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Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

Haunting America: Racial Identity and Otherness in Civic Society

by Mary K. Ryan

Upon spotting Rodney King speeding down the 210 freeway in Los Angeles, the California Highway Patrol engaged in a high-speed chase on March 3, 1991. King feared a traffic violation would cause his license to be revoked given that, at the time, he was on probation for a robbery offense. Eventually, King was caught by Los Angeles police officers. As the personal camera recording by local resident George Holliday captured, officers forced King out of his car and brutally beat him. As a result, Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, Theodore Briseno, and Stacey Koon—the four LAPD officers involved—were indicted on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and excessive use of force by a police officer. After all four officers were acquitted of any wrongdoing in April 1992,¹ intense race riots swept across Los Angeles. More than fifty people were killed, more than two thousand were injured, and 9,500 were arrested for rioting, looting, and arson, resulting in approximately one billion dollars of property damage.

In response to these events, many journalists and news reporters covering the riots noted the dire economic climate plaguing the Los Angeles community, suggesting that the Rodney King beating reflected a tipping point for a community divided by income inequality, joblessness, racial profiling, homelessness, and unequal housing access. Mike Davis, for example, writes in a June 1992 article for the *Nation* that:

[i]n two years of recession, unemployment ha[d] tripled in L.A.'s immigrant neighborhoods," resulting in "rapidly growing colonies of homeless *compañeros* on the desolate flanks of Crown Hill and in the concrete bed of the L.A. River, where people [were] forced to use sewage water for bathing and cooking. (743)

Moreover, because these issues were so widespread, affecting minorities of all ethnicities, Davis also addresses how racially and ethnically diverse the mobs and rioters were, including African Americans, Latino/as, and Caucasians—a multiracial outcry that underscored the decades of inequity ravaging the community. This ongoing tension between communities of color and local police helps to explain why police brutality against a black man would resonate so strongly with residents of the area; the community's shared experiences and socioeconomic struggles yielded a response that mirrored their common history.

For many in the 1990s, King thus became a household name. While his brutal beating and the investigations that followed were frequent news items, he also symbolized many of the problems between communities of color and authority figures, causing him to gain attention as a kind of crystallizing force for decades of racial pain in the United States. In a 2012 interview with Rory Carroll of the *Guardian*, King reflected on his experience: "I'm comfortable with my position in American history. It was like being raped, stripped of everything, being beaten near to death there on the concrete, on the asphalt. I just knew how it felt to be a slave. I felt like I was in another world" (par. 1). King also discussed his forgiveness of the officers who beat him: "No one wants to be mad in their own house. I didn't want to be angry my whole life. It takes so much energy out of you to be mean" (par. 12). While King's forgiveness may seem emotionally and spiritually mature, it begs a critical reflection. Citizens must consider why a victim of injustice is the one who must be kind and whose fragility is often in question. More to the point, King's comments enable us to ponder the affective struggle that inequity and abuse burdens people of color with at the hands of interpersonal racism and structural injustice.

In Los Angeles' case, people of color, especially African Americans, only became visible enough to produce public policy changes when they were harmed and outraged.² This phenomenon is not new; Martin Luther King Jr. observed in his 1967 "The Other America" that "a riot is the language of the unheard" and condemned the "contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society" (par. 7). One way to understand Rodney King's battery is to then consider it, on a theoretical level, as a trap of the ideological evil of racism, which frames society as tolerant and well-intentioned on the one hand yet ignores the systemic injustices and cruel realities of racism on the other. In their book *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2014), Barbara J. Fields and Karen Fields declare that "[t]olerance as an alternative to equality is so firmly rooted in good intentions that practitioners fail to recognize the evil. White persons are human beings until they choose not to be; black persons are not human beings until they earn the privilege, one at a time, by performing a meritorious act" (105). In this statement, a racial double standard emerges, urging readers to reconsider hollow

understandings of harmony, which suggest that tolerance alone can foster community change. In fact, true equality cannot abound from the toxic roots of ideological racism, which often renders its victims invisible in American society.

Though the events surrounding Rodney King demonstrate the hyper-visibility of a single black person, American racial identity is overtly considered to be a function of visibility or invisibility. By investigating the layers underneath this outward, sanctioned process in three novels—Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* (2013), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)—we can explore how American racial identity is informed through the processes of haunting and memory. Furthermore, juxtaposing these works alongside real-world case studies, such as the Rodney King beating, riots, and trial in the early 1990s as well as the handling of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, aids in the elucidation of salient race critiques of cultural practices and policy or administrative bureaucracy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such incidents of horror, haunting, and history are, of course, vital considerations for why we still need a civil rights movement today yet, perhaps more significantly, also serve to justify why it is so hard to achieve systemic, lasting, and meaningful reforms. Therefore, assessing how we think about identity through these works can help our society better understand that civic engagement, democratic promise, and civil rights for a collective society are not rooted in false individualism but rather in a stronger civic community bound together through authentic lives.

Haunting Citizenship in Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*

American racism can manifest itself in many ways. Unlike the blatant hostility exhibited by police officers in the Rodney King case, the experience of African Americans during Hurricane Katrina functions as a counterexample, calling attention to the hyper-invisibility of black persons. The bureaucratic mismanagement of this natural disaster in August of 2005 showcased the racial tension in America by shining a spotlight on New Orleans. In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, thirty thousand residents who were unable to evacuate, mostly African American and/or poor, found themselves stranded and overcrowded in the city's Superdome, while others were perched atop their flooded homes for several days awaiting rescue, food, clean water, and sanitary conditions (Sustar 12). Even today, there is no state or federal agency to track those missing post-Katrina, causing Americans to lack concrete statistical data about the severity of the hard-hitting natural and man-made disaster (Olsen par. 5). In "Discrimination's Effects on Katrina's Victims," Becca Hutchinson explains how the situation of the poorest New Orleans residents, who were overwhelmingly black, was no accident or surprise given the history of racism and racial segregation in America. Discriminatory housing practices, like redlining, have existed since the 1890s, contributing to the creation of subpar neighborhoods, white flight to the suburbs, and the isolation of African Americans to the point that they have become the most segregated ethnic group in the country (Hutchinson par. 9). Together, these structural conditions render African Americans into a statistical mass, grouping them into a dangerously powerless cluster that suffers from society's indifference to black lives.

Concerns surrounding Hurricane Katrina are a centerpiece of Kiese Laymon's 2013 debut novel *Long Division*. *Long Division's* plot focuses, in part, on the notion of disappearance and social invisibility. The protagonists of the novel are two black teenagers from Mississippi, both named City Coldson, one of whom lives in 2013 and the other in 1985. Considering Katrina from the vantage point of 1985, City wonders what kind of storm could just make people disappear, implicitly referencing the 500 names that have never been released as victims as well as the hundreds of lives that have simply gone unaccounted for in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (Olsen par. 2). Here, City also invites the reader to pass judgment on the policies, cultures, and practices that demonstrate racialized inequity, such as educational disparity and neighborhood segregation. In doing so, he envisions Hurricane Katrina as a gateway into another major interest area of *Long Division*, that of citizenship.

This concept emerges in different ways throughout the book's evolution. Both City (full name Citoyen, meaning *citizen* in French) discover what rules apply and what opportunities are available for various ethnic or racial identities in American society during different periods in national history. For example, the novel considers which people would be considered free white persons under the Naturalization Act of 1790.⁷ Broadly, the novel construes citizenship and racial visibility as constructions of power, turning identity into a performative, communal concept. In one sublime moment, for instance, near the end of the book's section called "Eyes Have It," 1985 City tells his friend and teenage crush Shalaya Crump that there "ain't no reason to be scared. What can [white] people do to you, really?" (Laymon 190). She replies, "They can

make you disappear," to which he reassures her, "Yeah but then you're gone. I ain't afraid of disappearing. I bet disappearing doesn't even hurt, to tell you the truth" (190). Just as Rodney King reported that he "felt like [he] was in another world" (qtd. in Carroll par. one) during his beating, City and Shalaya feel the need to imagine pain in an alternate time or place. This contemplation of what another world might look like reflects a friction of racial justice work.

While *Long Division*'s characters voice an intolerance of the status quo, they also indirectly offer a cautionary fear that the future may not be better. After all, Shalaya's fear, along with City's attempts to spin disappearance into something that is not painful and thus not something of which to be afraid, demonstrates the emotional duress internalized by African Americans after centuries of victimization, exploitation, colonialism, and capitalism. *Long Division*'s characters exhibit the emotional ramifications of our country's racist history and ideology, which "must be constantly created and verified in social life" (Fields & Fields 137). If "exercising rule means being able to shape the terrain" (140), then the novel bears witness to a kind of racial burnout through an existential quest of young African Americans who withstand fear, engage in optimism, and explore possibilities across time periods where they have never shaped the terrain.

While visibility can manifest itself in the literal presence of a person or through "seeing" an allegorical representation of a memory or ghost, conversely, society sometimes reveals times when invisibility is just as powerful or useful as visibility. *Long Division* employs time travel for an invisibility doubling as a kind of protective measure for its characters. Laymon employs time travel back to 1964, for example, to show the meeting of Shalaya, City, and a Jewish boy named Evan Altshuler, who is desperately trying to save his family from being harmed by the Ku Klux Klan during the Freedom Summer campaign. The remainder of this aspect of the novel yields insight into terror, neo-liberalism, religious freedom, and coming of age. In the present age, the characters encounter the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf oil spill, showing the reader that our country still has a lot of growing up to do.

Moreover, this novel cultivates ideas of identity and uses time travel to underscore that despite all of the positive events and progress of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many people, especially African Americans, remain imprinted by the damaging centuries of slavery and Jim Crow practices. City's 2013 classmates thus help the reader reflect on black self-identity in the "post"-Civil Rights Era. One girl, Baize Shephard, for example, is constantly daydreaming about introducing herself to the world and the companion image she will be presenting to others. She feels she must work even harder than her white counterparts to make a positive impression. Additionally, the novel begins as 2013 City competes in a grammar competition. The rivalry between City and classmate Lavender Peeler, a self-proclaimed "exceptional African-American" (Laymon 33) who dreams of proving himself worthy of marrying Malia Obama, is also telling. For City and Lavender, the goal is not just to win the grammar competition but to be noticed by those in power. In Lavender's opinion, African Americans are generally thought to be more ignorant than white Americans, so when an African-American kid outshines a white one, especially in a white state like Mississippi, the African-American child is special. City's interest is less individualistic; he just wants to be a good example for his neighborhood. Both of these examples outline the need for recognition and approval within the African-American experience as well as pathways to achieve them. At the same time, neither of these examples is expressly political, which is a critical reminder of the ways in which racism permeates social life, orients identity, and constructs community interactions.

As we see, *Long Division* is interested in how modern life has been shaped, or haunted, by the nation's racist past. City of 1985 and Shalaya Crump, haunted by rumors concerning their grandfathers' deaths, time-travel back to 1964 to chase the ghosts of their grandfathers who died during the Civil Rights Movement. When they arrive in 1964, their own mortality becomes jeopardized as they are hunted by the Ku Klux Klan. Flashing forward to the status quo, 2013 City remains haunted by the passion of the civil rights generation, feeling an eternal push to keep running to make progress. Thoughts like this, along with the book's cover image of a rusted and broken chain, symbolize the ever-present pressure America's history with slavery brings to African-American lives. The idea of being valued and devalued based on skin color, along with a feeling of being perpetually aware of one's Otherness, runs throughout the novel. In each time period—1964, 1985, and 2013—the African-American characters encounter the threat of racial discrimination and violence. This precariousness contributes to the poignancy behind City's final conversation with his grandmother, who cautions him to "do whatever it takes to protect you and yours. Especially in your dreams. Especially in your dreams, because you never know who else is watching" (Laymon 265). This resonates with City who, earlier, during one of his time travels, was told that "people can mash your heart in your chest while you're still alive. They can take people from you. That's something to be afraid of" (190). No matter what

the characters accomplish, whether it be academic excellence or time travel, their existence is never secure, suggesting our country still has strides to make before our work on civil rights and racial equity is complete.

Hope in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

While Laymon alludes to the election of Barack Obama and the murder of Trayvon Martin early in the novel, as they serve to represent the prime examples of twenty-first century African-American hope and hopelessness respectively, another novel, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, takes readers on a different journey of identity and awareness. *Invisible Man* is the story of a young, college-educated black man struggling to survive and succeed in a racially divided society that refuses to see him as a human being. Told in the form of a first-person narrative, *Invisible Man* traces the nameless narrator's physical and psychological journey from blind ignorance to enlightened awareness, transgressing the book's terminology of purpose, passion, and perception through a series of flashbacks in the forms of dreams and memories. Set in the United States during the pre-Civil Rights Era, when segregation laws barred black Americans from enjoying the same basic human rights as their white counterparts, the novel opens in the South (Greenwood, South Carolina), although the majority of the action takes place in the North (Harlem, New York). The book is a social and intellectual tour de force, incorporating the philosophies of black nationalism, Marxism, and Booker T. Washington as it examines identity and individuality.

The novel is framed by W. E. B. Du Bois' idea of double consciousness, an idea that taps into African-American literary heritage. Because of the invisible man's dual role as narrator and protagonist, the narrative is framed by the double consciousness of his grandfather. The grandfather's dying advice suggests two layers of action. He recommends pretending to uphold the racial ideology surrounding them while also proclaiming the need to undermine it.

Specifically, he tells the invisible man, "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open ... Learn it to the young'uns" (Ellison 29). Again, the reader sees that the authentic identity of African Americans is suppressed in a sociopolitical climate that does not allow black people to flourish, much less be genuine in their daily conduct as human beings. Such constrictions reshape the development of identity in two primary ways. Identity can be interpreted by white people—those who hold power and are external to the world of blacks—as either socially acceptable or unacceptable. In contrast, Ellison suggests that another option is possible, one in which black people doggedly preserve their authenticity and express only their own true thoughts and feelings, regardless of the implication for white people. Together, these dual approaches reflect an enduring monologue in the minds of black people battling to remain respectable and true to themselves as they navigate the cultivation of consistent public and private personas.

The invisible man's education and schema for interpreting the world are derived from the heritage of a grandfather and arguably, by extension, an entire generation that suggests African Americans cannot be respected authentically in public communities or the social world at large. *Invisible Man* is a gut-wrenching novel largely because of this troubling juxtaposition. Still, the invisible man believes in his American identity and his ability to make something of himself in American society. The tension to move beyond double consciousness is therefore palpable, yet the pathway is rigged with difficulties, including being tricked by white counterparts and given shock treatments, and the ensuing stresses this shoulders him with cause him emotional distress. *Invisible Man* reveals how one's personal haunting can function as a mask, which shows how being unable to infiltrate, much less survive in, the dominant white society can contribute to feelings of alienation. This isolation can in turn lead to hostility, yielding a more problematic result for all of society.

The genius of *Invisible Man* is the bridge built between internalized racism and collective hurt. The book shows how segregation drives wedges between communities, undermining the promise of communal decision-making—a major threat to cultivating effective democracy. Yet, perhaps most damaging of all, is the sustained re-creation of identity some African Americans take on in wearing the mask, which prevents authenticity and autonomy from guiding their lives. Racism as an ideological power can fool people, and, in turn, people can trick themselves into a false acceptance, generating a hollowness that erodes at their own quality of life while contributing nothing to the public either. This danger is revealed within the novel's conclusion that "being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking

through? Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (Ellison 591). As we see, the African-American male experience of attempting to self-actualize but always reflecting the white man conveys a fruitless invisibility.

In *Ghostly Matters* (1997), visibility is hypothesized as "a complex system of permission and prohibition punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness" (Gordon 17). Most importantly, this kind of visibility must be acknowledged because it helps us to reckon with racial injustice, but it also warrants our attention because of the implicit public death it threatens upon our social systems and civic virtues. *Invisible Man* is a powerful self-narration of a black man's soul in a bitter, overly calculated, and racial world, but it need not be all of our stories from this point forward. Ellison's hopefulness is apparent from the very beginning. He reveals in the prologue that the narrator is living in a basement hole within a whites-only building but that the light is bright and offers him the intellectual necessity of the truth. This invisibility of physically occupying the underground perspective is critically important to the saliency of Ellison's message. At the end of the novel, the narrator can resurface (after being lost in the Harlem riots that occurred earlier in the book) because overt actions have occurred. History, storytelling, and bringing invisibility to life matter. The invisible man, despite a barrage of obstacles from white society, remains hopeful of his ability for success. Flashing forward years later into mainstream society and the experiences of African Americans in the Rodney King beating or during Hurricane Katrina reveals the need for American society to remain vigilant to Ellison's voice. The past must haunt the present. The invisible must gnaw at and wrangle with the visible. These, as Ellison's book reveals, are the pathways to political change.

Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Ultimately, *Invisible Man*'s conclusion of speaking for another evokes the idea of claim and autonomy later presented in Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize-winning 1987 novel *Beloved*. Set after the American Civil War, *Beloved* mirrors the story of an African-American slave, Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery in Kentucky in 1856 by fleeing to the free state of Ohio. In the book, Garner is portrayed as the protagonist Sethe who also escapes slavery by fleeing to Ohio. Just shy of a month of freedom, she encounters a group of white people who arrive to retrieve her, supported by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In response to this duress, Sethe kills her two-year-old daughter, Beloved, instead of allowing her to be recaptured and raised in servitude. Years later, a woman presumed to be Beloved haunts Sethe's home at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati. Morrison opens the book by revealing the ghostly haunting—"124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (3)—which persists throughout the novel.

Beloved, set in 1873, offers this salient look into the experiences of African-American people during slavery. The novel grapples with how individual identity is connected to autonomy and legitimacy and how these features contribute to reckoning with our country's racial ideology. Specifically, the existence of Beloved's two dreams—exploding and being swallowed—suggests that memory can help trigger or influence our actions, as Gordon explains: "When the living take the dead or the past back to a symbolic place, it is connected to the labor aimed at creating in the present a something that must be done" (175). The ghost of Beloved haunts the present, reflecting a displacement of memory that demands attention. Morrison's book can thus be seen as a call to action to examine the ways in which contemporary social ills may reflect unlearned or unacknowledged lessons. When Gordon asserts that "[t]o be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects" (190), she, like Morrison, is urging us to find connections between our personal and political traumas. Particularly, Sethe's actions put forward the possibility of living in a way that one's surroundings suggest may not be viable as the only means to finally live an authentic life. This kind of cognitive dissonance reflects both the staunch optimism previously expressed in *Long Division* as well as the grappling with double consciousness that Ellison explores.

Despite being the namesake of the book, Beloved often represents an intangible presence, a person who almost functions as a thing, disorienting those around her. Here Morrison writes, "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed" (323). Despite being "freed" by her mother, Beloved becomes a heavy weight on her mother's conscience, revealing that the reasons and impacts of our actions remain distinct from the actions themselves. As Gordon observes, "Twenty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the characters in *Beloved* are struggling with the knowledge that 'freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another'" (172).

More broadly, Morrison conveys the ways in which personal choices act as a sort of echo chamber for societal renderings, including racism, violence, and belonging. Many people, after all, repress horrific memories. In *Beloved*, the characters Sethe, Paul D., and Denver all repress memories of slavery in an attempt to forget the past. Yet, this separation leaves them barren, fragmenting their sense of self and leaving them lacking a sense of their original, authentic identities. As Gordon alludes to, part of claiming ownership of oneself is allowing for the integration of all aspects of oneself, even those wrapped up in painful or unspeakable moments. The plight of repression from slavery in *Beloved* therefore echoes the public/private split so dominant in *Invisible Man* as one's sense of identity often seems heavily entwined with external evaluations of one's worth.

As we see, characters in *Beloved* are living through the complexity of being able to physically eject themselves from a tumultuous place while struggling to move past, emotionally and spiritually, from a heartbreakingly complicated, and painful past. One tangible representation of this struggle in *Beloved* comes from analyzing the use of the English language throughout the book. While only two characters, Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid, officially rename themselves, all are attempting to come to grips with definitions and language forced upon them by slave owners and slavery as a system overall. In the process of self-exploration, language is a tool Morrison employs to make those who have always been defined by others into people who become free to define themselves. Importantly, Morrison does not leave this process to each character alone; she paints a community of shared aspirations and common histories, such as when the Georgia prison inmates sing together with Paul D. Just as with the other two aforementioned novels, truly transformative power emerges with collective discovery, not merely one person's self-awareness. Likewise, part of what makes the collective experience of public policy-oriented problems in the United States, like the Rodney King beatings and Hurricane Katrina, so potent in our society is that they become part of the public consciousness. While the direct experience transpires to far fewer people, those experiences trigger similar historical events in our collective memory; shape our racial understandings of power, trust, and community; and test our public appreciation for all human beings as members of a holistic political community.

Heeding the Haunt: Lessons for a Stronger US

In *Beloved*, *Invisible Man*, and *Long Division*, America's pervasive struggle with racism is explored across numerous time periods, offering a comprehensive look into the country's efforts to create policies and social or political reforms related to areas including criminal justice, education, housing, and employment. While the civil rights reforms of the 1960s are important steps in the country's efforts to cultivate equitable lives among citizens of all races, we can see, in a very small way from the Rodney King beating and riots as well as the handling of Hurricane Katrina, that racism is still a serious problem in America. After all, part of the reason for the thorniness of America's problems with racism is because it is larger than simply civic policy alone. For that reason, racism can be perceived as an ideology steeped in the political arena and thus a critical component in civil rights largely because it is able to "shape the terrain" of ideological practice (Fields & Fields 140).

Perhaps more significant to twenty-first-century civil rights efforts, though, is the Fieldses' closing call for collective action in *Racecraft*. Since racism lives on in social life, policy change is important but not sufficient alone to create lasting change. To reinforce this point, Fields and Fields invoke Harold Garfinkel's reflection that racism employs "seen but unnoticed features of social life," which "enter the memory" and "manifest as social order" (Fields & Fields 186). In this way, it becomes clear that racism is not simply a legal taboo to be amended or vetoed. It is a palpable inequality penetrating our society and threatening our democracy. While civil rights reform helps us to see that inequality is not a zero-sum issue, as the Fieldses put it, "Inequality never stands merely as fact: it requires moral reinforcement in collective beliefs" (277). The nation's moral codes and acceptance of racial ideology will, therefore, help to steer the necessary forthcoming progress in civil rights.

Just as the Fieldses suggest that "the law shows society in the act of inventing race" (130), twenty-first-century racial progress holds the promise of recreating our understanding of power. The need to infiltrate this power reflects a struggle, but in the present century, haunting offers American society an instructive guide. This struggle for power ought not to be about a particular racial or ethnic group gaining supremacy. Since, as the Fieldses note, "exercising rule means being able to shape the terrain" (140), democratic power must be shared across diverse identities to prevent the warping of the terrain for the interests of one identity alone. It is a collective struggle for all of us to break out of the racial ideology that has trapped this country

since our foundational roots in slavery. Together, the novels thus make the case that all identity is haunted and all of our lives are performances of the political influences structuring the world in which we live. As such, civil rights in the twenty-first century requires a recognition of the political processes that have been sanctioned as legitimate, understanding which cultural and social practices are rooted in inequity, and identifying ways to break down policies that alienate and segregate people. Our nation's horrific racial past ought to haunt us, but it need not separate us into individualism or divide us by Otherness; it must compel us to unite and achieve the racial equality we all deserve.

Long Division, *Invisible Man*, and *Beloved* therefore offer critical insight into the myriad of psychological, material, and emotional ways that American racecraft operates as an ideological force on both collective and individual levels. In each book, there is a gap between personal and social expectations, public and private life, and objective versus subjective truths. Thus, in these ways, America can be viewed as "a haunted society, full of ghosts" (Gordon 98) from our collective past. Therefore, "the very way in which we discover things or learn about others or grapple with history is intimately tied to the very things themselves, to their variable modes of operation, and thus to how we would change them" (65). Depicting US society in this way, these three novels offer insight into how racism in America frightens, segregates, and undermines people while also revealing ways in which communities and people unite, empower each other, and flourish. However, it is a mistake for us to live in the haunting or be scared away by the ghosts in the country's social memory, so if the next wave of civil rights reforms comes, collective action will be necessary to spur strides for equality. Progress is not guaranteed without deliberative, conscious action to reconcile the ghosts of our past. It is up to us, along all racial lines, to ensure the historical bigotry highlighted in these novels as well as the inequity experienced in contemporary public life are mitigated and overcome in the future. Laymon, Ellison, and Morrison may deliver an idea of a haunted society, but the solutions rest with the American public itself.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Letter to My Son" voices this observation when he writes that his "great error was not that [he] had accepted someone else's dream but that [he] had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft" (par. 24). Instead of settling for living in the harmful racial dream of a false whiteness, our society should heed Coates's advice in his closing lines to his son: "I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world" (par. 37). By owning up to and taking stock of all sides of our past as well as being present in the complexity of the status quo, we can better learn how to live in a world of constant transformation. America's ability to treat all races as equal requires us to move beyond an arbitrary rainbow catalogue of racial identity and into a new zone of wholeness, uniting memory with action and brokering new displays of power and belonging.

Notes

[1] The United States Department of Justice filed federal civil rights charges against the officers; in August of 1992, two were found guilty while the others were again acquitted. As a result of a civil trial, King was eventually awarded 3.8 million dollars for the injuries he sustained.

[2] This incident is explicitly connected to institutionalized racial intolerance, which spurred the investigation of an independent commission, informally known as the Christopher Commission. Accordingly, the incidents led to the resignation of LAPD Chief Daryl Gates, his replacement with black police chief Willie Williams, and other reforms related to citizen complaint systems and internal disciplinary measures.

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