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Posthumous Justice for the Walking, Talking Female Dead

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Posthumous Justice for the Walking, Talking Female Dead

Brian Norman. *Dead Women Talking: Figures of Injustice in American Literature*.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013. viii, 223 pp.

\$45.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper, \$45.00 e-book.

In this clear, persuasive study, Brian Norman argues that representations of embodied, talking dead women proliferate in American literature and constitute an important, often-overlooked literary tradition that addresses issues of injustice. Vital to Norman's study is the centrality of the body to these representations and the social justice issues they refuse to let die with them. Responding to critical work that yokes body and citizenship, including Orlando Patterson on "social death" and Russ Castronovo on "necro citizenship," Norman demonstrates the particular problematic of these talking dead women—not only that they've returned from the grave vocally but also that they've returned *bodily*, and that they're seeking recognition, both vocally and bodily, as community members and citizens. No mere ghosts, posthumous voices, or otherwise insubstantial postmortem narrators, these women in their corporeal returns "tap into not only aesthetic and psychological ideas about uncannily beautiful female death and poetic techniques for representing dead speakers, but also concerns about political ventriloquism, inactive citizenship, posthumous legal rights, and racial blood memory" [7].

Dead Women Talking ranges widely in its temporal archive, generic reach, and critical and theoretical contextualization. In ten brief chapters—moving (for the most part) chronologically from the wailing Madeline Usher in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) to the blues-singing Willa Mae in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Getting Mother's Body* (2003)—Norman traces increasingly explicit critiques of injustice and bids for sociopolitical recognition made on the protagonists' own terms. Each chapter, in fact, centers on a distinctly embodied vocal "action" that a dead woman performs. These progress from the most inchoate, dependent, and pain-filled in the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries (wailing, dictating, rotting), to the more overtly dissatisfied in the latter twentieth century (cursing, wanting, heckling, gossiping), to those reflecting reconciliation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (healing, coming of age, singing).

Norman's gendered focus—the walking and talking dead he finds are all *women*—not only picks up on traditional linkages between “femininity and death” but also exposes the association of literary female bodies with voicelessness and injustice [8]. Here, the book's final chapter, which concentrates on the figure of “No Name Woman” in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), becomes particularly important. Through a focus on the role that silence, too, might play in the realization of justice for our talking, walking dead, Norman makes good on one of his introduction's opening claims—“by the end of this study, we should find it odd when dead women *don't* talk”—and he also provocatively asserts that only by allowing the dead the right *not* to speak do we “restore to the realm of the living the obligation to seek justice” [21, 184]. Norman ultimately suggests that these women do not only “figure injustice” by resurrecting past wrongs. More crucially, they are women whom we—unjustly—make advocates for justice even after death, demonstrating the injustice attending our abdication of responsibility for the issues to which these dead do, but shouldn't have to, bear witness.

Though Poe is a focus of only one chapter, it is the first, foundational chapter, which situates his generic, thematic, and gendered explorations at the head of a long literary legacy that follows in the wake of Madeline Usher's wail. Norman's treatment of “The Fall of the House of Usher” adds to the wealth of critical attention to Poe's representations of women, attention that has (unsurprisingly) remained vexed about what to make of all his dead/undead, poetical/grotesque female characters. Norman's chapter reflects this vexation; despite work by such scholars as Cynthia S. Jordan, Leland S. Person, Jacqueline Doyle, Joan Dayan, and Eliza Richards that has attempted to unearth, in both polemical and sharply circumscribed ways, political meaning in Poe's strangely enduring if mutilated women, Norman makes it clear that he finds a “feminist reading” of “The Fall of the House of Usher” to be “unfounded” [27]. Nonetheless, his reading of the crumbling aristocratic foundations of Usher notes the simultaneous erasure and lingering presence of Madeline's body/voice, suggesting an uneasiness with, if not radical critique of, the story's “patrimonial frame” [27]. Norman locates a primary source of this uneasiness in Madeline's ambiguous representation: she is not clearly dead or alive, woman or symbol, talking or silenced. Further, he emphasizes the narrational usurpation of Madeline's voice and insists on its illegibility to drive home the text's disruptive power, yet he stops short of pinpointing any political motive for this disruption. Instead, he uses Madeline's uncanny wail to argue that, despite the “untenab[ility]” of finding any direct political commentary on injustice in Poe's tale, her incoherence does something potentially more valuable: it forces us to ask, “what would it entail for us to listen to Madeline Usher?” [34].

Not only does the wide-ranging nature of his study support Norman's contention that the trope of dead women talking has gone "largely unnoticed," but it also lends the study some of its particular strength [20]. Norman argues early on that these figures proliferate in "fissures" between and within genres, communities, and historical moments, and Madeline Usher's story adds language to that list [16]. If Madeline's wail is "uninterested," as Norman claims, "in propagating docile citizenship," then it seems equally the case that Norman is uninterested in propagating docile readership [34]. As "dead women talking" become more easily recognized as a trope in American fiction, Norman cautions, the trope "runs the risk of losing its uncanny abilities to provoke unexpected confrontations with the past" [20]. Though some of the implications of ready recognition are left unexplored, there seems an unspoken argument that our difficulty claiming a feminist reading of Poe's story might, paradoxically, be a sign of its subversive strength. It may not be necessary, Norman's provocative study suggests, to articulate injustice in order to figure it in American literature. Rather, what is necessary to figuring injustice is that dead women's voices prompt listeners to engage.

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