but he also symbolically prefigures continued and evolving forms of institutional racism and oppression. By analogy, the sadistic institutions of slavery are not too far removed from the oppressive institutions of the school-to-prison pipeline. Where Sweet Home is beset with the terrors of racial violence and scientific racism, classrooms are equally beset, haunted not only by Beloved, the embodiment of trauma, but by schoolteacher—the hazy figure in a distance, the stench Baby Suggs smells long before The Misery, the rancor of death and violence.

Thus, the nameless, diffuse sadism of schoolteacher in the novel becomes a kind of proxy for compulsory education in general, and more specifically, for the types of pseudo-progressiveness which educators or (elite?) schools might normally want to congratulate themselves about. In a somewhat tense interview with Charlie Rose, Morrison, publicly proclaimed, "I have spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in any of my books" (Charlie Rose, 2015). By extension, I suggest that *Beloved* and schoolteacher are deliberately misfitted, ill-at-ease, and haunting within classrooms—social structures that retain undeniable connections to the white gaze and white supremacy more broadly.

As such, Morrison demands that we do not attempt to take settler colonial or predominantly Western approaches to storytelling, history, teaching, or research as the

starting place for knowing. Rather, as I have attempted to show above, the power of Morrison's novel and its ability to upset, demands that the work becomes the starting place. Thus comes the crisis of trying to fit the novel into existing classroom rhythms and practices. Thus comes the failure of the séance. In the next section, I will outline a few of the ways in which these crises and disruptions emerged among my students in their encounter with the text.

Séance as Refusal

Even at their most student-centered and dialogic, my efforts to facilitate discussion around *Beloved* were inevitably weighted with Sethe's charge of "foolishness" (p.226). One year, in fact, a student who perhaps more than any other distinguished themselves through continued engagement with the text, finally reached a point of refusal, a denial of the foolish questions in the classroom. Halfway through our reading of the novel, I presented the class with a discussion post that asked them to synthesize a qualitative study in which my former professor and researcher Joubert (2017), considers the implications around "using literature which explores the death of or violence on bodies of color and, as a result, the presence of ghosts of color in curricula that supposedly promote social justice and equality" (p.581), and an excerpt from Rankine's (2016) chapter in which she advocates "to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture" (p. 150) as a strategy of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The question asked students to consider their own reflexivity and positionality in terms of the haunted curriculum. In other words, I confronted them with the research question of this paper: what does it mean to read with ghosts (which is to read stories of the institution of American Slavery and the countless forms of sadism and violence against black people that began with colonialism and continue today) in spaces of privilege, in spaces of an economic elite, primarily non-black, private school classroom? What does it mean for us, as a class, to consume these trauma narratives? Is there an ethical way to bear witness, or give "testimony" (Simon, 2014, p.19) to the difficult knowledge and troubled histories in this text?

Responses ranged widely. One particular student, however, detailed their refusal to answer the question in a lengthy personal email, included here with permission:

> Dear Mr. [Teacher/author name],
> I sincerely do not mean to come off as disrespectful or lazy, however, I do not believe I can complete the writing assignment due tomorrow while holding to academic principles that are important to me and (I believe) to you.
> You have previously expressed that you don't like when students' writing becomes performative. I find this quite reasonable and I, too, don't enjoy writing when I have nothing to say.
> With that being said, I don't know what it means to read about trauma, violence, and Black death. I don't think it is my place to speak on that subject. I am not black and have not had the experience of reading literature which portrays my life as expendable. I think anything I have to say would be at best regurgitated platitudes, and at worst deeply disrespectful and counterproductive.

> I think both the Joubert article and Beloved are important to discussions of the questions you posed, but I am neither willing nor able to provide a defensible interpretation of either.
> I would appreciate an alternative opportunity to demonstrate my learning and understanding of this subject, but I won't be doing this assignment as it is currently formulated.
> Thank you,
> PS: Having spoken to some classmates, I believe I am not unique in feeling this way.

On one level, the refusal amounted to a brief and uncharacteristic unwillingness on the part of the student to wade into the waters of an uncomfortable inquiry. On another level, admittedly, my initial question embodies a sort of 'foolishness' – a sort of schoolteacherism or feigned séance—a staged encounter with the ghost meant to elicit programmed responses and predetermined conclusions.

While initially offended at the refusal, now it seems, in part, that the student objected to the covert sadism in the question, the thinly veiled probe into the obvious limitations of even the most genuine desires to "witness" and respond to the traumas of *Beloved* (Simon, 2014, p. 36). In a way, this student articulates the difficulty of responding to the violence and suffering in the text without reducing it to "spectacle" (Simon, 2014, p. 36). The implications of passivity and voyeurism, inherent in the concept of spectacle are not overstated. Non-black, predominantly white readers of *Beloved* cannot escape the painful legacy of lynching and the histories of eager onlookers and perpetrators of violence against Black bodies. To read the violence inflicted on Sethe and the other characters re-creates feelings of voyeurism, the disconnected consumption of the trauma narrative.

Another student respondent raises some of the same concerns outlined in the preceding section. They write:

> On one hand, I do believe it's important to see history through experiences and emotions rather than just facts and dates. History is more than just events, and ignoring the depth of human experience would both misrepresent the past but may also make us less compassionate and fail to see WHY these events were/are so meaningful. On the other hand, it does feel strange to have to continuously engage with upsetting themes and events simply because they happened in the past. Will there ever be a point when we won't have to discuss these in so much depth, or will they forever be a part of our curriculums and conversations? It also may cause us to become desensitized or burnt out after a while, so it's important to me that the engagements we do have are valuable and used well, and that we use this kind of teaching to actually create change instead of merely informing others. There is only so much power in "spreading awareness" so my hope is that reading with ghosts will create real movement towards equality.

And so, for the most perceptive students, the question necessarily leads to a dead end of honest reflexivity. To read the traumas of the institution of American Slavery,

in an elite preparatory school, for a senior year English elective as a pitstop before admission to a top university along the pathway towards continued economic prosperity, certainly engenders feelings of impotence or even guilt. Better still, to *teach* the traumas of the institutions of American Slavery, at an elite preparatory school, for a senior year English elective, as a demonstration of the schools' enlightened curriculum aligned with progressive social and political ideals, ensures my job, my economic security, and my continued access to material resources.

Other examples of individual and class responses to *Beloved* could also be charted and detailed here. Certainly, too, some students barely spoke a word for the entire trimester. Their silence became an addition to the well documented body of research around silence as resistance. Even examining these few responses— refusal, impotence, and silence—gives a clear picture of the complications of hauntings in the classroom.

In light of these challenges, collectively, as students and teachers, we are asked to consider the intention and efficacy of séance more carefully. We are asked to entertain the possibility of séance as nothing more than a dressed-up gesture. We might consider how encounters with the ghosts of troubled histories, in the spaces of an elite private school institution in some ways constitute 'settler moves to innocence' and in some other ways, amount to a sort of exploitation of the dead, and uncritical consumption of trauma narrative. We grow fat, as Beloved, on Sethe's "diamonds"—her haunted history and trauma (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 69).

But the primary goal of this paper is not to abandon *Beloved*, to simply 'not teach it' as one colleague suggested in response to a version of this discussion that I put forward at a department meeting. Rather, in keeping with the framework of the world of the text, the next section will explore possible alternatives to the disembodied, individualistic, or performative séance.

The Clearing

Just as *Beloved* commands itself as the starting place for encountering ghosts, a co-author in constructing a haunted curriculum, so too, the vision of a world beyond haunting also emerges within the novel. The first move in a radical response to the radical demands of *Beloved* requires not the adornment and pageantry of séance—not an invitation into existing structures of individualism but a radical restructuring—a Clearing.

In the novel, the Clearing functions as an informal gathering place for the community of formerly enslaved people to join together and support one another in a vital process of self-determination, self-love, and cathartic, embodied expressions of song, laughter, dance and even crying. Baby Suggs, holy, the "uncalled, unrobed, unanointed" preacher entreats the community to love their flesh, to "Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face" (p. 104). As the Clearing becomes a threshold through which the community moves in their journey towards freedom and healing, it also works likewise for students, moving them from the disorientations of their initial encounters with trauma narrative into a place of supported engagement.

To initiate the Clearing in the classroom would begin by inviting students into a conversation about alternative possibilities for bearing witness, holding dialogue, and approaching the traumas of the past in order to engage the present from a posture of radical resistance and embodied community. For the purpose of this paper, three main aspects of the Clearing offer alternative classroom practices for reading difficult histories in a way that supports student wellness and responds to the unsettling demands of trauma narratives, such as *Beloved*: alternative spaces, self-determination, and radical resistance.

Alternative Spaces

Firstly, the metaphor of the Clearing offers an important and instructive perspective about the classroom as a space. Rather than the "spiteful" confines of 124 Bluestone, the Clearing is "a wide open place cut deep in the woods" (Morrison, 1987/2004, pp. 3, 102). The reimagining of a classroom Clearing could include both literal and figurative openings. While openness does not demand a physical space outside the classroom, there were times during my teaching of *Beloved* when I could see that students crossed the threshold of the classroom as Paul D. enters 124, "into a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood" (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 10). The option to conduct class in an alternate physical space would signal rupture against monotony and a departure from the traditional classroom milieu. In their work with non-traditional educational spaces, Noterman and Pusey (2012) cite the Free Skool approach to non-traditional spaces as "volunteer-run and community-supported" which are "decentralized, holding classes in social centers, parks, and other public or reclaimed spaces" (p. 183).

While the option to a physical space set aside as Clearing might not always be possible or practical, the implications for reimagining spaces extend beyond the literal. In their efforts to disrupt the limiting forces of institutional space, Jeppenson and Adamiak (2017) endeavored to

> make a decisive intervention into the *psychologies of space*. By prioritizing learning from experience and flipping the understanding of expertise on its head, the emotional aspect of learning was linked with knowledge-sharing, discouraging theorizing disconnected from practice, social relationships and lived experience. (Jeppenson & Adamiak, 2017, p. 235)

In my own practice to interrupt the "psychologies of space," I have experimented with the dialogue journal as an informal writing exercise to engender more honest, less-formal exchanges with students about their impressions of the book. Along with the dialogue journal, I employed numerous projects, writing assignments, student-led discussions, and inquiries—all of these fell short or remained somewhat tethered to the séance model, trying to coerce the ghost. Without a genuine dismantling of the power relationship between teachers and students, all else amounts to bells and whistles, the same old stuff by a different name.

Therefore, to work towards an authentic practice of Clearing requires fundamental shifts in the ways that classroom spaces are defined by power. In his formulation

of education as being "led into the open," Nouwen (1975) conceives teaching as "the creation of a space where students and teachers can enter into a fearless communication with each other and allow their respective life experiences to be their primary and most valuable source of growth and maturation" (p. 85). Along with fearlessness, Pusey (2017) thinks of "radical informal learning spaces" as necessarily "self-managed and horizontal" (p. 126). One example of both horizontality and wide-openness, would be to reach out to folks in community and in activism, simultaneously connecting the study of the novel to larger discourses and communities outside of the insularity of the immediate school community. Reaching out, dissolving the false boundary between the classroom and the world, also dismantles notions of the teacher as central authority.

Another compelling example of constructing a more horizontal orientation towards educational spaces proposes "horizontal pedagogy" (HP) as "a way of learning, teaching, and studying that is committed to non-conventional, non-hierarchical educational practices" (Backer et al., 2017, p.198). Along with these initial ambitions, HP workshops use a set of routines that also include an opening check-in time for participants to say their name and how they feel. The authors note how checking-in:

> situates participants in a space, acknowledging participants' emotions and states of being at the start of the interaction. This moment prior to examining the text recognizes that everyone approaches the process from different perspectives and states of mind" (Backer et al., 2017, p. 199).

While the check-in might speak to a universal best practice, with the emotionally demanding nature of a trauma narrative, the process of normalizing and inviting full-community participation rooted in affective experiences has the power to fundamentally alter patterns which might normally alienate students from themselves, from one another, and from the text.

I can't help but think that a checking-in process might have better supported a student who approached me sobbing one day because of how disturbed they felt by a particularly troubling scene of sexual abuse from *Beloved*. In all of these forms, the Clearing signals an alternate classroom space of wide openness, horizontality, of rethinking relationships to expertise, and the physical or figurative boundaries of the classroom where a community of learners can join together in the shared endeavor to engage and respond to difficult histories.

Self-determination

The meditation about the literal and figurative parameters of the Clearing as a space raises another important consideration. The formerly enslaved community in *Beloved* could not simply move from the condition of slavery to physical freedom without undergoing a process of self-healing, without creating a "radical subjectivity" (Vaneigem, 1967/2012, p. 219) and self-love. The pathway to imaging a new social structure came through the realization of the personal experience of freedom and self-expression. For Sethe and participants in the Clearing, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another (111–112).

It is important to note that the Clearing, as a communal space in the novel and potential model for alternative classroom practices, is not a negation of the self, not a turning away from the self. Rather, it is the radical reclaiming of the self, as a practice of personal freedom that enables genuine turning to others. Just as the formerly enslaved people in the Ohio community imagined a new world for themselves, for students to forge their own radical subjectivities, the ground upon which they might imagine new worlds, they must recognize and break free from the patterns of dependence and domination. That is, they must experience freedom to imagine freedom.

Similarly, the principle of self-determination, the oft cited and celebrated goal of student-centeredness, if taken seriously, would vastly transform engagement with the novel. In one experiment with offering students self-determined learning, Williams (2017) conceived a literal co-created syllabus for his class, leaving "two sizable blank spaces—course objectives and course requirements—for students to fill in once they had collectively made their decisions regarding these two crucial components" (p. 158). While not without challenge, the above provides a glimpse into one strategy for more horizontality and self-directedness.

In another practice of co-construction and self-directedness, students could design their own forms of assessment or engagement for the course. The class might opt for a shared expression of learning rather than the individual practice of writing a culminating paper. Innovative and student-designed demonstrations of learning would eliminate the misfitting of pairing such a personal and emotionally powerful novel with the analytical practices of academic writing. Jeppenson and Adamiak (2017) name their own striving to this end as the "co-production of knowledge that is critical of disembodied and individualized academic performance" (p. 224). These capstone projects could include any number of arts-based or non-traditional modes of assessent that emphasize the affective and communal dimensions of learning over traditional notions of mastery and individual achievement.

Radical Resistance & Black Joy

By incorporating traditional academic writing assignments as the summative assessment for the novel, not only did I recognize the incompatibility with pairing the emotional upheaval of the novel with the disconnected postures of academic writing, but I also noticed a troubling pattern in the limited range of student readings. Each year, a majority of student writing centered on Beloved as a symbol of trauma, intergenerationalat best and at worst as an analogy for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Aside from my frustrations with repetitive and uninspired themes and compositions, I realized that students felt overwhelmingly inclined to reduce the ambiguous figure of Beloved to a diagnosis. Unwilling or unable to hold themselves in the tension of the unnamable, they instead searched for simplistic and totalizing explanations. Not surprisingly, students tended toward diagnoses and psychology—a frame which ignores the social and reduces the structural to the individual, which makes the victim responsible for their recovery, which easily elides any recognition for the institutional forces which perpetuated slavery and continue to haunt Black Americans.

To repeat the mistake of conceiving Beloved in entirely personal or psychological terms is to repeat the mistake of Sethe, to become locked in myopic intercourse with the ghost, ignoring or pridefully declining the necessary healing power of the community, the necessity of the Clearing. The preponderance of unimaginative and reductive readings of *Beloved* points to a more problematic misreading: to approach the novel wholly through the lens of trauma without the lens of resistance undervalues the supreme courage and willingness of Sethe to act. That is, the reading of Beloved as trauma must be paired with the reading of Sethe as resistance. Likewise, the teaching of *Beloved*, while haunted and traumatic, should include teachings of resistance.

In this point, I took great direction from Joubert (2017) and his experience of teaching in a juvenile detention center using a curriculum which included "the death or violence on bodies of color and, as a result, the presence of ghosts of color in curricula that supposedly promote social justice and equality" (p. 581). To me the article asks important questions about balancing portrayals of Black life to include both the realities of suffering alongside the triumph of creativity and the tradition of radical resistance. In an interview for a documentary about Ralph Ellison's particular genius for this capacity, Cornel West explains,

> Anyone who doesn't talk about the damage done to Black folk has no sense of reality. We are a wounded people. On the other hand, if you think we are only a wounded people and have no creativity, you have no sense of reality either… There's space that Black people create that hold[s] at bay the ugliness of white supremacist damage. (Author Documentaries, 2021)

Here West closely echoes the Clearing, a space apart, where Sethe recalls, "Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better" (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 111). This short passage contains a concise outline for important principles in a pedagogy of the Clearing: healing, real-talk, company, knowing names, feelings of *fun and sorrow.*

To this end, I began supplementing the anchor text of *Beloved* with the volume *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner* (2013). In small groups, students used one of the chapters from this amazing collection to enhance, deepen, and access the view of resistance alongside their haunted reading. I also included some selections from *The Fire This Time* (2016) to connect historical with contemporary examples of resistance, such as the Black Lives Matter movement.

Hopefully, even if incomplete or not fully imagined, the above outline of a vision for a pedagogy of Clearing provides a useful framework in which students might engage the necessary work of confronting the ghosts and traumas of difficult histories while also supporting one another in the shared project for a future free from the iniquities of dominance, oppression, racism, and sexual violence.

Conclusion

This paper began with a review of séance as a possible but limited framework for teaching difficult histories and concludes with the vision of the Clearing. Where haunting facilitates an initial encounter with ghosts, healing must come from spaces that allow for the possibility of exorcising those ghosts, collectively, in song and dance, in a world apart from the institutions which continue domination, in opposition to forces and traditional spaces that only allow for disconnected performance, settler moves to innocence, or private encounters with our own shame. If ghosts symbolize the encounter with the past reduced to individualized, psychologized and morbid self-reflection, the Clearing represents shared spaces which also acknowledge suffering, while opening the possibility towards healing, hope, and self-fulfillment. With the Clearing, this paper envisions the classroom as a place of deeply transformative encounters with ourselves within a community of others.

In one of the closing scenes of the novel, Paul D. approaches Sethe to awaken her from self-destructive melancholy. He remarks, "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 322). At last, I hope this paper embodies an effort to think through a practice which might attend to both the hauntings of yesterday and today and *some kind of tomorrow*. Finally, we might imagine the Clearing as radical polyphony—one consciousness knowing itself through the knowing of others: "I am Beloved and she is mine" (Morrison, 1987/2004, p. 248).

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