

Specters of Racial Trauma in *Beloved*, “Strange Fruit” and “Paris is Burning”

by

Marlene Z Anderson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in Race and Ethnic Studies.

Whitman College
2019

Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Marlene Z Anderson has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Race and Ethnic Studies.

Nicole Simek

Whitman College
May 08, 2019

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Acknowledgements

To my mother and sister, thank you for all the support. Those late night phone calls full of encouragement and kind words have kept me going. I love you both so much.

I'm grateful for Tarik Elseewi. Thank you for reigniting my passion for film. I would not have thought to write about "Paris is Burning" without you re-connecting me with my love of thinking and writing about film in your Middle Eastern Film and Media course. Thank you for always asking tough questions and pushing my thinking to new horizons.

To my major advisor, Zahi Zalloua, thank you for always valuing me as a scholar even when I was at my worst. Your faith in me inspires me to work and think harder. Since my first year you have nurtured my intellectual curiosity, answered my silly questions and supported me as a scholar and a person. As one of the smartest people I know, you never made me feel stupid instead you inspired me to challenge myself. Thank you.

My thesis advisor, Nicole Simek: words fail here because I literally could not have done this project without your patience, your brilliant mind and your kind heart. You kept me sane through this arduous process, you listened to my ramblings and helped shape them into actual arguments. Every time I started to panic, you were there: reassuring me and guiding me. Taking your Race, Trauma, Narrative course was the beginning of my thinking on this subject and it's only right that you are here with me at the completion of my thesis project. Your teaching, mentoring and scholarship have helped me to

understand my own relationship with trauma both personally and as a scholar. I will always be grateful to have been your student and advisee.

Thank you to all my mentors and my community for sustaining me. Kyle Martz, thank you for commiserating with me over writing two theses at the same time. Barbara Maxwell, thank you for always believing in me. Teresa Maddess, thank you for always checking on me. To my Gender Studies and Race and Ethnic Studies seniors, thanks for sharing this experience and a glass of wine (or two!).

I'm grateful for the confluence of events that caused me to declare Race and Ethnic Studies as my second major during my Junior year. I'm so happy to have had the opportunity to take more Race and Ethnic Studies courses and to be allowed to write this thesis.

Abstract

In my thesis, I analyze the 1987 novel by Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Jennie Livingston's 1990 film "Paris is Burning" and the song by Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit," first recorded in 1939, for the spectral nature of racial trauma. I argue that the ghosts in these texts elucidate the liminal quality of racial trauma. I utilize three key paradoxes; life and death, past and present and visible and invisible. In using these categories, I am able to analyze the function of ghosts in the texts. I conclude that ghosts start a conversation that exposes racial trauma's marginalized nature. This spectral communication opens up a process of working through that includes mourning, storytelling and connect with community. Each text makes gestures towards working through and its components. However, none of the pieces offer a neat conclusion to working through. Rather, the ghosts continue to do their work in communicating racial trauma, telling stories of trauma, mourning traumatic violence and connecting with community. My project offers three case studies of spectral racial trauma that ask for critical attention on ghosts and their communicative ability so that processes of working through can occur.

Introduction

What makes one describe something as “haunting”? Be it in songs, films, or stories, ghosts are present in many cultural forms. These specters evoke feelings of the uncanny, of the past visiting the present, and the undead. Legacies of racial violence haunt the U.S. and its cultural productions; from slavery to lynching to racialized poverty, our present and our cultural forms are saturated with ghosts. Ghosts demand recognition. This project engages such ghosts in cultural forms.

I analyze the 1987 novel by Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Jennie Livingston’s 1990 film “Paris is Burning” and the song by Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit,” first recorded in 1939, for the spectral nature of racial trauma. *Beloved* follows the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road in Ohio after their escape from slavery. The house is haunted by the ghost of Sethe’s eldest daughter who, it is revealed, Sethe murdered to keep her from being re-enslaved. The spectral and intergenerational nature of racial trauma from slavery is central to the book. “Paris is Burning” is a documentary film by Jenny Livingston following the New York City ball scene in the 1980s and its performers, queer and trans* people of color. Drag performers are interviewed about their participation in balls and their alternative kinship models called “Houses,” where drag “Mothers” mentor and protect younger wannabe performers as they try to survive intersecting oppressions along the line of class, race, gender and sexuality. Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” is an anti-lynching anthem that brutally and poetically describes the violence experienced by black bodies in the “pastoral” South. The song was based on a poem by Lewis Allen. In his book of the same title, David Margolick says that the literal lynchings in the song connect to other metaphorical lynchings of racial violence. These “other kinds of lynching” took

the form of harassment, segregation and discrimination, like the racist treatment Holiday's father received in a segregated hospital until he ultimately died (60). This experience in part motivated Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit"; Holiday is quoted as saying "When he [Lewis Allen] showed me the poem, I dug it right off. It seemed to spell out all the things that had killed Pop" (32). The racial trauma of lynching and other racist violences haunt Holiday's song lyrically just as her performance is sonically haunted.

These three objects offer differing examples of haunting in diverse forms; film, song, and novel. The ghostly in *Beloved* is very strong and invites analysis of the ghostly characters as well as the haunting trauma of slavery. "Strange Fruit" is often described as haunting, I get chills every time I hear it. The acknowledgement that this song aurally and lyrically produces something ghostly invited me to think about the racial trauma of lynching. "Paris is Burning" is a profoundly intersectional look at racial trauma, calling up ghosts of racism, homophobia, cissexism, and classism. By analyzing three different cultural forms, I am able to map the spectral across different mediums.

These three cultural forms provoke many questions about racial trauma and the spectral. I ask: What is the relationship between hauntings and racial trauma as represented in cultural forms? How can specters communicate racial trauma or enable a working through of racial trauma? Hauntings elucidate the paradoxes in racial trauma, the inbetweenness, and the liminal because they exist at the intersections of life and death, past and present and visible and invisible. Ghosts start a conversation that exposes racial trauma's marginalized nature. This spectral communication opens up a process of working through and a space for traumatized subjects to connect with community. Understanding the spectral is vital to my project. In *Her Shape and His Hand*, Avery

Gordon provides a clear definition of specters and haunting that I find useful for my project. She writes:

What kind of case is a case of a ghost? It is a case of haunting, a story about what happens when we admit the ghost--that special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present-- into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world. It is a case of the difference it makes to start with the marginal, with what we normally exclude or banish, or, more commonly, with what we never even notice. (120)

Ghosts admit the excluded and silenced into our understandings of worldly relations, racial trauma being a significant dimension of those relations. Racial trauma that goes unnoticed or marginalized, like representations of slavery, lynching or the invisibilized systemic racialized poverty, can be communicated by ghosts in cultural forms.

This definition also sets out categories of analysis that I utilize in my readings of the three texts. First, there is the category of the visible/invisible which prompts me to ask: how might ghosts complicate discrete notions of visibility and invisibility? How might ghosts interrupt the binary between the two so as to perform their work? Second is the liminal space between the living and the dead; how are ghosts partial resurrections of beings or ideas from beyond? Third, the past and the present are especially interesting to me when thinking about intergenerational and historical trauma manifesting as ghosts. In their study *The Ghostly and the Ghosted in Literature and Film*, Lisa Kroger and Melanie Anderson write through these same three themes of the ghostly, highlighting the in-between paradoxical nature of the ghosts: “Because of their tendencies to defy the

permanence of death, ghosts have long been considered denizens of the shadows, the areas ‘betwixt and between’” (ix). Ghosts resist the finality of death to instead exist between life and death. The spectral at once exists in the margins and demands a confrontation with the marginalized. Temporality is also of interest to Kroger and Anderson; they write that “*With ghosts the past is never over*, the present is never secure, and the future is certain only of the spectral return” (emphasis added, x). Temporality is muddled and complicated by the power of the spectral. The past bleeds into the present which is unsettled by that very intrusion while the future is uncertain. Finally, these two authors also deal with the invisible/visible paradox by exploring the way that the ghost can bring to light that which has been hidden or repressed: “The ghost is a signal of ambiguity and of the ineffable. It is the sign of something- any person, or group, or cultural moment- that, largely ignored or repressed by the society in which it participates, refuses to be marginalized any longer, but pushes to be recognized”(xii). The ghostly resistance to repression is vital when it is applied to racial trauma, the topic of my project. Ghosts expose the complexities and hiddenness of racial trauma, refusing to be marginalized or forgotten. Rather, I argue that ghosts, and their paradoxes, can communicate racial trauma to the audiences of the cultural forms in a way that starts a conversation that hails the audience without necessarily telling the whole story. Just by attending to the ghost, racial trauma can be admitted into a space where audiences can react and respond. My project argues that by including ghosts, important conversations on racial trauma can be opened up.

To define racial trauma I first look to broader definitions of trauma before specifying the racial element. Cathy Caruth engages a myriad of scholars and experts on

the subject of trauma in the interviews she conducts in *Listening to Trauma* ranging in topic from the Vietnam War to incest. One clear articulation of the nature of trauma comes from an interview with psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, who explains that “in trauma you get overwhelmed by the experience—you cannot put it together” (154). van der Kolk emphasizes that trauma makes it difficult to construct a coherent or clear narrative of the traumatic event. In Caruth’s interview with Geoffrey Hartman titled “Words and Wounds,” Hartman adds that “Trauma is generally defined as an experience that is not experienced, that resists or escapes consciousness” (214)¹. Traumas are not incorporated fully into the being who is traumatized. Rather the trauma haunts the being on the edges of experience very much like a ghost. As Caruth had put it earlier in her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). In this formulation the trauma takes over the person who is traumatized, an experience like being visited by a ghost. It is worth noting that spectral language--terms like “haunting” or “possessed”--is often used to describe the effects of trauma. Caruth goes on to say that “since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (8).² Trauma seems to split a person between times and spaces, making them never fully present and always mediated by their experience of trauma. This shows us how the in-between nature of specters might allow the spectral to engage the traumatic.

¹ This represents a scholarly split between Caruth, van der Kolk and Brison. For Brison, trauma is experienced while Caruth and van der Kolk invest in the un-experienced model. Brison critiques their approach in *Aftermath* (69-70).

² Preceding this quote, Caruth explains the belated nature of trauma. She writes “The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (8). Brison critiques this as generalizing survivors’ experiences. I tend to agree with Brison but Caruth offers an important background that aligns with the spectral.

In her book *Aftermath*, Susan Brison approaches trauma from a different angle, emphasizing instead the relational nature of trauma and how it is experienced as a disruption of the ability to make sense of ourselves and the world. She writes “trauma shatters one’s most fundamental assumptions about the world, including beliefs about our ability to control what happens to us” (xii). The power of trauma to shatter any sense of control over the self magnifies the painful experience and disconnects the self, especially from community. Brison writes, “Victims of human-inflicted trauma are reduced to mere objects by their tormentors: their subjectivity is rendered useless and viewed as worthless. As Herman similarly observes ‘The traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others’” (Brison, 40). Trauma can disrupt subjectivity and attack the psyche of the traumatized by convincing them that they both lack agency and cannot relate to or connect with their community. This is significant when discussing racial trauma because it is often experienced on a community level or as the estrangement from the self and community. Reconnecting with community is one of the prongs of working through trauma that I explore later.

Racial trauma can be defined as a traumatic experience of racism and/or racial violence which disrupts the psyche of people of color. This includes, for my purposes, systemic racial violence like racialized poverty which is a slow form of violence that is still traumatic. In “Racism and Ethnoviolence as Trauma: Enhancing Professional Training” Janet E. Helms, Guerda Nicolas, and Carlton E. Green argue that racism traumatizes communities of color. They write that “racist incidents are traumatic and affect survivors in ways that are analogous to the impact that rape and domestic violence have on those who are victimized. As is the case for rape and domestic violence, racism

may involve physical and psychological assaults that might be overlooked if racism is not considered to be an important cause of physical and emotional distress.”(55) Racial trauma functions like sexual trauma, disrupting the sense of self of victims and causing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Racial violence like that of slavery, lynching or racial discrimination causes the victim to be possessed by the event as well as to experience a rupture of subjecthood and traumatic symptoms.

My project argues that the spectral can help to articulate and communicate unspoken impacts of racial trauma, reconnect communities, and open up space to work through trauma. Ghosts can even help communicate trauma through non-narrative non-linguistic means, making them important for the legibility of trauma, which may escape language. Hauntings in story, song, and film can communicate racial trauma while especially highlighting its complex nature. The spectral admits liminality into the discussion, forcing a confrontation with the messiness of trauma. I contend that this confrontation is vital for both communicating what forms of racial trauma have been experienced as well as opening up space for working through the trauma. One must first grapple with the entirety of the traumatic experience, including its paradoxes, before one can fully engage in working through or its components, storytelling and mourning.

My analysis will engage with the paradoxes of hauntings so as to lay bare the complexities of racial trauma, with the goal of better understanding the different relationships my objects have with working through. The nuanced relationships between past and present, dead and living, and visible and invisible in my three objects open up a conversation on the complexities of racial trauma. Ghosts are liminal beings and therefore offer an excellent way into the fraught and complex nature of racial trauma.

Ghosts allow that which has been hidden or purposefully ignored to be brought into a space of reflection and analysis. But what is the significance of communicating or elucidating trauma? What comes after the communicative and clarifying moment of the ghost? One answer is a working through of trauma. Working through, and to a lesser extent acting out, are ways of dealing with trauma made possible by the spectral and its nuanced analysis. This communicative power of ghosts is significant because of the way it enables working through. Working through trauma involves mourning, storytelling, and (re)connection with community. After expanding upon the significance of working through below, I turn to the three definitional paradoxes of haunting in my three objects--the living/dead, the invisible/visible, and the past/present--so as to explain the power of the spectral to engage with racial trauma. This engagement with trauma is significant because of its relationship to working through.

Chapter 1: Working Through

What is working through? According to Kate Schick in “Acting Out and Working Through: Trauma and (In)Security,” working through is “an ‘articulatory practice’ that gradually enables one to make distinctions between past, present, and future. It is not a linear process, nor can binary distinctions be made between acting out and working through; on the contrary, the process of working through is complex and is never tidily resolved” (1847). Working through is a messy process that holds potential for victims of racial trauma. In working through, traumatized people are able to sort out temporality, grieve their losses, and craft their story. I argue that working through is aided by the inclusion of the spectral. By acknowledging the liminal nature of racial trauma as represented by specters and haunting in cultural forms, these stories, songs, and films can better articulate working through.

The other side of working through is acting out. Historian Dominick LaCapra explains,

In acting-out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed. Mourning involves a different inflection of performativity: a relation to the past that involves recognizing its difference from the present-simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others (716)

Instead of constantly reliving past trauma, working through offers a method of engaging trauma (often through mourning) that allows a victim of trauma to (re)devote themselves to present life and communal bonds. However, acting out is not completely separate from working through; rather, the two work together: “acting-out may well be a necessary condition of working-through, at least for victims. Possession by the past may never be fully overcome or transcended, and working-through may at best enable some distance or critical perspective that is acquired with extreme difficulty and not achieved once and for all” (717). Working through is not a linear progression of healing; instead, it is a fraught process intermingled with acting out. This quote highlights that the trauma of the past may never be fully processed. The figure of the ghost once again has relevance here because of its ability to communicate the complexities and liminal, unfinished nature of trauma. The ghost is both the presence and absence of trauma, just as working through simultaneously exposes and resolves trauma.

Mourning

One specific aspect of working through is mourning (LaCapra, 713). Schick writes that “part of mourning is expressing grief at the pain and loss that one has suffered. This can be enormously difficult for traumatized individuals and groups; part of the experience of trauma is that one’s feelings become difficult to access: individuals feel wooden and severed from reality. In particular, it can be difficult to use words to express feelings” (148). In this linguistic gap resides the ghost. The ghost can express emotions

through haunting, an important undertaking to communicate the pain of trauma which escapes language.

In “Trauma, Absence, Loss”, LaCapra offers important thoughts on working through especially as it relates to mourning: “Mourning brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again” (66). In this way, mourning might be vital as a means of responding to trauma - not in a way that resolves the pain of trauma completely but in a manner that allows the traumatic events to begin to be processed. LaCapra goes on to describe memory work as part of working through with the result that “one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one’s people) back then which is related to, but not identical with, here and now” (66). In my analysis, ghosts demonstrate the complex temporality of trauma, of the troubling of discrete boundaries between past, present and future that occurs under racial trauma. By recognizing the ghostly connections between past and present forged by racial trauma, only then can one take on the process of separating temporalities and working through.

Storytelling

Susan Brison explains the way that working through functions in relation to crafting and telling one’s story. She writes: “It may be that the performative, healing aspect of trauma testimonies is distinct from their functioning as reports of historical fact. That is, the same utterance could be (at least) two kinds of speech act: one of bearing witness (describing events that occurred) and one of *narrating or working through (and thus transforming) traumatic memories*” (emphasis added, 72). Working through via

narration has the power to transform traumatic memories, to change the relationship between the traumatized subject and their trauma so that the traumatized can better live with their trauma. Working through does not erase the traumatic experience nor does it completely heal the traumatized; rather, working through is a process involving mourning which enables a healthier relationship with one's trauma. It is important to note that in my work, acknowledging and admitting specters is a prerequisite to working through. Only by first engaging with the liminal nature of racial trauma and its haunting qualities can a mourning or distinguishing occur.

Storytelling can even be “central” to the mourning process as Schick notes, for it performs “‘work of reconstruction’ that transforms the traumatic memory and enables it to be incorporated into the traumatised individual’s life story” (1849). Like a ghost story, trauma stories connect audiences to communities. The crafting of trauma narratives by victims is a potentially transformational process that can enable working through. Ghosts expose the materiality of trauma, enabling the traumatized to recognize and grapple with their traumatic experience. This precedes the storytelling process which can occur as part of working through. Crafting a story about trauma can involve the summoning and marshaling of ghosts.

Importantly, storytelling does not happen in a vacuum; rather stories beg for an audience. Schick writes, “The storytelling process is communal: without an audience, be it one person or many, it loses much of its power” (1850). Working through via storytelling is thus a relational project. Audiences to the tellings participate in the working through process of the traumatized individual. Telling asks a community to listen and empathize, a process which can be cathartic for the teller of the story and the

audience who participate in receiving the story. Each of my three objects participates in a form of telling and each has audiences, though they function in different ways due to their differing forms. *Beloved* as a novel does a different form of telling for readers than the live performances of “Strange Fruit” or the multiple audiences in a film screening who experience “Paris is Burning” both “together” and from different subject positions. Novels are typically read individually while groups often gather for film screenings. Audiences are impacted differently and affectively by these various tellings.

As established, mourning and storytelling require a relational and communal component. The three texts examined here show us different aspects of this relationality. In *Beloved*, the black community rallies around Denver and Sethe. The community provides food and employment to Denver when she works up the courage to ask for help. The houses in “Paris is Burning” with their “mothers” serve as alternative kinship arrangements, forging community even among rival houses. “Strange Fruit” forges an audience of listeners who experience the song and its call for empathy and action; an engaged community crafted by her performance. From the lyrics to the musicality, “Strange Fruit’s” haunting quality demands of its audience a response to the racial trauma that is the topic of the song.

In sum, ghosts express trauma through liminal paradoxes. They communicate the nuances of trauma in cultural forms so that working through may enter the conversation. My project does not resolve the racial trauma present in the three texts; rather I offer a reading of ghosts which attends to their role in communicating the traumatic to audiences. This reading opens up space for mourning, storytelling, and working through. In this study, I understand working through to be one possible place that ghosts lead us,

which ghosts prepare us for. In order to evoke working through, it is important to first engage the ghostly paradoxes that explicate racial trauma: the coexistence in this trauma of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, and the past and the present.

Chapter 2: Visible/Invisible- Racial Trauma in the Margins

The visible and invisible paradox of a haunting is important for understanding racial trauma because of the way this trauma is often marginalized and hidden. Kroger and Anderson explain, “The ghost is a signal of ambiguity and of the ineffable. It is the sign of something- any person, or group, or cultural moment- that, largely ignored or repressed by the society in which it participates, refuses to be marginalized any longer, but pushes to be recognized”(Kroger and Anderson,xii). The ignored, marginalized, and unseen nature of racial trauma is challenged by the invocation of the ghostly visible/invisible paradox. To look at the places that are traditionally invisible is a productive project that resurrects the ghostly. This section will explore such places, attending closely to the invisible and visible specters in “Paris is Burning,” *Beloved*, and “Strange Fruit.”

Beloved

In *Beloved*, there are many examples of the visible and invisible tied to haunting. The quintessential example from the opening illustrates this paradox well. The baby ghost starts the novel between visibility and invisibility. It commits violence while invisible, from shattering mirrors to throwing the dog so hard its eye comes out (Morrison, 3). The ghosts haunt the house, causing nuisances: “Together [Sethe and Denver] waged a

perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air” (4). These invisibly perpetrated actions still establish the presence of the ghost, however.

When Paul D arrives and enters the house the ghost takes a visible form: “[Paul D] followed [Sethe] through the door straight into a pool of red undulating light that locked him where he stood” (10). The invisible ghost takes the visible form of red light with the power to control his body. This ghostly action is physical but also profoundly emotional: “Walking through it, a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry...Paul D looked at the spot where the grief had soaked him. The red was gone but a kind of weeping clung to the air where it had been” (11). The red light is a visible manifestation of the pain and grief of the baby ghost. In these opening pages of the novel the ghost goes from being described as invisible to visible and grief is materially manifested in the weeping and the language of “soaking” Paul D. The ghost is taken out of the margins with the arrival of Paul D, taking on a visible form of its trauma.

This visibility becomes even more pronounced with the arrival of Beloved in her full corporeal form, “a fully dressed woman” described as having “walked out of the water” (Morrison, 60). With this line, the fully visible and material ghost is manifested. The appearance of the physical ghost indicates that there are different types of ghostly manifestation in the novel. There is the visible ghost that acts upon the material in the opening which then transforms into the red light ghost who affects emotions and bodies. These two types of ghosts are joined by the fully corporeal figure of Beloved.

Another example of the paradox of the invisible and visible arises around the ghostly choking of Sethe. A conversation between the accusing Denver and the defensive Beloved illustrates an example of the unseen verging on the seen;

‘You did it, I saw you’ said Denver. ‘What’ ‘I saw your face. You made her choke.’ ‘I didn’t do it’ ‘You told me you loved her.’ ‘I fixed it,didn’t I? Didn’t I fix her neck?’ ‘After. After you choked her neck’ (119).

This passage marks an argument over the seen-ness of Beloved’s violence against Sethe. Denver proclaims “I saw you,” then clarifies “I saw your face.” Beloved’s supernatural powers did the violence in an unseen way; however, Denver is able to “see” Beloved’s actions on her face. The invisible nature of Beloved’s violence as a ghostly figure exemplifies the invisible, while Denver’s ability to “see” through Beloved shows the complicated relationship between the visible and invisible violence against Sethe.

The negotiation of the visible and invisible is demonstrated in the haunted nature of Sethe’s very flesh. Her scarred back from her beating at Sweet Home before her escape are invisible to her, experienced but unseen by her. They are usually hidden beneath clothing thus usually unseen to others, however, Paul D uncovers them. In the kitchen, Paul D unhooks Sethe’s dress and bears witness to her scars:

He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way of her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. Raising his fingers to the hooks of her dress, he knew without seeing them or hearing any sigh that the tears were coming fast. And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say ‘Aw, Lord, girl.’ And he would

tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years (21).

Sethe's scars are invisible to her. While she knows they exist because of her violent experience of receiving them, she can only understand them through the eyes of others. She is told it looks like a tree. Paul D thinks it looks like a sculpture. The visibility of her scars, a kind of proof of her trauma, is always mediated through others. Not only is her back unseen to her, but Sethe's back skin is described as being "dead for years." She is numb to this mark of her terrible trauma which has become a normalized part of her traumatic existence. Her scars are invisible, unseen to her but when viewed by others they become hypervisible nodes of trauma.

"Paris is Burning"

In "Paris is Burning" the paradox of visibility is slightly different because of its inclusion of hypervisibility. In this film, the paradox is between invisibility and hypervisibility. While visibility accounts for what can be seen, hypervisibility denotes that which is extremely visible, which cannot be ignored, which demands the eye of the viewer. The film represents both the invisible but powerful American Dream and the hypervisibility of whiteness.

The American Dream, largely unseen, haunts the queens of "Paris is Burning". Many of the performers interviewed talk about being a "big star" (Willie Ninja) or models and "household names" (Octavia St Laurent and Venus Xtravaganza). Venus even names the often unseen racialized nature of success, saying "I'd like to be a spoiled

rich white girl” (22:20). This desire to live the life of the wealthy and white exemplifies the invisible hand of whiteness and capitalism that structures the desires of the queens. This discourse of the American dream operates under ground as the invisible but impactful force that motivates many of the performers. The racialized poverty that impacts the performers is juxtaposed against their desires to occupy the position of rich white subjects who have access to the American Dream. This unseen force structures their existences and their aspirations. Octavia St. Laurent describes her dream of modeling, pointing to different models in posters on the walls of her bedroom. She is effervescent, describing what she admires about the women, all smiles. Later she is seen in a mall at an open casting call for models. She is subdued yet she stands out in the sea of white women, the odd one out. Octavia’s dream does not prepare her for the overwhelmingly white and cisgender reality of her field. Octavia is hypervisible in that space as one of very few people of color, yet we also see her fade into the background; a ghost of her bubbly, optimistic self from the earlier scene in her bedroom. Octavia experiences the haunting of whiteness that invisibly structures her reality. She is not alone in this experience as other ball participants struggle to represent aesthetics of the wealthy and white from their positions as queer and trans* people of color.

The notion of “Realness” highlights the desire to replicate and embody rich white people. “Executive realness” and “school boy/girl realness” are two ball categories that exemplify this desire with performers dressing as business people or college students. These categories are the hypervisible examples of the ideology that underpins this world of poor black and Latinx queers for whom the white supremacist capitalist society has been violent. These moments of mimicry demonstrate the power of these structures in

creating desire for it. One queen comments that some drag children will come to balls hungry but having stolen a designer garment so as to participate in the performances. This stresses the importance of feeling as if they can access the capitalist dream even when doing so is at stark contrast with their lived reality of poverty, racism and homophobia. The film makes visible the highly intersectional lives of its subjects who experience racism, cissexism, homophobia, and classism.

The film also hypervisibilizes the lives of rich white people through b-roll shots of the wealthy and white on the street, especially in executive positions. This clashes with the images and voice-overs of the black and Latinx queer ball participants. The reality of rich white people contrasts with the struggle to survive of queer people of color. The images of wealthy white people haunt the footage of the queer and trans* black and Latinx performers who attempt to perform categories inspired by the wealth and whiteness they cannot possess. In the beginning of the film Pepper LaBeija says, “Balls are as close as we’re going to get to fame and stardom”. Balls themselves are haunted by--possessed by--a certain racial and class identity (rich and white).

While the racialized poverty is largely visually absent, the interviews with the queens offer glimpses of systemic violence in their life narratives, explaining the way in which some steal to survive or struggle with homelessness. The invisible visible paradox exposes the haunting of racialized poverty and the American Dream in the lives of the queens of “Paris is Burning.”

Though the whiteness of the rich white people in the b-roll is hypervisible, the whiteness of the director Jenny Livingston is invisible in the film. Her voice is heard off camera on several occasions but her subject position as a white lesbian woman goes

unseen. In “Is Paris Burning?” bell hooks, writes about this powerful invisibility and the crafted neutrality of Livingston’s subject position. hooks remarks that a black director making a film on white gay culture would be interrogated about their motives while Livingston was mostly critically celebrated without that line of questioning. Whiteness functions as invisible for the director even as rich white subjects are hypervisible in the film.

bell hooks critiques the film’s whiteness in her piece “Is Paris Burning?”. She is critical of the queers who “worship at the throne of whiteness” but her reading of white audiences explains how whiteness may invisibly structure the film’s reception (149). She explores the whiteness of audiences of the film and the differing responses black and white audiences have. She writes: “Watching the film with a black woman friend, we were disturbed by the extent to which white folks around us were ‘entertained’ and ‘pleasured’ by scenes we viewed as sad and at times, tragic”(154). hooks highlights the disparate experiences of black and white audiences. White audiences laughing at scenes that from hook’s perspective are tragic demonstrate the way that whiteness invisibly structures the viewing of white audiences in ways that erases the tragedy that black audiences can see.

“Strange Fruit”

Invisibility and visibility explicate the racial trauma of lynching found in “Strange Fruit”. Holiday’s lyrics and her musical accompaniment bring the racial violence out of the margins through the juxtaposition of visibility and invisibility. In the opening of the song mournful trumpet alternates with Holiday’s vocals creating, that is it trades off with the narration of the traumatic events while providing its own emotional and musical

register. The first stanza of the song establishes visible and violent imagery of the lynching; Holiday croons “blood on the leaves and blood at the root” are vivid in their depiction of racial violence that occurred. Next comes the line “black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze”, a visceral and haunting image of lynched bodies is made visible in the mind’s eye of the listener.

In the second stanza Holiday croons:

Pastoral scene of the gallant south

The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth

Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh

Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

I read the first line as an example of the invisibility of the violence. While the first stanza clearly establishes the racist violence that has occurred, this second stanza begins with a seemingly benign image that invisibilizes the violence of the first stanza, the pastoral scene glosses over the violence, invisibilizing it during the line. This invisibility is dramatically disrupted by the following line with the clear and haunting image of “bulging eyes” and a “twisted mouth” of the murdered lynching victim. This pattern occurs again with the olfactory lines about the “sweet and fresh” southern air being disrupted by a vicious “smell of burning flesh”. The apparent or visible is contrasted with the seemingly benign and invisible. The play between the visible and invisible increases the haunting of the listener by heightening the horror through juxtaposition.

One invisible aspect of “Strange Fruit” is the invisibilization of the agents of the racial violence. “The gallant South” is mockingly hailed and implies for the listener, a white Southern audience and perpetrators of the lynching. Listeners of the song must

interpret the ironic “gallant South” and must wonder at who violently cultivates the “strange fruit”. In the song, the racial violence is made visible through imagery but the killers of the “black bodies swinging” are invisibilized. The audience is left with visceral depictions of racial violence and must wonder about those that committed it.

Racial trauma is often invisibilized, existing on the margin but begging to be acknowledged. Ghosts deal directly with that positionality by playing with the space betwixt the visible and invisible. In *Beloved*, the ghost goes from invisible to visible to corporeal in order to communicate the marginalized violence she experienced. The queens of “Paris is Burning” are haunted by the hypervisible rich white reality that they aspire to while their racialized poverty is relatively unseen. The lyrics to “Strange Fruit” oscillate between the visible nodes of racial violence and the invisibilizing “pastoral scene”. The ghostly in these three texts expose the trauma at the margins.

Chapter 3: Dead/Living- Multiplicity and Visceral Experience

Beloved

One of the three definitional paradoxes set out by Gordon's definition of haunting is the pairing of living/dead. Specters complicate our understandings of what it means for something to be living or dead as they exist in the space between life and death. Specters open us to a confrontation with the undead, with that which resists death or which resists life. I will trace this duo through *Beloved*, "Strange Fruit" and "Paris is Burning" in order to explore the way that each is related to haunting and racial trauma. Each of these cultural forms has a different relationship to death, with a resulting multiplicity of dead/living functions. While there are multiple relationships between life and death in these objects, death is represented in each as a visceral experience. This visceral nature of death connects all three cultural forms.

The complex relationship between the living and dead in *Beloved* offers rich ground for analyzing the haunted in the novel. In the following quote, the reader gets a developed sense of the liminal space between death and life, in the undying nature of trauma through rememory. Sethe says to Denver:

'Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. *It's never going away. Even if the whole farm- every tree and grass blade of it dies.* The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there- you who never was there- if you go there

and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.’ (emphasis added, 43-44)

These rememories, which are an intrusion of the dead on the living, represent nodes of traumatic experience that cannot die but instead live on to visit trauma upon other generations. Sethe remarks that places play a role in this rememory; even if the place “dies” the trauma of what happened there persists in a sense, making that place live on after its death, making it haunted. Sethe clearly outlines that this traumatic memory of slavery does not occur only for those who experienced the place and time of trauma; rather anyone who goes there can become swept up in the trauma of the past because the rememory of trauma has not and will not truly die. Instead, rememory keeps trauma in a liminal space between death and life.

Sethe continues:

‘So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over- over and done with- it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what.’ Denver picked at her fingernails. ‘If it’s still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies.’ Sethe looked right in Denver’s face. ‘Nothing ever does’ she said (44).

For Sethe, a woman steeped in her past and in death, her utterance that nothing ever dies has significance. She is haunted by the undead Beloved and her rememories of loss and pain at Sweet Home under slavery. She shares this notion with her daughter, thus pulling Denver into this legacy of the never dead. This action exemplifies intergenerational trauma, Denver is beholden to the trauma passed on to her by her mother. Sethe is haunted by events from her past, even ones that are supposedly “over

and done with,” dead, but in reality are still haunting the present through rememory; these rememories are undead. She passes this intergenerational racial trauma on to Denver. The first part of the quote does important work to explain how even if Denver has never experienced the trauma of her mother, the place of Sweet Home still holds the spirit of the painful violent memories which are waiting to haunt her because that trauma won't die. Sethe warns her daughter that she must never go to the place of trauma because it will be awaiting her. There is added urgency as Sethe reasons that the power of trauma attached to place is why she had to save her children from that experience no matter the cost. She would rather kill her children than let them fall victim to the racial trauma of slavery.

In Sethe's assertion and Denver's conjecture that “nothing ever dies” is an articulation of why haunting is a vitally useful tool for theorizing racial trauma. The specter exists in the undead liminal space, not truly alive but not dead either. Sethe and Denver experience this spectral paradox of the space between living and dead when they experience the undying rememory of Sweethome.

Another example of the living/dead paradox is in the nursing of Denver following Sethe's infanticide of her eldest daughter which demonstrates the intertwined nature of life and death;

‘It's time to nurse your youngest,’ she [Baby Suggs] said. Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go. Baby Suggs shook her head. ‘One at a time,’ she said and traded the living for the dead, which she carried into the keeping room. When she came back, Sethe was aiming a bloody nipple into the baby's mouth...So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister (179).

The dead and the living literally coexist at Sethe's breast. Her dead child's blood feeds living baby Denver from her blood covered nipple. Though Baby Suggs tried to stop it, this comingling of the dead and living occur seemingly as Sethe cannot understand why the two ought to be separate. Rather, in her mind, death and life are not opposites but are rather closely intertwined and connected. The dead child that Baby Suggs removes and the living Denver are closely linked for the traumatized Sethe, for who the dead and living are entangled based on her lived experience of trauma that leaves her haunted. Sethe's inability to parse out the difference between death and life at her breast implicates her living child. Denver nurses, receives life giving sustenance, at the same breast that is covered in her dead sister's blood. The violent death of her older sister is represented viscerally with the imagery of the bloody breast.

In a way, one could understand Denver herself as a liminal figure. From her infancy, she is caught betwixt death and life. She nurses at the same bloody breast as her dead sister. She is haunted in a way that puts her in between her family and the black community that ignores her. Though she did not experience the trauma of Sweet Home she is still haunted intergenerationally by its past through her mother. Intergenerational trauma marks her as a traumatized subject however she did not experience the violence at Sweet Home like Paul D and Sethe, and thus she feels excluded from them. She is in between experiences of trauma.

This living/dead paradox demonstrates the haunting of racial trauma that eats at the characters in *Beloved*. Denver's macabre nursing and the memories that never die show the connection between the haunted, racial trauma, and the dead/living paradox.

These examples communicate the intricacies of the living/dead paradox which in turn invites a reflection on the racial trauma that Sethe and Denver experience.

Kathleen Brogan writes in *Cultural Haunting*, “The dead, it should be emphasized, must be incorporated in some meaningful way into the community of the living; exiled, the dead would continue to haunt the living in menacing fashion” (67). Brogan’s call to incorporate the dead into the living is a relational understanding of the two. The dead and the living must coexist in order to acknowledge racial trauma. The ghost can function as that figure of coexistence. Acknowledging the dead happens on both an individual and communal level. Brogan puts forward the notion of community which is vital to responding to racial trauma often experienced by entire communities like those within *Beloved*. Communities must respond to their ghosts, to the undying dead, in order to be whole. The reconnection of the black community at the end of the novel demonstrate this both when the community feeds and sustains Denver, Sethe and Beloved and when the women of the community come to 124 to exorcise the ghost.

“Paris is Burning”

Just as the novel situates Denver as a liminal character marked by the paradox of the living/dead, “Paris is Burning” represents transgender sex worker and ball performer, Venus Xtravaganza as in between death and life. Venus, a Latinx trans* woman and member of the House of Xtravaganza, is shown in the first half of the film full of life and dreams for the future. However, it is later revealed that Venus was murdered. This juxtaposition of footage of a vibrant and joking Venus against footage of her drag mother, Angie Xtravaganza, mourning her death evokes a haunting. As Angie says that Venus’s body was stuffed under a bed in motel room, b-roll of a sketchy room plays, a

sharp juxtaposition with the footage of Venus's interviews where she tells her story charmingly, coyly. Due to her murder and the audience's discovery of that fact, Venus's interviews all become read through the lens of her murder so as to create a retroactive ghostly understanding of her. Because of the visual nature of film, Venus's image is kept alive despite her violent end. The materiality of film means that representations of Venus, her interviews, live on after her death. Thus Venus is neither fully alive nor fully dead in the film through its representations of her life.

In one scene, she is lounging on her bed as she tells the camera about her dreams; to be "married in church in white", to be "a complete woman" and a model. The pose of her body demonstrates Venus's vulnerability and femininity. It is especially sad to hear her dreams when her violent fate is revealed. The dreams are never to be as Venus's death robs her of those potentials. This tragedy is described by Angie as just "part of life, of being transsexual". Even before Venus's murder, she existed on the edge of death because of her work and identity. In one interview, Venus describes a violent encounter between her and a client who assailed her after touching her genitals and finding a penis (55:00). She escaped him by jumping out the window but this encounter emphasizes the violence her existence always alludes to. Venus's very identity is targeted for violence making her a liminal being existing between life and the threat of death even before her murder is actually carried out. Venus says "Some people think we're [trans* people] sick and some think we are gorgeous and special" (21:00). It is projected that Venus is killed by a john who discovered her trans* identity, someone who thought Venus was "sick" and worthy of violence. Violence against a transgender woman of color holds its own racial and gender-based trauma.

“Strange Fruit”

In “Strange Fruit”, Holiday similarly constructs beings who are neither dead nor alive in their objectification. The black bodies of Holiday’s song are liminal figures akin to Venus and Denver. Black bodies are represented by the metaphor of strange fruit on trees. Holiday’s representation of the violence they have experienced through lynching renders them in between the living and dead. The reduction of the bodies to the objectified “strange fruit” and “bitter crop” demonstrates how these figures exist between life and death, not fitting either category cleanly. The second line of the song, “The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,” asks the audience to imagine the body, and more specifically the face of the lynching victim. It is significant that Holiday asks the audience to come face to face with the victim of violence.

While the victims of the lynchings are physically dead they are not allowed to rest or move on. Instead the bodies remain on display and at the mercy of the elements in Holiday’s song. The strange fruit exist in a liminal space between life and death much like a ghost. They hang on the trees decaying. The following lyrics solidify the conception of the black body as between life and death, unmourned, liminal;

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck

For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck

For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop

The black body, victim of lynching, is not laid to rest. Instead the body is on display and at the mercy of crows, the rain, wind, sun and trees. The imagery of decay and of prolonged spectacle serve as a reminder that lynching was both a horrible trauma experienced by an individual but also a communal trauma as black folks are forced to

behold bodies hanging for weeks or memorialized forever in lynching photography found in drug store post card displays (Gross). This spectacle keeps the undeath of the victim as a violent reminder of racial trauma, in a word, a haunting. This vivid imagery in the song produce beings who are neither dead nor alive.

In “Everybody’s Protest Song: Music as Social Protest in the Performances of Marian Anderson and Billie Holiday”, Janell Hobson emphasizes the power of Holiday’s performance, its haunting nature and its relationship to life and death, even comparing it to a funeral dirge.

It would take Holiday’s vocal inflections and embodied knowledge to bring alive the poem’s ironic edge by invoking the cynicism and despair that elevated the song from sentimentality to poignancy (we hear the staccato pronouncement and almost sour note in the last verse, in the way she utters the word bitter and especially the long, drawn-out off-key intonation of the word crop). The song ends on a note of questioning and dirge-like moaning, more an elliptical rendering instead of finality. “Strange Fruit” is thus a call to action, a blues singer speaking for numerous subalterns while bearing witness to a scene that she may or may not have personally encountered (6).

Hobson notes specific aural elements in the song, like “the staccato pronouncement” and “off-key intonation” which contribute to an emotional register and impact. Holiday brings alive the dead victims of lynching through her haunting performance. Musically at the end, the note goes up and hangs in the air, indicating that while the song is over the struggle against such racial violence is not. The relationship to the living/dead paradox

elevates the song from entertainment to a “call to action” for the audience to take a moral and political stance against the racial violence of lynching.

Using the definitional tool of the living/dead paradox of the spectral, one can see in these three case studies the way that racial trauma is a visceral experience as represented in intense experiences with death and violence. Across all three objects, the living/dead demonstrate the multiplicity of the relationships to death and death’s visceral modality. The liminal nature of racial trauma is also emphasized: the pain of racial trauma lives on even after the violence has occurred and it never truly dies.

Chapter 4: Past/Present-Traumatic Punctures

Beloved

One key paradox that makes up a haunting is the relationship between the past and present. In a haunting, the past punctures the present. The haunting is often a visiting of the past upon the present or a blurring between past and present as the ghost does its work. I trace the past and present paradox of haunting through my three objects in order to elucidate the ways in which the past and present of haunting can explicate racial trauma.

In *Beloved*, the past and present are juxtaposed and complicated in the lives of Sethe, Denver and Paul D. One example of the power of the past and present is found in Sethe's reflections about "rememory". She says

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. 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 rememory but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened...Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. An you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs

to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away (43).

This passage on Sethe's rememory conjures up the power of past occurrences to haunt the present moment. Sethe understands this spatially with places holding rememories even after time has passed or the place has changed like with the burning down of a building. The rememory of the trauma is tied to the place and scars it in a way that others can feel the history of the place without being the one whose rememory it is. Sethe discusses the place she "was before [she] came here, that place is real. It's never going away." Sweet Home and all the racial trauma of slavery that came along with that place are very real to Sethe, they still haunt her despite her new place away from that space. Even though Sethe has escaped Sweet Home that place is never going away from her rememory. She is still constituted by those rememories and the painful ghosts of the past that puncture her present.

Sethe directly addresses the strange temporality of the novel. She says "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay." Her reticence to believe in time demonstrates how difficult and slippery of a concept it is in her haunted existence. In her experience, time acts asymmetrically, sometimes things "pass on" with the passage of time but other things (usually traumatic things) stand the test of time, "just stay[ing]". Sethe attempts to make sense of time but time for her is haunted. This haunting means that her past and present are always informing one another, complicating the other. Sethe's traumatic experiences persist in her present despite their being past happenings. Her racial trauma lives in both her past and present.

Two poignant lines about Sethe's relationship to the past and present stand out. The first is "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay." (51). This example illustrates the ways that Sethe's past is always intruding on her present and even her future. She is haunted by the past in a way that denies her a full future, instead the future is always already full of the past or at best is spent constantly trying to negate the past. In either case, Sethe's future is haunted by her traumatic past. In the second line, the weighty nature of Sethe's past is made clear: "Nothing better than to start the day's serious work of beating back the past." (86) While Sethe starts her day working dough for bread, a seemingly menial domestic chore, she is haunted by the other task that demands her time and energy; to beat back the past that constantly threatens to overwhelm her. Sethe's ghosts are always on the verge of overcoming her present, so she must always be fighting to keep the past back. Sethe's experience reminds us that one can be going along in life only to stumble upon a traumatic point that punctures the present with the past. Sethe's daily routine consists of working against her past so that she can even have a present, however in doing this work her present is still already accountable to this past trauma.

Paul D perceives the complexities in Sethe's past/present and offers some thoughts. Paul D says "'Sethe'... 'me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.'" (321) Coming towards the end of the novel, Paul D urges Sethe to allow herself some kind of present or even a future. Interestingly, Paul D's "tomorrow" does not necessarily come at the expense or with the erasing of the past, of the "yesterday". Having a past (even a tremendous and traumatic past) does not foreclose the possibility of having a future. This represents an important opportunity for working

through, for Sethe to realize that she has a self, capable of time, not overcome with the past. Paul D then says “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” To which Sethe responds “Me? Me?” She is still in the process of reconciling her past, present, and future with a notion of selfhood and agency which had been undone by trauma. Paul D prompts her to think of her identity, her subjecthood outside of the haunting she constantly experiences as a result of the blurring of past and present, specifically the racial trauma she has lived through.

Morrison weaves together past and present scenes repeatedly, impelling the audience to slip between temporalities complicating the narrative. At the same time, this practice elucidates the reality of the present which is so informed by the past. By, at times, collapsing the past and present Morrison demonstrates the haunted nature of time for Sethe and the other residents of 124. One of the multiple hauntings of the novel occurs in this way; a perversion of time and a juxtaposition of the past and present as intermingled but also at times oppositional. In one scene, Sethe is with Beloved and Denver but suddenly the time slips and she (and the reader) is caught up into the past of her escape from slavery with her baby (105). She slips back into the present briefly, to be in a clearing with Beloved and Denver but the memory of Baby Suggs strikes and Sethe is sent back to her first “twenty-eight days- the travel of one whole moon- of unslaved life”(111). These slippages between past and present are powerful manifestations of the temporal complications present in the novel. They take on the form of the intermingling of past and present in a way that the reader must follow the challenges to linear temporalities. This conflation and troubling of the relationship between past and present is one example of the haunted nature of time in *Beloved*. The temporal slippages in this

aspect of the haunting is demonstrative of the way that racial trauma functions. As Brogan explains, “Haunting in *Beloved* signals the return of a past that can neither be properly remembered nor entirely forgotten. The novel records a battle between anamnesis and amnesia, the desire to account for the dead struggling against the need to obliterate them. At issue is the relation between historical consciousness and traumatic memory, the problem of how to represent what is experienced as unspeakable” (Brogan, 63).

The nature of a past visiting upon the present evokes racial trauma. Brogan demonstrates that the novel is a struggle to account for the dead and damaged victims of racial trauma. I contend that hauntings do the work to explain and represent the unspeakable pain of racial trauma under slavery because hauntings exist in the liminal space between past and present. The complex temporality of racial trauma is communicated by spectral figures that can attend to that liminal space. Racial trauma haunts the novel and Sethe especially, and cannot be confined to the past. Rather, this element of the haunting shows the way that racial trauma may have roots in the past but has reached its branches into the present. By looking at the past/present paradox of haunting, the temporal nature of racial trauma is elucidated. The past trauma punctures the present calling for a response, perhaps a working through.

“Paris is Burning”

In “Paris is Burning” the past/present juxtaposition is found in different elements of the film. One way in which this haunted temporality functions is the way that there are two distinct temporalities in the film. There is a temporal dichotomy between the first phase of the film in 1987 which shows the ball scene thriving to the second temporality set in 1989 in the latter half of the film in which the ball scene is faltering and becoming “boring”. The split in the two temporalities complicates the relationship between past and present. In a way, the second “present” temporality of the film is haunted by the first, the ghost of the once vibrant ball scene playing a haunting role, puncturing the present with the past.

Another example of the play between past and present is the way Venus Xtravaganza is both limited to the past by her murder but then also projected into the present by the filming of her interviews. The documenting and showing of phototage of Venus in some ways keeps Venus alive in the audience’s minds but at the same time she is frozen in her past with no options for a future. Venus is limited to her past because of her murder. All her interviews are of her past and her past desires and aspirations. She has no present and her future too, has been cut away though it is voiced quite clearly in her past interviews. Her drag mother, Angie Xtravaganza grieves her passing saying that she misses her every day, that she was the main daughter of the House of Xtravaganza. At the same time, Angie is matter-of-fact when she says that Venus’s fate is part of life as a transsexual. She seems resigned to the violence that faces her community.

Other queens grieve the way the ball scene has changed. Willie Ninja says that people are often disappointed now when they go to the balls, saying they are boring.

Willie proclaims that the balls were never boring and seems saddened by this change. However, his own success in the latter half of the film positions him differently from the other performers. The end of the film seems to mourn the changing ball scene while also pointing to its importance as a function of community. Two young queer kids comment in the final scenes of the film, “we are just like a community...this gay community like...wants to be together”. These young queer people evoke a future of survival and connection found in a community even as they grieve the past in the form of lost members and changes to the ball scene. This evocation of the potentiality of community takes the past/present paradox and looks towards a future informed by trauma.

“Strange Fruit”

“Strange Fruit” relates to temporality and racial trauma differently. As Margolick points out, the number of lynchings was dramatically down by the time Holiday sang yet she brings these past violences into the present (58). She disallows distance from the horrors of the past and forces audiences to contend with a present that still has racial violence and discrimination. Margolick recalls when Holiday talks about her father who died as a result of racist segregation in a hospital. While lynchings may have been on the decline, the logic of racist violence was and is very much alive in her present and our present (58). Lyrically, past /present are played with in the way time passes for the forsaken bodies, the “strange fruit”:

“Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop”

This passage of time of the elements taking their toll on the body connect the moment of spectacular violence in the past with the slow violence the body experiences into the present. The decaying bodies of the past lynching puncture through the present that must deal with the remains of the racial violence. The racial trauma of lynching is thus communicated by the haunting paradox of the past and present. The violence that the bodies of the lynching victim experience is brought into the present by Holiday; a powerful hailing that occurs every time the song is listened to. Within the lyrics is time passing for the lynched body and the black community who are forced to watch the decaying body in their present. These dual temporalities demonstrate the power of the past/present paradox. Holiday's haunting performance muddles the past and present so that a history of racial trauma can be communicated.

Ghosts elucidate the way that the past haunts the present, the way past violences puncture the present demanding acknowledgement. In *Beloved*, Sethe's rememory represents the traumatic past infringing on her present. She is constantly fighting to keep her past at bay but it continues to puncture through into her present. In "Paris is Burning" the two temporalities set up a haunting relationship where the past of the ball scene is mourned in the "present". Further, Venus is denied a present, though her interviews project a ghostly figure from the past. The performance of "Strange Fruit" brings the past of lynching into the present while lyrically the decaying corpse of the lynching victim represents the past violence sustained into the present. In these examples of the past puncturing the present, ghosts show the way past trauma lives on.

Conclusion

In this project I have sought to tell the “ghost stories” that run through “Strange Fruit”, “Paris is Burning” and *Beloved* in order to establish that ghosts are critical figures worthy of study and acknowledgment. It is vital to attend to ghosts because of the way that racial trauma haunts our present moment.

Ghosts provide one answer to a vital question; how do we respond to racial trauma? Ghosts allow us to think through and affectively respond to a concept which is inherently difficult, messy and painful. Ghosts help us navigate liminality while also forcing us to grapple with the complexity of racial trauma. These ghosts offer up one path towards working through, a way forward. Working through is a matter of process rather than a simple solution. It does not dismiss or reduce racial trauma but rather clues audiences into the nuances that are present.

These three texts have ghosts that prompt questions. In all three texts, ghosts ask for recognition of racial trauma. They also ask us to look at the liminal spaces of life and death, past and present, and the visible and invisible. In *Beloved*, ghosts ask how the novel’s subjects of slavery account for the past and its marginalized violence. How does the novel and those subjects work through, mourn and perform storytelling? Ghosts in “Paris is Burning” ask how film can manifest dead people as ghostly figures. And how do social conditions like racialized poverty haunt the queens? Ghosts in “Strange Fruit” ask for a recognition of the violence of lynching lyrically and aurally. How can the haunted be manifested musically? All these texts prompt the question what is the relationship between hauntings and racial trauma? To which I respond that ghosts communicate the liminal nature of racial trauma in a way that invites a response from audiences of the

cultural forms. This communication of paradoxes also opens up space for working through and its companions mourning, telling and reconnecting with community.

As part of working through, “Strange Fruit” participates in a clear telling of the horrors of lynching. Its audiences are brought into the racial trauma lyrically and aurally. Past trauma punctures the present and is brought out of margins. Even though lynchings are on the decline, Holiday brings the visceral imagery and sonic pain to the present. “Strange Fruit” is commonly understood as musically and sonically haunting, my analysis explores both its sonic and lyrical contents which relate to the past/present, living/dead/ and visible/invisible. “Strange Fruit” does not provide a typical working through but it does tell a story about racial trauma. The song’s telling evokes emotional responses in audience members. “Strange Fruit” also evokes different communities. One is the racist white community of the “gallant south” who perpetrated (and/or witnessed) the violent act of lynching black bodies, this community has violently excluded black bodies from it. The lynched figure is a spectacle for the white southern community and an ominous threat to the living black community about what could await them. There is also the community of audiences in the present who hear the telling and are prompted to remember and mourn the racial trauma of lynchings.

Beloved like “Strange Fruit” evokes community. Morrison highlights the power of the black community to come together to support Sethe and Denver and exorcise the ghost. The novel is a telling of the trauma of slavery through the lens of a ghost story emphasizing the spectral nature of racial trauma. This telling of a ghost story communicates the visceral nature of slavery while attending to the liminality of the trauma as exemplified by the ghost. *Beloved* performs a mourning for all victims of

slavery through the epigraph “Sixty Million and more”. This gesture exemplifies the novel’s ethos of mourning and telling of the slave experience. Trauma begins to be worked through with the reconnection of the inhabitants of 124 with their community. However, the novel does not resolve trauma completely; the working through is still in process when the ending comes.

“Paris is Burning” also centers community in its resolution; specifically the way that the queer community functions as a mechanism of celebration and survival. The community is evoked as a hopeful future by two young queers who poignantly reflect on the togetherness and connection of the gay community. Telling and mourning are two other elements of working through which the film engages. The film tells the story of the queens and the queens tell their own stories in interviews. Through these tellings, stories of trauma surface like the murder of Venus. Mourning also occurs in the film; Angie Xtravagaza grieves Venus, her drag daughter while reflecting on the structural violence that transsexuals face. Other queens mourn the changing ball scene as it declines. The invisible force of whiteness and capitalism underpin the dreams of the queens to be models and stars, a haunting force that goes unmourned and told only through the juxtaposition of b-roll of the wealthy with testimonies of impoverished queens.

Ghosts in these cultural forms open a conversation about racial trauma. They invite a response from the audiences of the three texts. This project does not presume to know how those audiences will respond but one conjecture is that of an affective response. Ghosts communicate racial trauma in a vivid and visceral way that evokes strong emotion in audiences. Affect could be part of the conversation that ghosts start.

Another question that remains for future research is where else might we find and attend to ghosts? This project has offered three texts which elucidated the power of ghosts to bring to light and communicate marginalized experiences of racial trauma. The myriad of other ghosts with spectral stories of racial trauma await our critical attention and affective responses.

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