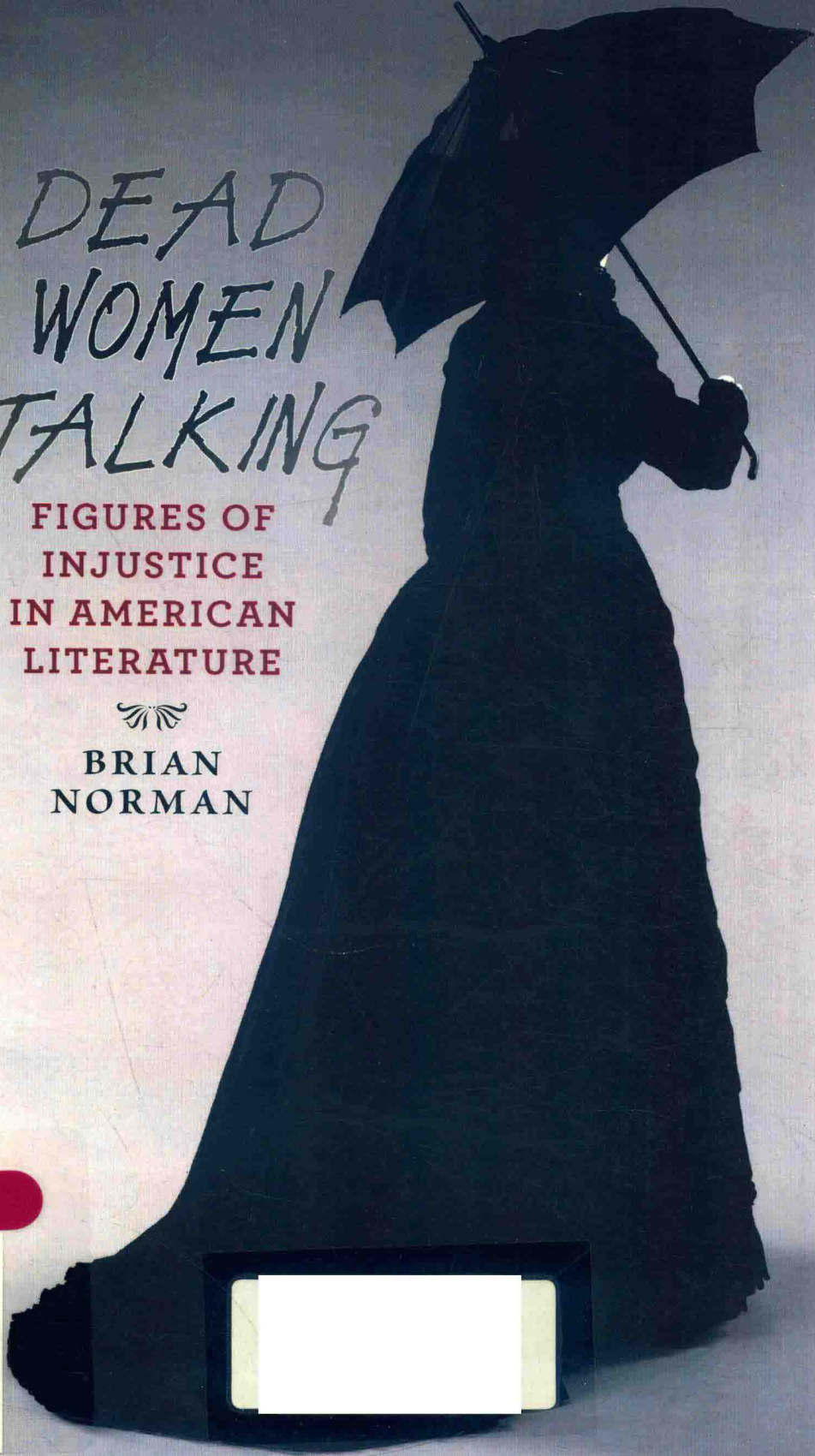


# DEAD WOMEN TALKING

FIGURES OF  
INJUSTICE  
IN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE



BRIAN  
NORMAN



# **Dead Women Talking**

Figures of Injustice in American Literature



**BRIAN NORMAN**

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# DEAD WOMEN TALKING

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## Recognizing the Dead

As a general rule, dead women are rather quiet. The same goes for dead men. But in American literature, the dead talk more often than we might expect—especially women. They appear in works by such classic American writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and William Faulkner, as well as in more recent work by Toni Morrison, Tony Kushner, and Alice Walker, among many others. Now, it is almost old hat when dead women talk in contemporary literature and popular culture, from Alice Sebold's best-selling novel *The Lovely Bones* to the hit television dramas *Desperate Housewives* and *Drop Dead Diva*. What are we to make of all these women?

Collectively, these dead women, at least the more literary ones, constitute a tradition in which writers address pressing social issues that refuse to stay dead. When they talk, they speak not only to their own lives but also to matters of justice, history, and dearly held national ideals—whether the community welcomes it or not. Thus, writers stage encounters with that which should be past but has not passed. For instance, an American narrator encounters atrophied lines of aristocratic privilege in Poe's 1839 tale "The Fall of the House of Usher." Or, in Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, a mother confronts slavery's legacy a generation after its demise. And in Kushner's *Angels in America*, Ethel Rosenberg sits at the deathbed of Roy Cohn in Reagan-era America, taunting the man who orchestrated her notorious McCarthy-era execution.

Dead women tend to talk in American literature when their experiences of death can address an issue of injustice that their communities might prematurely consign to the past. When declarations of injustice's end do not coincide with the achievement of actual justice, the resulting gaps create spaces from which these women speak. In a meditation on death and subjectivity, theorist Colin Davis asks, "Can the Dead Speak to Us?" He suggests that we



are more likely to hear our own words imposed on the dead, though their traces may be found in moments of surprise, that which we can't anticipate.<sup>1</sup> Inside literary worlds, though, dead women need not wait for a discerning listener attentive to the indirect and unexpected, nor must they accept the passivity their deceased status entails. They can speak for themselves. In doing so, they raise questions about gender and voice, sexual violence and nonnormative sexuality, class privilege and cross-class contact, reparations for past racial injustices, and the immigrant's fraught relationship with national identity, among other pressing concerns.

Of all the examples of dead women talking in American literature, *Beloved* stands as the prototypical example. Long after Sethe, an escaped slave, commits the horrific act of infanticide to spare her daughter from life as chattel, *Beloved* returns full-grown and with an insatiable hunger. The murdered girl-child is neither mere corpse nor figure of speech. Denver, *Beloved*'s surviving sister, describes her as a "greedy ghost,"<sup>2</sup> but that category, too, is insufficient. Paul D asks, "You think she sure 'nough your sister?" Denver responds, "At times. At times I think she was—more" (314). *Beloved*'s power derives in part from her inability to be categorized. So too, her fellow dead women talking arise as unfamiliar, strange figures, often disrupting an otherwise realist mode underpinning the story. They resemble such familiar figures as ghosts, zombies, spirits, revenants, vampires, mediums, mythical figures, and even corpses, but they are more. The horror of *Beloved* is not only that the dead woman has a body and talks but that she seeks membership in and recognition by a living, present community. She is not sequestered in dead spaces such as a tomb or even the slave ship's hull. Nor is she an abstract allegory of the past or synecdoche of black suffering in general. She is not content to stay in the realm of the dead, to speak from her tombstone as in Edgar Lee Masters's popular 1915 sequence of epitaph poems in *Spoon River Anthology*, or to relive past experience as a dead watcher as in Thornton Wilder's 1938 play *Our Town*. Rather, as I will argue in chapter five, *Beloved* inserts herself into the community in search of something else: citizenship.

The appeal for a posthumous form of citizenship may seem more pedestrian than that of, say, a vampire in search of blood, but such a request requires that the community reconceive itself to endow such recognition. What these women seek turns out to be the inverse of what Russ Castronovo calls *necro citizenship*. "The U.S. democratic state loves its citizens as passive subjects," he argues, "unresponsive to political issues, unmoved by social stimuli, and

unaroused by enduring injustices.”<sup>3</sup> He points to Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 classic *The Scarlet Letter* as a sort of “walking corpse” who inhabits the public sphere of a community without its attendant rights and recognitions.<sup>4</sup> Castronovo is extending the concept of civil death and following such influential work as Orlando Patterson on “social death,” which describes those living bodies, such as slaves, who are not enlivened by the rights doled out by the state.<sup>5</sup> Beloved, however, is no metaphorical corpse—she is in fact dead. Further and more importantly, what is so inexcusable to the community is that Beloved, like her counterparts, demands active participation in a community that might prefer her absence, silence, or acquiescence. As Ella explains in Morrison’s novel, “But if it took flesh and came in her 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” (302).

Generally, within modern doctrines of natural rights, to be recognized as a formal member of a political community—that is, citizenship—one must have a body. We see this in contemporary debates about legal rights of the unborn, as well as in long and varied histories of parceling citizenship rights based on the race, gender, and so forth assigned to different bodies.<sup>6</sup> Whether we are speaking of membership in a national community or more local forms of community, the body is the entry ticket. The bodies of dead women who talk must be recognized as one of the community’s own, a fictional corollary to the legal exercise of identifying a body at the morgue. Further, their bodies are often uncanny and bear marks of past struggles and social anxieties. In *Beloved*, for instance, the community around 124 Bluestone Road encounters the strangely adult body bearing a familiar scar across her neck. Beyond that iconic example, we encounter a body allergic to the stench of the living in a novel by Ana Castillo, a young boy’s body housing a woman’s knowledge in a story by Randall Kenan, and a wailing and bloodied body shrouded in white in Poe’s tale. On the other hand, even before Addie Bundren dies in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, her bones are a desiccated bundle of sticks. Addie is a corpse long before the moment of her death, not to mention her posthumous monologue. In fact, as many have noted, Addie’s corpse is much more active than she herself was in life.

Can, will, or should a community recognize such dead women’s bids for citizenship? Many of these dead women are not terribly pleasant. Beloved is greedy and perhaps grotesque in her strange plumpness, not to mention her disturbing refrain, “I am Beloved and she is mine” (243, 248). She is in good

company: Madeline Usher is off-putting with her pallid body and incoherent wail; Addie Bundren reveals a surprising depth of bitterness and sadism in her posthumous chapter; in Suzan-Lori Parks's 2003 revision of Faulkner, *Getting Mother's Body*, Willa Mae Beede really is as trashy as they say underneath her pluck and charm; one of Castillo's dead women in the 1993 novel *So Far from God* is unrepentantly misanthropic; and Sebold's adolescent protagonist is, well, adolescent. Further, some dead women are downright gossipy and mean-spirited, as we see in Kenan's and Kushner's works. But surely recognition by a community should not depend on being pleasant.

Recognizing the dead comes with its risks and rewards, for in doing so communities may become—reluctantly or not—akin to what Joseph Roach calls “cities of the dead.” “Cities of the dead,” Roach explains in his landmark study of death rituals in the Atlantic world, “are primarily for the living. They exist not only as artifacts, such as cemeteries and commemorative landmarks, but also as behaviors. They endure, in other words, as occasions for memory and invention.”<sup>7</sup> For Roach, this is largely a welcome prospect: he looks to performances and sites of memory to counteract the forgetting central to modern power, especially colonial whiteness. In the American literary tradition of dead women talking, such women demand much more than commemoration on the part of the living. The invention they demand is what they were denied in life: social justice. But if we confer citizenship upon the dead, their narratives ask, might we risk becoming necro citizens ourselves, mere denizens of a present hamstrung by the past?

Dead women such as *Beloved* constitute a curious, uncanny kind of potential citizen. Paul D says, “She reminds me of something. Something, look like, I’m supposed to remember” (276). These women are “something,” but they are also inexplicable. To describe *Beloved* as merely a ghost is to dismiss her. As Anne Cubilié argues about survivors who testify about atrocities, “To name a woman a ‘ghost’ . . . not only removes her (again) from the human but privileges her speech as that which comes from the realm of the dead or the uncanny.”<sup>8</sup> While the women in this book may in fact be both dead and uncanny, they refuse such designation and demand a presence in their living communities. The larger narratives tend to acknowledge the uncanny or fantastical nature of these talking dead women, while also making room for them, insisting on their place in a realist world. A good example is the frame tale for James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw*, which explicitly distinguishes its dead

from the stuff of generic ghost stories and folk legends. Therefore, I am being as precise as possible in describing these figures as dead women talking. That is how these narratives understand them. It is odd that they are dead. It is sometimes odd that they are women. And it is definitely odd that they are talking. Making sense of them entails making sense of the systems of injustice that gave rise to each bewildering figure in the first place.

## Of Ghosts, Corpses, and Their Kin

Scholars have mostly approached this topic from two angles: the corpse and the ghost. When scholars focus on the corpse, this can lead to more abstract questions about death and its representation, or what classicists call *ars moriendi*.<sup>9</sup> Or, as Elisabeth Bronfen illustrates in her study of dead women in Western art and literature, when scholars approach the female corpse, psychoanalysis and deconstruction have been the go-to theoretical apparatuses because they get at the intertwined structures of social power and symbolic representation. Scholars have also done terrific cultural studies of the corpse, be it real or symbolic, such as Karla FC Holloway's compelling study of the African American funeral business<sup>10</sup> and Michael Kammen's social history of notable reburials in America.<sup>11</sup>

Yet what happens when the dead become or remain animate, no longer inert, if exquisite, corpses? This often leads to the second approach: ghosts and their kin (revenants, vampires, and so on). Ghosts are plentiful in American and British literature, especially in women's writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the ghost story enjoyed a resurgence, led especially by such writers as Edith Wharton, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.<sup>12</sup> Gothic literature scholar Kathy Justice Gentile sees such ghost stories as "supernatural commentaries on gendered fin de siècle anxieties."<sup>13</sup> Ghost stories have long helped a nation work through all manner of anxieties about identitarian ties, be they welcome or repressed, acknowledged or buried. Literary critic Kathleen Brogan explains that the ghost story was subsequently reinvented by the modernists, who were inspired by Freudian-era psychology and its vision of an internally haunted self. Then, she argues, ghost stories became prominent in twentieth-century American ethnic literatures because they enact how shared histories are recalled and reshaped in the present. In such stories of "cultural haunting,"

ghosts are a trope for “acculturation and cultural transmission in a polyethnic society” so that “the bloodline family ghosts of different ethnic groups belong in fact to the same cross-cultural genre.”<sup>14</sup>

Ghosts and corpses have proved good fodder for theories of justice, power, and inequality. Sociologist Avery Gordon argues that haunting is one of the ways that systems of oppression and exploitation make themselves known in everyday life.<sup>15</sup> So too, feminist and queer theorist Sharon Patricia Holland argues that literary encounters with the dead equip us to listen to the silenced and bring voice to the voiceless.<sup>16</sup> Such cultural studies fit well within studies of death and biopower, such as Vincent Brown’s persuasive account of the “mortuary politics” of black Atlantic slavery cultures<sup>17</sup> and Achille Mbembé’s theory of “necropolitics” and the creation of “death-worlds” among the living.<sup>18</sup> Such thinking has a long pedigree in critical theory, from Hegel to Foucault to Agamben. In “On the Theory of Ghosts,” a draft note for *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that ghosts are more than a return of the hated, the primitive, or the repressed in the individual psyche, as in Freudian thinking. Such figures, they suggest, signal how humans have become detached from history, including through modern practices of funeral rituals and beautified corpses. “Only conscious horror of destruction,” they argue, “creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same conditions and the same disappointed hope.”<sup>19</sup>

But what about when ghosts cease to be the ethereal stuff of spooks or mute cadavers and become something else—embodied, talking, and wanting more? They are closer to what feminist literary theorist Diana Fuss deems “speaking cadavers,” Claire Raymond calls “posthumous voices,” Mary Worthington calls “posthumous postures,” Janice McLarren Caldwell calls “animated cadavers,” and Lisa Perdigao and Mark Pizzato call “reanimated dead.”<sup>20</sup> Some see the potential for agency in such women,<sup>21</sup> though a rush to celebrate them may overlook the troublesome fine print that death is prerequisite to achieving voice or agency. Fuss asks, “Why, and when, is a dead voice more appropriate than a live one? What does speaking through the fictional persona of a cadaver allow poets to achieve that writing in their own living voices apparently prohibits?”<sup>22</sup> Fuss’s inquiry leads to elegies and poetic acts of apostrophe and prosopopoeia, when speakers throw their voices into the wind, personify the dead, or take on the voice of a corpse, which she finds particularly prominent in nineteenth-century lyric poetry.<sup>23</sup> This book builds on such work as it aims

for a more comprehensive account of what happens when corpses speak for themselves in American literature, especially in more recent fiction. Fuss locates most of her voices in the tomb, while Raymond considers disembodied posthumous voices. The latter are especially close kin to ghosts and an end-run around a key mode of feminine subjection, what Worthington calls "the problem of the body."<sup>24</sup> In these cases, the body is a prop or an impediment. The women in my study, on the other hand, typically inhabit very real, often conspicuous bodies as they seek entrance into living communities. When such women talk, they 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.

I cover a lot of ground as I track this curiously pervasive and recurring figure in American literature. The tradition crosses eras, identities, genres, sensibilities, and movements, from the nineteenth-century gothic tale to modernist experimentation to the postmodern sublime. Too much ground, some may object. Still, I could go even further and place these talking dead in a much longer line back to mythic figures of antiquity. In that vein, one is more likely to find a posthumous voice that is not her own, without body, or somehow removed from the community of the living. For instance, *prosopopoeia*, a device from classical Greek rhetoric and popular among the romantic poets, can locate a voice in a corpse, but ultimately it is an act of ventriloquism: the corpse is a mask or a persona for the speaker. Or we may encounter pure voice, as in the case of Ovid's *Echo*, whose body, rejected by *Narcissus*, withers away until all that remains is a lone voice, condemned to be a mere reverberation of another's. Sometimes we encounter such women beyond the world of the living in heaven or the underworld, as in the case of H.D.'s "Eurydice," a 1916 persona poem in the voice of the mythical woman left behind in Hades by *Orpheus*. The best classical forebear may be Euripides's *Alcestis* when she goes to Hades in place of her husband, who in turn promises to not replace her. When *Heracles* confronts Death in order to restore *Alcestis* to her husband, the returned wife is initially veiled and silent, unrecognizable and unable—at least initially—to resume her place among the living. While this classical dead woman eventually talks and tentatively rejoins the community, the dead women in this project are less hesitant, and often insistent. Sometimes they are downright bold as they return with both body and voice to claim citizenship among the living. *Antigone* is another classical precursor

because, while not dead herself, she seeks an ethical space outside her community and Creon's legal regime to honor the dead.<sup>25</sup> The dead women in this study, in contrast, seek a place *within* their communities and often the legal apparatus itself.

I could also trace these talking dead to classical elegiac traditions in Virgil and others, or iconic dead men in the Western tradition, such as the ghost of Hamlet's father, Dr. Frankenstein's monster, Lazarus resurrected, or even Jesus Christ after crucifixion. Or I could move outside Western traditions, perhaps to *vodun* concepts of the undead, which would lead in turn to African-derived tropes. Or I could place these women among more contemporary vampires and ghosts, the stuff of *Dracula* knockoffs, Scooby-Doo mysteries, or the *Twilight* phenomenon. Indeed, modern readers are well equipped to make sense of Anne Rice's vampires or Angela Carter's feminist reinventions of fairy tale characters, Catherine's ghost in *Wuthering Heights* in British gothic fiction, or, as an interesting limit case, the ghost-women at the end of Toni Morrison's 1998 novel *Paradise*. These female vampires or ghosts are not dead women talking per se; they are, ultimately, female vampires or ghosts. While many of these examples are interesting reinventions of familiar categories, as akin to the black Frankenstein metaphor that Elizabeth Young traces in American literature,<sup>26</sup> such animated dead are nonetheless recognizable, even expected, by those readers well versed in convention.

A key question remains: why women? Several of the examples I note above are men, most notably *Hamlet*'s ghost and Jesus Christ. And we can find many more in the period covered by this study, from Poe's 1838 novel *Arthur Gordon Pym*, in which the titular character escapes a mutiny by masquerading as a recently dead man, to Joe Gillis narrating his life and eventual murder in Billy Wilder's 1950 film noir *Sunset Boulevard*, to Jim Grimsley's contemporary gay coming-of-age novel *Dream Boy* featuring a possibly haunted plantation house. In fact, there are talking dead men in two of the works featured in this study, Kenan's *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* and Kushner's *Angels in America*. Still, talking dead women maintain prominence in American literature. Even within the Kenan and Kushner examples, the dead women have a distinct status, in both narrative function and social justice concerns. In part, the question of gender points us to the oft-noted and long-studied cultural association between femininity and death. In a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* on "Death in the Novel," Diana York Blaine notes how "death and the feminine are nearly always aligned,"<sup>27</sup> which prompts questions about women's agency in addition

to formal questions about how to narrate the unnarratable. Carolyn Dever goes one step further to observe that death and mothers in particular are intertwined.<sup>28</sup> Dead women have long been the subject of distinct artistic fascination, so much so that Bronfen finds that the female corpse is a long-standing object of wonder and dread in Western culture, an object to behold as its morbid beauty veers into the sublime.<sup>29</sup> From this backdrop, dead women come to be associated with both silence and collective histories of injustice, which is why not only their dead status but also their speech is so powerful. It is no coincidence that the two examples furthest from speech and self-awareness—Madeline Usher and James's governess—are also furthest from the social justice concerns that become central to the literary tradition as it develops.

With all these precursors and corollaries in mind, I trace a distinct American literary tradition concerned with questions of national belonging. These dead women talking in American literature do not fit—and often explicitly resist—familiar tropes of gothic, horror, and mythic modes. In the end, they seek agency not as ghosts or other tropes readily accessible in the literary imagination but rather as citizens, which is ultimately more disturbing to the communities from whom they seek recognition.

### Dead Housewives, a Buzzing Fly, and Lady Lazarus

Dead women now talk routinely in contemporary popular culture. In addition to Mary Alice Young, the dead narrator of the hit series *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), the talking dead appear all over prime-time television and premium cable. Prominent examples include *Six Feet Under*, a drama series about a family-run mortuary business that ran on HBO from 2001 to 2005 and that regularly featured talking cadavers in literally portrayed day-dream sequences; *Pushing Daisies* (2008–2009), a short-lived but high-budget network comedy series in which a pie baker can bring the dead back to life, including his sidekick lover Charlotte “Chuck” Charles; and *Drop Dead Diva* (2009–present), a feel-good show on the Lifetime network about a shallow model who dies and comes back in the body of an overweight lawyer. Horror films, of course, have long featured reanimated dead. In *The Others*, a particularly artful example from 2001, the matriarch played by Nicole Kidman struggles to protect her children by ridding her British manor of ghosts only to find in the end that she is the ghost haunting another family. Beyond the horror



genre, Hollywood has long provided milquetoast examples, such as the 1992 screwball comedy *Death Becomes Her* featuring Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn trying desperately to retain their beauty as their corpses fall apart, literally. And one can't forget the 1987 romantic comedy *Mannequin* about a mall employee's romance with the eponymous mannequin played by Kim Cattrall, who turns out to be an ancient Egyptian woman who now helps the affable hero design attention-grabbing window displays.

There are, of course, plenty of examples of dead men talking, including in some of the above examples. In fact, they create some weird moments in American popular culture, such as Natalie Cole's posthumous duet with her father Nat King Cole for the hit song "Unforgettable," which she performed at the 1992 Grammy Awards accompanied by film of her father projected on a giant screen. In a strange reprisal, Janet Jackson danced with her recently deceased brother Michael at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards. Likewise, Elton John teamed up with a deceased Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, and Louis Armstrong to peddle Diet Coke in a 1991 commercial. Soon advertisers used technology to exhumate departed celebrities to hock all sorts of wares, such as John Wayne in a 1996 Coors beer advertisement and Fred Astaire's bizarre posthumous endorsement of Dirt Devil in 1997. Perhaps the most uncanny example is Nike's 2010 "ghost dad" commercial featuring the voice of the deceased father of Tiger Woods scolding his son in the wake of a highly public sex scandal. As the black-and-white camera pans in, the adult son looks straight into the lens and we become the disappointed father reprimanding the philandering son while, Nike hopes, also implicitly forgiving him. Yet we are of course *not* the father of Tiger Woods. Therefore, we also feel uneasy overhearing this private moment, an unease that becomes doubly uncanny given the way Nike employs a dead man as the voice of a nation's moral authority.

Such posthumous product testimonials prompt discussions, not to mention legal quandaries, about the rights of the dead,<sup>30</sup> especially when the gigs seem out of step with or beneath rightful legacies. The fictional examples, on the other hand, play with gendered scripts as the dead women interrupt otherwise conventional genres such as heterosexual romances. They may nudge living communities to diagnose their own social ills, be it the stultifying boredom of a shiny suburban existence in *Desperate Housewives* or, if we push it, the ahistorical and inhuman plasticity of 1980s consumer culture in *Mannequin*. Of course, these examples rarely venture into even the shallow end of