

# (Un)Homely Haunts: Gothic Spaces in Literature

Caitlin Hancock and Dr. Rebecca Ballard

## Introduction and Background

The research was conducted in two parts. First was working with Dr. Rebecca Ballard to closely read and edit the manuscript of her work on how contemporary speculative fiction correlates to post 1960 acts and communities of activism. Specifically, focus was on the chapter titled **"Gothic Infrastructures,"** which focuses on how infrastructures that facilitated and resulted from slave plantations and the **Plantationocene**— how plantation systems and violence are still responsible for environmental degradation, and as opposed to the Anthropocene (Haraway)— in the southern United States have led to Black community activism, such as in Cancer Alley, and how these realities correspond to gothic representations in works by contemporary Black authors.

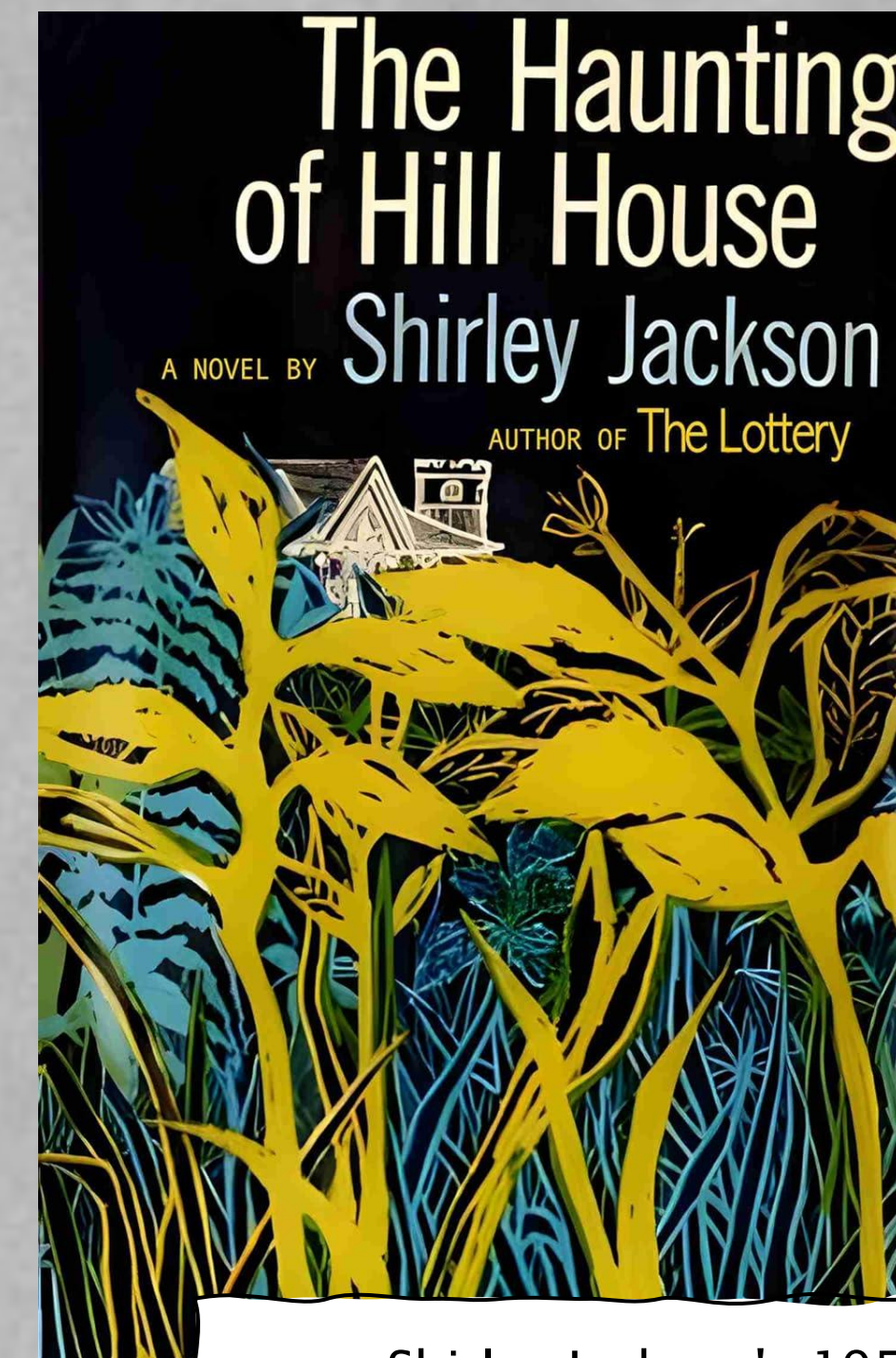
The second part of the research focuses in on **Gothic Geomemory**— "the imbuing of built environments and above all of infrastructure with gothic slippages in time... and in agency" (Ballard). Specifically, the question for this section of independent research is "In what way(s) does the haunting of non-private spaces differ from the haunting of the home in gothic stories highlighting different demographics?" Along with and as cited in Dr. Ballard's work, Katherine McKittrick's **"On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place"** offers a theoretical foundational baseline for how demographic groups can be situated within and associated with spatial locations.

The research is academically significant in the way it seeks to bridge the gap in these diverse conversations and looks for future gaps for exploration.

## Methods of Research

The research was separated into three sections with different methodologies.

- 1) Wide reading and citation creation and editing:** The first section of the project was spent reading through the citations of the manuscript chapter for formatting and general ideas.
- 2) Reading primary and secondary sources in the chapter:** For the second part of the research, foundational research was conducted through reading the cited primary and secondary sources from the chapter in depth to look for possible gaps in research. Primary sources read in this section include *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward.
- 3) Reading primary sources for comparative analysis:** After these initial steps, research focused on reading additional foundational primary sources not in the chapter to explore the proposed research question, "In what way(s) does the haunting of non-private spaces differ from the haunting of the home in gothic stories highlighting different demographics?" Texts were chosen for their relevance to the manuscript chapter and their canonical importance to the "haunted house" narrative. The first text looked at is *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson. The texts were read to look for plot, character, and textual details including what spaces were haunted, what these haunted spaces represented for the characters, how private were the hauntings and the spaces haunted, what demographics were being represented, and how the demographics of the characters related to the spaces being haunted.

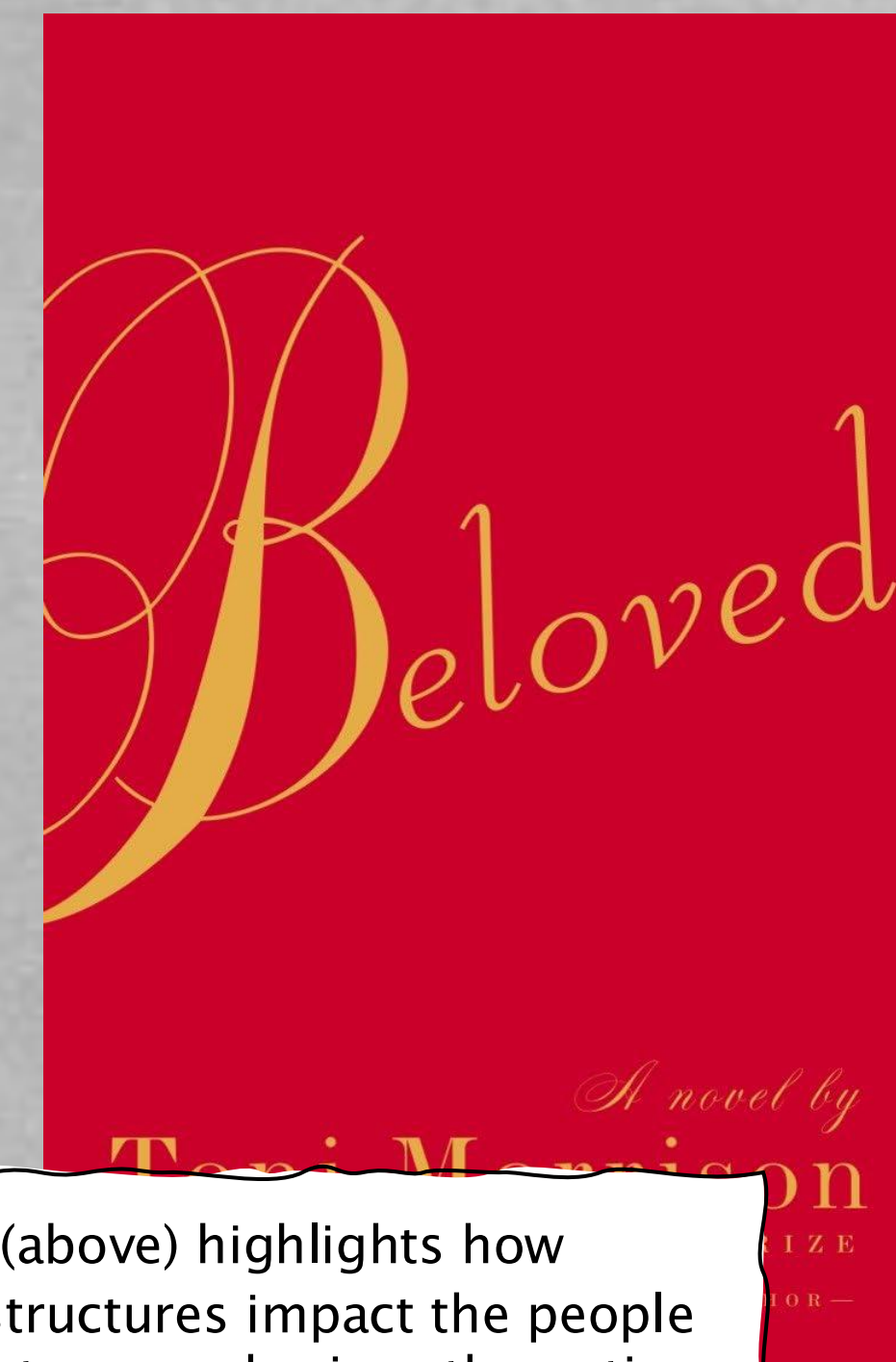


Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (above) is a quintessential and canonical haunted house story that sets conventions for more contemporary works.

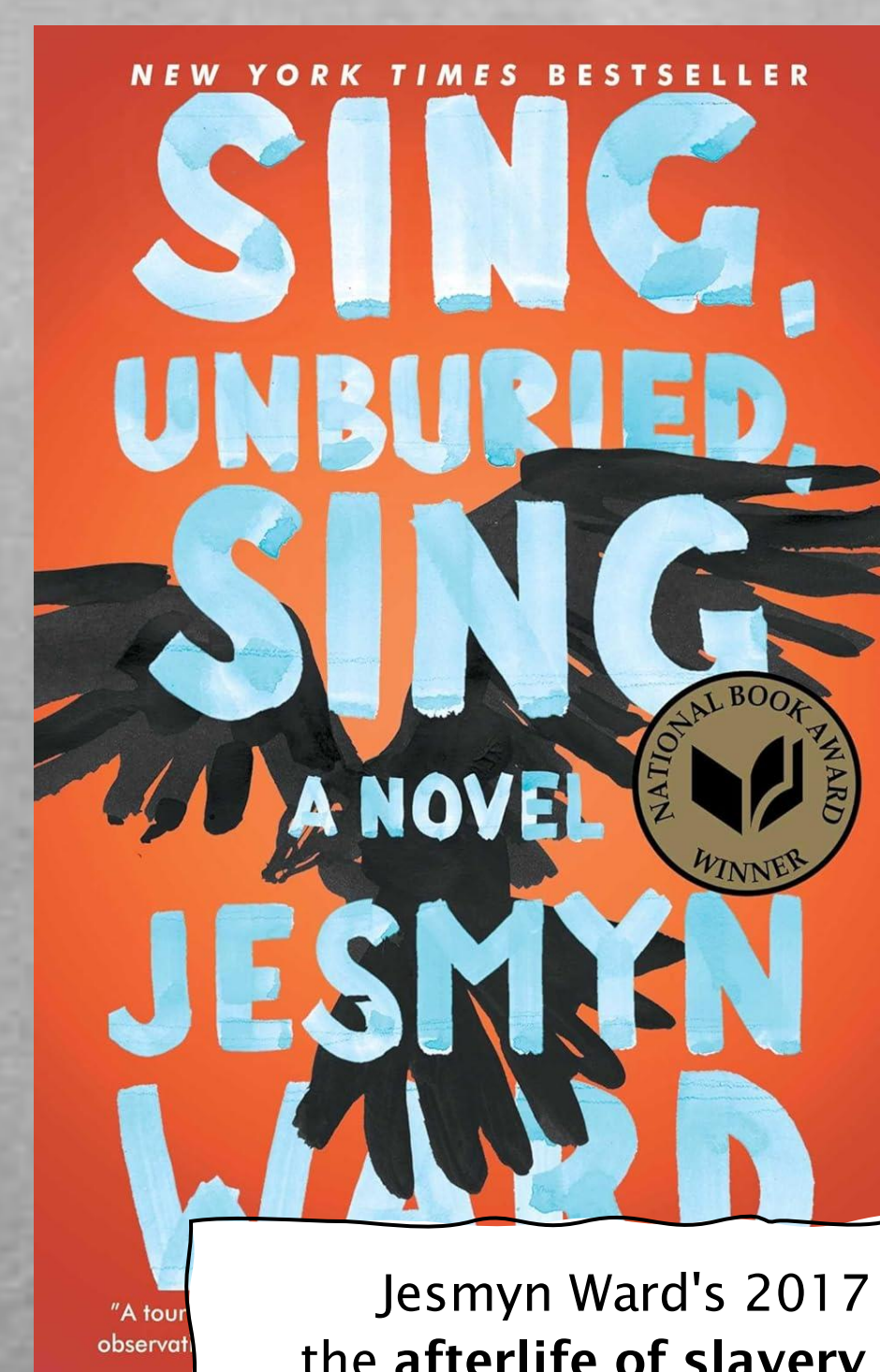
"It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope."  
- Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*

"It might not then be too fanciful to say that some houses are born bad."  
- Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*

"Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place— the picture of it— stays, and not just in my memory, but out there, in the world... if you go there and stand in the place where it was... it will be there for you, waiting for you."  
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*



Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* (above) highlights how systems of slavery and plantation infrastructures impact the people that lived in them. This haunted house story emphasizes the notion that **memory is tied to spaces**— that memory is forever connected to a place even after infrastructures change.



Jesmyn Ward's 2017 novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (above) deals with the **afterlife of slavery** in the land and the people who live on and with it, specifically highlighting how systems of slavery have bled into the prison system in the southern United States.

"And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once?"  
- Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

## Preliminary Findings

There is a distinction to be made between the areas of **private** haunted spaces and that of **non-private** (while not necessarily entirely public) haunted spaces. The Haunted House trope established in novels such as *The Haunting of Hill House* sets frameworks that are worked within and against in the later works of *Beloved* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Non-private spaces emerge in the form of plantations in prisons in the later works.

Plantations are separated as non-private because though people lived on plantations, those enslaved on plantations were not allowed the privacy that comes with having your own home, and the hauntings were distinct from that of a haunted house.

The hauntings of these different spaces also brought up the topic of the **commercial** versus the **domestic**. These findings are still limited by and to the primary sources that I have read.

## Future Direction

There is a lot of future action for this research. The next step is to continue reading foundational and canonical texts that establish the conventions of the haunted house trope. These texts include but are not limited to *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole and *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James.

The next step after establishing this foundation will be to read more contemporary novels that either complicate and/or diverge from the typical "haunted house" trope and include other haunted spatial locations (such as schools, prisons, and hospitals) and/or play with genre (for example, a memoir instead of a fiction narrative). It would also be interesting to expand mediums and look at television, film, plays, etc.

A future goal for the research is to adapt the preliminary readings, areas of interest, and research question into an Honors in the Major topic.

## Resources

- Ballard, Rebecca. "Gothic Infrastructures," *Genre Frictions: Structural Violence, Activist Forms, and American Literature*, (unpublished).
- Haraway, Donna. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2015, pp. 159-65.
- Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*. Penguin, 28 Nov. 2006.
- McKittrick, Katherine. "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place." *Social and Cultural Geography*, vol. 12, no. 8, 2011, pp. 947-63.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. S.L., Vintage Classics, 2020.
- Ward, Jesmyn. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. S.L., Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017.