Haunting and Derealization

A Study of Historical Representation in the Fiction of
Toni Morrison and E. L. Doctorow

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Abstract

This study will discuss history as essentially a narrative practice. Through omission and selection, the narratives of history can shape what, and who, is considered real. This study is concerned with investigating the different narrative structures involved in this through the concepts of haunting and derealization. As this thesis will show, these concepts are deeply interrelated: derealization signifies the narrative structures that aim to reduce the sense of reality attached to a person, or a group of people; while haunting signifies structures that venture to undo this harm performed by derealization—to restore a sense of reality to those who have been derealized. This study aims to show that these concepts can be considered as central to how we understand, and interact with, history. This will be explored through readings of Toni Morrison’s Beloved and E. L. Doctorow’s The Book of Daniel. While these novels are not usually considered together, this study aims to show that they share many common concerns, as both novels aim to provide an alternative to dominant forms of history through fiction.
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**Introduction**

History is pervaded by silences and invisibilities. In this study, history will be understood as essentially a narrative practice, which means that it operates through selection and omission. Because of this, history can never be fully representative, nor fully objective. Considering this, this study will investigate how narrative, and thus history, can shape what, and who, is considered real. The study investigates the different narrative structures involved in this through the concepts of *haunting* and *derealization*. As this study will show, these concepts are deeply interrelated: *derealization* signifies the narrative structures that aim to reduce the sense of reality attached to a person, or a group of people; while *haunting* signifies the structures that venture to undo this harm performed by the structures of derealization—to restore a sense of reality to those who have been derealized.

This will be explored through readings of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and E. L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* (1971). While these novels are not usually considered together, this study aims to show that they share many common concerns. Both novels work towards providing alternatives to dominant forms of history through the use of fiction. Both novels are concerned with historical events and with people who in various way have become derealized by historical narratives. *Beloved* is inspired by the historical Margaret Garner, an African American slave that killed one of her children in order to prevent it from being enslaved. *The Book of Daniel* is similarly inspired by the Rosenberg Case, that saw Julius and Ethel Rosenberg committed to death for supposedly leaking the secret of the atom bomb to the Soviet Union. Common to both Garner and the Rosenbergs is that their names are known to history due to their connection to dramatic and violent events, but little is known about what kind of lives they actually led. The historical narratives written about them are not concerned with either Garner or the Rosenbergs as people, but as concepts; that can be used in order to communicate sentiment in connection to the Cold War and slavery. In this way, both Garner and the Rosenbergs are victims of historical derealization. Through readings of these novels, the
study aims to show that the concepts of haunting and derealization can be considered as central to how we interact with, and comprehend, history.

**The Novels**

As discussed above, both *Beloved* and *The Book of Daniel* are based on historical events. *Beloved* is based on the story of Margaret Garner, who, along with a company of other slaves, escaped from Kentucky to the free state of Ohio in January 1856. Upon being exposed by slave catchers in Cincinnati, which meant that they would be taken back to slavery in Kentucky (under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act), Garner killed one of her children. This event caused a minor news sensation when it took place, and her story can be read in a number of different newspapers and memoirs from the time, one of them being the *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*.\(^1\) Levi Coffin was a famous abolitionist who resided in Cincinnati and who attempted to help Garner’s party of escaped slaves prior to them being exposed. While Coffin is sympathetic to Garner, his account of the event does not express anything about what this experience must have been like for Garner.\(^2\) Her voice is not present in Coffin’s account, nor in any of the other accounts that were written about her.

This is something that is addressed in *Beloved*, which was published more than a century later, in 1987. The novel provides a fictionalized account of Garner’s story, where Sethe (who takes Garner’s place in the story), eighteen years after the murder of her child, is haunted by the ghost of her child, who returns to her in the form of a young woman who calls herself “Beloved.” As it turns out, Beloved is more than just the ghost of Sethe’s daughter, however. As Beloved speaks about experiences appropriate to the middle passage, she comes to speak for the “Sixty Million or more,”\(^3\) nameless and disremembered African slaves that lost their lives to the Transatlantic slave trade. In this

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\(^2\) Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the reputed president of the underground railroad; being a brief history of the labors of a lifetime in behalf of the slave, with the stories of numerous fugitives, who gained their freedom through his instrumentality, and many other incidents* (Cincinnati: West Tract Society, 1876), 557.

way, *Beloved* ventures to “re-realize” both Garner and countless other slaves, whose experiences otherwise would be lost to history.

Due to the prevalence of ghosts of haunting in the novel, *Beloved* operates with a sense of reality that is (probably) foreign to many of its readers. As Sharon Holland in *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* brings to attention, many reviews of the novel involve a discussion of the Beloved-character and the plausibility of her return from death. Of these, many commented on the need to suspend disbelief in order to make sense of the plot of the novel.⁴ Holland argues that these problems were caused by *Beloved*’s “reversal of a trenchant Western paradigm: that those who die do not come back, that the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is finite and, therefore, never porous.”⁵ This is evident in Marilyn Atlas’ observation that reading *Beloved* made “some reviewers extremely uncomfortable.”⁶

Reading *Beloved* requires the reader to suspend their notion of reality in favor of the one the novel presents. Morrison’s aim with this is to make the reader enter into “a shared experience with the novel’s population,” an experience in which the reader is on equal ground with the characters of the novel.⁷ Within this reality, nobody questions the presence of ghosts. Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, explains the haunting of their house quite matter of factly: “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby.”⁸ Atlas claims that this has the effect of “forcing confrontations not usually required by literature.”⁹ She asserts that the critics that are unwilling to commit to this change of perspective are so due to a resistance to explore certain characters and issues:

These critics do not want to reflect upon these particular human issues and they are unable to see how exploring these new details from new perspectives permanently

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⁵ Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 1.
⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, xii.
⁸ Ibid, 6.
expands the tradition of American literature, and allows valuable characters into the world, ones they can see no value in examining.\textsuperscript{10} In other words, the inclusion of “unrealistic” elements such as ghosts and haunting in \textit{Beloved} forces the reader into a confrontation with the past that leads to different insights, some of which, some readers, being perhaps invested in other, more dominant narratives about the past, may be reluctant to approach.

This change of perspective is important, not because it involves the reader accepting the presence of the supernatural, but because this reorientation brings about a different relationship with the past and the inhabitants of that past. In accepting their reality, we allow the inhabitants of the past to retain a form of reality that is otherwise often not granted in historical narratives. This form of haunting works as motivation for taking the past seriously: it negates derealization by inhibiting the instinct that wants to separate the past from the present; that wants to simplify the past and make the it unreal, when it was real. This reality is important, because when it is not acknowledged, both past and present are falsified; as the present cannot either be understood without understanding the past.

While \textit{The Book of Daniel} was published over a decade earlier than \textit{Beloved}, in 1971, it is concerned with a much later event: the Rosenberg case during the McCarthy period in the early 1950s. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were tried, convicted and executed for espionage in 1953. They were accused of leaking secrets of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union, but their conviction required no physical evidences and was based chiefly in witness testimonies (given by Ethel’s brother, who was charged with the same conspiracy, but was treated more favorably for testifying against the Rosenbergs). Whether the Rosenbergs were guilty of the activities they were convicted for remains contested, although it is likely that at least Julius had some involvement in espionage for the Soviet Union during the 1940s, but that this was not related to the atomic bomb.\textsuperscript{11,12}

\textsuperscript{10} Marilyn Atlas cited in Holland, \textit{Raising the Dead}, 1.
The conviction and execution was controversial at the time and remains so still. Robert Meeropol, one of the sons of the Rosenbergs, maintains that, “The United States government knew all along that Ethel Rosenberg was not an espionage agent, and that Julius was not an atomic spy, but executed them both anyway.”

Jonathan Freedland, in introduction to *The Book of Daniel* describes the trial as “the underside of the American dream […] a peculiar American nightmare—a moment when the nation lost its head.”

*The Book of Daniel* portrays a fictionalization of the trial seen through the eyes of the adult son of the victims—who are called the Isaacsons in the novel. Consequently, the novel is occupied with two time periods simultaneously, the early 1950s of the Isaacsons, and the late 1960s of their son Daniel; the novel examines how Daniel and his sister struggles with forming meaning about their past and their parents’ execution in the political climate of the 60s.

In contrast to *Beloved*, *The Book of Daniel* is not a ghost novel. It does however involve itself with haunting in a different, less direct way. This can be seen, for example, in this scene, where the childhood of the main characters, Daniel and Susan, is portrayed as haunted:

> These ghosts were not strange sounds in the attic, nor were they mists who moaned in the midnight garden. These ghosts were ironies. These ghosts were slips of the tongue. They were brutal meanings in innocent remarks. They were the necessity to remain sensitive to your own words and gestures. These ghosts clung to the roof of your mouth, they hovered in your brain like fear, they resided in your muscles like nerves.

This scene depicts a form of haunting that is different from conventional ghost stories. The ghosts are not moaning figures in the attic or the garden, but “ironies” and “slips of the tongue;” things that reside in words, gestures and in muscles. The children are not haunted by a specific ghost, but by a past that cannot be resolved or done away with, a past that forces its presence upon them.

As I will discuss in more depth in my chapter on the novel, this has to do with a narrative problem. Derealization has ensured that there are no proper forms of narrative

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13 Meeropol, “Case Overview.”


available for the children to make sense of their experience of being orphaned. Because of this, all they are left with is a haunting that they cannot articulate. As the attention of the novel lies more on how these narrative structures are formed and the power they have over the individual, my discussion of *The Book of Daniel* will focus more on the narrative structures of derealization that produces this haunting, than the haunting itself.

*Beloved* and *The Book of Daniel* differ in many respects, both in style and topic matter, and are not regularly considered together. This will hopefully have the benefit of providing some breadth to the study and its insights—this also theoretically, as the novels are usually considered in somewhat separate (although not entirely) areas of criticism, mainly pertaining to African American studies/race studies, or poststructuralism. It is my hope that the combination of these novels can work to provide an intersectionalist perspective to the thesis, in which the historical oppression that is the concern of this study will be considered with attention to different forms of oppressions and how these may be combined.

Although different, the novels also have some interesting similarities, which this study hopefully will provide productive insight into. The novels do belong more or less to the same time period, as both were published in the late 20th-century. They both share characteristics associated with that period, especially of postmodernism: they are both (in different ways) concerned not only with telling a story, but with *how* the story is told, favoring ambiguous, fragmented and self-reflective modes of narration. This is evident in their approaches towards history, that appear influenced by post-structuralist sensibilities; seen in their attentiveness to ideology and skepticism towards the possibility of finding a “complete” truth, in literature, language, or anything else.

To address this, the narratives favor the search for “incomplete” and fragmentary forms of truth, that work to destabilize claims to the existence of any form of “complete” truth, as well as ideological appearances of such. This is seen, especially, in the lack of closure given in any of the novels; many questions are left unanswered, the identity of Beloved? the guilt of the Rosenbergs? These novels do not claim to have the answers to these questions. In this way, the novels are respectful of the fact that there are some parts of history that cannot be known, that are lost. Instead of making up solutions, and
in doing so, taking the risk of misrepresenting the events and the persons they are representing, these novels do something radical: they ask the reader to accept that some things cannot be known.

**History and Fiction**

It is clear that both Morrison and Doctorow are concerned with the limits of history and that this has been a central motivation for them in their writing. Doctorow posits a distinction between what should be regarded as *history* and what should be regarded as *myth*, in which myth describes the “end product of history,” distinguished by its inflexibility in opposition to history, which is inherently fragmentary and unstable. He maintains:

> What most people think of as history is its end product, myth. So to be irreverent to myth, to play with it, let in some light and air, to try to combust it back into history, is to risk being seen as someone who distorts truth.¹⁶

This conception of myth can be seen as comparable to derealization as both terms are used to describe how the reality of history is reduced into inflexible and simplified narratives.

Both *The Book of Daniel* and *Beloved* can be seen to address what Doctorow describes as mythic narratives of history. The historical events in question took place, as most do, in a social and political context that was decisive, not only for how the event has been interpreted later on, but also for the events to have occurred in the first place. It is impossible to imagine Margaret Garner without the context of American slavery, or the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, just as it is impossible to imagine the Rosenbergs without the Cold War, McCarthyism and the threatening backdrop of the atom bomb. Contemporary and later reports of these events must be read with these contexts in mind, as opinion was often heavily influenced by these events’ respective political landscapes, which would work to favor some interpretations and silence others.

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As Kathleen Brogan points out in *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*, history and fiction share that they are both expressed through narrative structures:

History and fiction […] are closer than we have realized, not because history lacks reference to reality, but because history relies on rhetorical and narrative strategies central to fiction in order to shape a coherent representation of reality.\(^{17}\)

This view is shared by Doctorow, who in the essay “False Documents,” contends that, history, like fiction, “shares a mode of mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning.”\(^{18}\) This commonality is central to this study, which will approach history and fiction not as separate, but interrelated forms of communication, and focus on this shared narrativity. This involves considering that history, just as fiction, is subject to the same characteristics as every other form of narrative; to bias, to inflexibility, to lack of representation. It also means that it is written by someone with purpose, in a concrete social and political context.

History is inevitably the result of selection and omission, like all narratives. Brogan, citing historian Lynn Hunt, observes that:

We are increasingly coming to see history, in historian Lynn Hunt’s words, not as a ‘repository of facts,’ but as a telling of stories. Hunt notes that history “is better defined as an ongoing tension between stories that have been told and stories that might be told.”\(^{19}\)

History is a form of story telling, just like fiction. In contrast to fiction, history is not entirely honest about how it functions, however. Although essentially similar, history and fiction are set apart by how they are understood within our society and by the expectations these categories inspire. While history is just as subjective and involved as fiction, it does not admit to it. Where history claims to describe reality, fiction does not. Doctorow suggests that exactly because of this, fiction may provide a superior alternative to history:

19 Brogan, *Cultural Haunting*, 17.
Novelists know explicitly that the world in which we live is still to be formed and that reality is amenable to any construction that is placed upon it. It is a world made for liars and we are born liars. But we [novelists] are to be trusted because ours is the only profession forced to admit that it lies—and that bestows upon us the mantle of honesty.\textsuperscript{20}

In his essay, Doctorow connects this to a discussion of the privileging of factuality within our society. Observing how we live in a society that privileges fact over fiction, Doctorow argues that facts are in themselves “infinitely violable,”\textsuperscript{21} since although facts are presented and thought of as objective, they are man-made and subjective. This view is supported by Herbert Marcuse, who maintains that, “pure objectivity reveals itself as \textit{object for a subjectivity}.”\textsuperscript{22} That is, the objectivity of the objective is only possible on the basis of some “subject” that can posit the objective as objective. Rather than expressing “essential” truths, facts reflect the values and dogmas of the society that has “discovered” them, as Doctorow maintains:

What we proclaim as the discovered factual world can be challenged as the questionable world we ourselves have painted—the cultural museum of our values, dogmas, assumptions, that prescribes for us not only what we may like and dislike, believe and disbelieve, but also what we may be permitted to see and not to see.\textsuperscript{23}

This privileging of facts may prove reductive when approaching the past. Hayden White, in “Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality” supports this view by observing:

A simply true account of the world based on what the documentary record permits one to talk about what happened in it at particular times, and places can provide knowledge of only a very small portion of what ‘reality’ consists of.\textsuperscript{24}

Facts, or “truth,” as White puts it, can suppress certain things, in many regards, facts only record what is important to the dominant ideology. In this way, silences and invisibilities are created. Historical narratives that are predominantly focused on factuality may thus, at least in some ways, be less truthful than those narratives that are less occu-

\textsuperscript{20} Doctorow, “False Documents,” 164.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 153.
\textsuperscript{22} Herbert Marcuse, \textit{One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society} (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 172, author’s italics.
\textsuperscript{23} Doctorow, “False Documents,” 153.
pied with factuality, as facts in themselves are easily corruptible by suppression and misconstruction. This it not to argue that facts are to be thrown out entirely, but that it is important to consider what the privileging of facts within our society and our way of writing history entails.

This privileging of facts explains, for example, why so little is known about the Atlantic slave trade, except estimations of numbers and sums of money, as well as charts of slave ships that depicts how the slaves were incarcerated—this was what was considered as important. This historical loss that this constitutes is central to Beloved, but the lack of historical record is also visible in other places. Considering both the Rosenbergs and Garner, there is a striking lack of personal testimony from any of the actual “main characters.” For example, as pointed out by Avery Gordon in Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, most of what is known about Margaret Garner is derived from the Cross, who may have set a couple of pages aside in his memoirs for the story about Garner, but in those pages the only report of Garner’s (supposed) own words was a few statements, and the entire story is surrounded by another story about Cross’ hat that appears just as important to the narrator.25

White submits that in order to get at the “real,” one needs not only facts, but an imagination of possibilities: “The real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be.”26 In this lies the understanding that facts alone cannot represent the past realistically, as facts do not present human experience. White argues that in order to represent reality, one needs artistic endeavor, or as he puts it: “The conjuring of the past requires art as well as information.”27 This notion is reflected in Morrison’s approach to Garner, as she writes that she “would invent [Garner’s] thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual.”28

Whereas accounts of history based exclusively in factuality can bring useful knowledge about past events, there is little these narratives can do to bring these events

25 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 159–160.
26 White, “Introduction,” 147.
27 Ibid, 149.
28 Morrison, Beloved, xi.
to life. While the epigraph to Beloved, “Sixty Million and more,” is an assessment of the number of African slaves believed to have died as a result of the Transatlantic slave trade, there is little that number alone can do to make us understand what this may have meant. The rest of Beloved can be seen as a way of working towards other ways of making sense of that loss. Fictionalized accounts of history address the places in which facts are insufficient, or lacking, to make sense of past events, and work to provide an alternate approach.

Fiction provides ways of knowing beyond the mere recognition of facts. Fiction’s inherent flexibility; its ability to communicate subtle meanings, to handle nuance and ambiguity; allows for alternative ways of communication. Doctorow argues that fiction has the ability to communicate something more than just information:

Fiction is not entirely a rational means of discourse. It gives the reader something more than information. Complex understandings, indirect, intuitive, and nonverbal, arise from the words of the story, and by ritual transaction between reader and writer, instructive emotion is generated in the reader from the illusion of suffering an experience not his own. A novel is a printed circuit through which flows the force of a reader’s own life.29

Because of this, fiction may provide a way for derealized history to attain a form of “re-realization;” in Beloved, the past takes on bodily form and walks right in through Sethe’s front door. Fiction may present a way to approach forms of history that are not accessible, nor comprehensible, by factuality. As Marcuse proclaims: “Fiction calls the facts by their name and their reign collapses: fiction subverts everyday experience and shows it to be mutilated and false.”30

**Derealization and Haunting**

Key to this discussion about history is the concept of derealization. In Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence, Judith Butler considers American and global politics in the wake of 9/11. As part of this, she discusses how certain lives are publicly grievable, while others are not, pointing out that, “certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ung-
rievable.” While the American losses at 9/11 became nationally commemorated, with the names and images of the victims publicly shown and memorialized, the same if not true of the victims of the conflicts the United States has participated in the aftermath of the attacks:

we seldom, if ever, hear the names of the thousands of Palestinians who have died by the Israeli military with United States support, or any number of Afghan people, children or adults. Do they have names and faces, personal histories, family, favorite hobbies, slogans by which they live?

In this, Butler draws attention to that mourning has a political dimension that says something about what a culture does and does not value.

To Butler, mourning is a category that excludes as well as it includes. She argues that there is a “hierarchy of grief,” which can be determined from the genre of the obituary, in which some lives are “quickly tidied up and summarized, humanized,” and others are not even mentioned. From these structures a normative category of humanity can be identified, from which many are excluded, often on the basis of race, gender and/or sexuality, as well as geographic location (such as the global south) and nationality. This exclusion takes the form of derealization—the denial of reality. This, Butler writes, is a matter of “an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?” Derealization is how reality is remade in order to exclude.

To Butler, derealization exists in a mutual relationship to physical violence, where both mutually enable and reinforce the other: derealization marks the person as accessible to violence, while violence marks the person as accessible to derealization. Butler writes: “dehumanization [derealization] […] gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization already at work in the culture.”

Derealization facilitates different forms of violation, but it is also a form of violation in

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33 Ibid, 32.
34 Ibid, 33.
itself, as a denial of the recognition of humanity. This denial marks a person as available to for suppression, or to killed with impunity.

Both *Beloved* and *The Book of Daniel* contain explorations of how persons are reduced into something less than real. In *Beloved*, this is seen, for example, as Paul D learns his price:

Paul D hears the men talking and for the first time learns his worth. He has always known, or believed he did, his value—as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on a farm—but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future.36

The slave owners do not recognize Paul D as a person, but as a sum of money, connected to his various physical and mental capabilities. Through this, Morrison explores how slavery functioned through a system of reality that denied the enslaved the recognition of humanity and personhood. This is also seen in *The Book of Daniel*, as Rochelle Isaacson, Daniel’s mother, feels herself reduced to something less than real during her trial:

She wanted to extract from that miserable deathface an acknowledgment of her real existence. She could reconcile her persecution, her death, but never a delusion so monstrous that it did not grant her the truth of her own life.37

This denial of reality makes Paul D available for enslavement and Rochelle for execution.

Derealization is important to history because these processes of denial are continued after the death of the derealized person. Derealization becomes part of the processes that produces the kind of history that Doctorow describes as “myth.” Nation-building, which usually has its foundation precisely in myth, is also defined by derealization. Anthropologist Michael Taussig, proposes the term “space of death” to describe a culture’s imagination of its dead. This “space of death,” Taussig maintains, is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness, nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes.”38 Holland expands upon this by suggesting that much of the American “space of death” often is relegated to a

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“national subconscious.”

Her central example of this is slavery, which she claims is not necessarily present in narratives of American history and identity:

We have chosen to relegate these experiences to the calmer reaches of our national subconscious, and most Americans would tell a far different story about the founding of our fair republic and contemporary life among its peoples.

This shows that derealization can impact a culture’s way of understanding itself and its history. This is something I will consider in more depth in the second chapter.

As discussed above, haunting aims to repair the damage performed by derealization. In certain ways, both *The Book of Daniel* and *Beloved* portray American culture as haunted by versions of history that have been suppressed and derealized. Butler argues that although the violation of derealization attempts to negate lives, it cannot ever be entirely successful. She points out that, “If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated.”

Since the person is already established as unreal, they are neither dead nor alive, and in this way they cannot either, at least from the perspective of violence, truly be killed or negated. This grants the derealized a certain spectrality:

[the derealized] have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they were always already lost or, rather, never ‘were,’ and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the ‘Other’ means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral.

Butler suggests that, “a national melancholia, understood as a disavowed mourning, follows upon the erasure from public representations of the names, images, and narratives of those the US has killed.”

This melancholia is discernible in Morrison’s motivation for writing *Beloved*:

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40 Ibid.
42 Ibid, 33–34.
43 Ibid, xiv.
There is no place where I can go, or where you can go, and think about, or not think about, or summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of—slaves. […] Something that reminds us of the ones who made the journey, and those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial—or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There’s no three hundred foot tower. […] And because such a place doesn’t exist that I know of, the book had to.\textsuperscript{44}

I will suggest that this melancholia consists of a form of haunting, and that it can be addressed through literature. As discussed above, Butler sees that the dead are recognized through public demonstrations of grief, such as obituaries and monuments. This can however also be done through literature. \textit{Beloved} opens with the epigraph of “Sixty Million and more.”\textsuperscript{45} which speaks about a group of people that have be derealized so successfully that little more than this number remain of them. Just as Morrison suggests in the citation above, the epigraph suggests also that the novel can be seen as a form of monument to this loss. This is reinforced by the second epigraph, which suggests that \textit{Beloved} works to claim this people as its own and to bring them recognition:

\begin{quote}
I will call them my people,  
which were not my people:  
and her beloved,  
which was not beloved.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

This is also present in \textit{The Book of Daniel}, where the three epigraphs of the novel suggest that the novel is concerned with the derealization, both of the oppressed; with the reference to the biblical Daniel; and the “conquer’d and slain persons,” through its citation of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” The final epigraph is from Allen Ginsberg’s “America,” and reads:

\begin{quote}
America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing ….  
I can’t stand my own mind.  
America when will we end the human war?  
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

This epigraphs marks that \textit{The Book of Daniel} is not only concerned with derealization, but also the experience of it. Like the narrator of “America,” Daniel also finds that he


\textsuperscript{45} Morrison, \textit{Beloved}.

\textsuperscript{46} Romans 9:25 cited in Morrison, \textit{Beloved}.

\textsuperscript{47} Allen Ginsberg cited in Doctorow, \textit{Daniel}.
has given America “all.” America, with its participation in the Cold War and its use of the atom bomb has reduced Daniel, just as the narrator, to “nothing,” to someone who “can’t stand his own mind.”

Derealization is not only a question of historical representation, but also of experience. In my discussion of Beloved, I will examine how the novel, not only gives the slaves the historical representation they have been missing, but also, as part of this, portrays the experience of being derealized. Derealization is thus not only a process of outward definition, but also a process that can come to define and destroy the life of the one who is being derealized, as an internalized process of self-destruction.

In order for literature to prove a successful alternative to the derealization of history, it needs not only to insist on reality, but to convey it. This is done through haunting. Haunting is what is left after the processes of derealization has reduced history to something less than real; it exists at the margins of history. Unacknowledged does however not mean silent, just as invisible does not mean non-existent. At times, haunting talks back to history and informs it of its flaws. Brogan writes:

Like history, ghost stories attempt to bring the dead back to life. In contemporary haunted literature, ghost stories are offered as an alternative—or challenge—to “official,” dominant history.”

As argued above, history is pervaded by silences and invisibilities. However, as Morrison brings to attention, that something is invisible does not mean it does not exist:

We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily ‘not-there’; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them.

As Morrison observes, these invisibilities call attention to themselves—in a way that can be seen as haunting. Haunting involves recognizing things have not been acknowledged by any dominant narratives and giving these things attention. Gordon writes that examining haunting involves “investigating how things that appear absent can indeed be

48 Brogan, Cultural Haunting, 17.
49 Toni Morrison cited in Holland, Raising the Dead, 11.
a seething presence.” Acknowledging haunting means recognizing the existence of that which has been defined out of reality. In this way, haunting may provide a way to reverse derealization.

This study will consider haunting and derealization as primarily practices of narrative that shape what, and who, can be considered as real. Where derealization, by structures of narrative, works towards retracting and reducing the sense of reality attached certain people; haunting works to establish alternative narrative structures that may reverse this.

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50 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 8.
1 Haunting in *Beloved*

In this chapter, I will consider how narrative structures of haunting can be employed in order to reconsider history. I will argue that the use of haunting in Beloved allows for alternate approaches to history, that not only enable the retrieval of historical “blindspots,” but that also constitutes a restructuring of what kind of narratives we are able to form about history. Narrative structures of haunting provides a way to approach the past while remaining respectful of the past’s opacity, its impenetrableness. Because of this, haunting may provide a way to approach those described by Butler as the “de-realized Other;” to make lives that were “ungrievable,” “grievable.” I will suggest that the use of these structures has an impact on different levels: it works to “re-realize” lives and experiences, both on an individual level, and a communal one.

I will consider the ways in which Morrison employs structures of haunting to address what has been largely left out of dominant historical narratives; the physical and cognitive experience of being enslaved. I will argue that Beloved’s haunting in the novel constitutes a return of the past in which the conditions of enslavement are prolonged. These conditions are to be considered in relation with the historical treatment of the lives of slaves, as both takes the form of a derealization of the person. In this way, haunting connects the epistemic violence of historical neglect to the physical and cognitive violations of enslavement.

This discussion will build on various parts of Morrison scholarship, especially pertaining to the role of the ghost and haunting in the novel. Most prominently, I will rely on Pamela Barnett’s reading in of the Beloved-character as presented in “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*.” Barnett proposes that Beloved can be read as a succubus figure, who drains the life force of Sethe and Paul D, thereby establishing a metaphor to how rape was institutionalized under slavery.\(^1\) I will connect Barnett argument to a discussion of derealization, arguing that Beloved, in her haunting of Sethe and Paul D, brings about the effects of derealization upon them.

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1.1 The Slave Narrative

Morrison writes in the essay “The Site of Memory” that, “the print origins of black literature (as distinguished from the oral origins) were slave narratives,” narratives in the forms of memoir, autobiographies and recollections, that in different ways told of the experiences of slaves. In the essay, Morrison appreciates their importance for her historical and literary heritage, although she also discusses some of the limitations she finds with this genre and how she works to address these limitations in her own literary project. *Beloved* can be seen as a reworking of this genre, as is argued, for example, by Sherryl Vint in “‘Only by Experience’: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives.” Vint frames *Beloved* as a *neo-slave narrative*, “an African American genre that investigates the history of slavery and reworks the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition.”

In her essay, Morrison argues that the slave narratives were, as all forms of historical writing, limited by the context in which they were produced. This criticism must be understood as in no way underestimating either these narratives’ historical or literary value, but as a discussion of the limitations of time and environment. These put restrictions on what the narratives could include, as well as the form in which they were written. It was of utmost importance that the narrative presented events in a logical and believable way and as objectively as possible. This can be seen, for example, in the preface to Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which aims to convince the reader that the events of the narrative are in fact true:

> Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts. I have concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names. I had

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no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course.

As the narratives were concerned first and foremost with changing public opinion in favor of abolition, it was important that the narratives were both believable and palatable to the intended white audience.

This motive put restrictions on the narratives that were determined by the social context and literary fashions of the time, which involved a 19th-century reluctance to approach topics that would be seen as too violent, brutal or unseemly. This concern is evident in Jacobs’ *Incidents*, which described the struggles of “Linda Brent” (Jacob’s pseudonym for herself) growing up as a slave in North Carolina. Unlike many other slave narratives, *Incidents* focuses specifically on female experiences of slavery, exploring the sexual abuse faced by many slave women, as well as what it meant to have children and be a mother under that system of oppression. As these are concerns that are also central to *Beloved*, it makes sense to consider these narratives together in this discussion.

*Incidents*’ intended audience was “the women of the North,” who needed to realize that there were still “two million women at [sic] the South, still in bondage, suffering what [Jacob’s had] suffered, and most of them far worse.” Jacobs thus took on the challenging task of writing to 19th century white women about the sexual abuse slave women were subjected to in a manner of style that attempted to offend as little as possible, while still maintaining its central purpose. This problem shows that there was an inherent paradox to the slave narrative: the narrative had to be sufficiently palatable in order for it to be read—slavery, on the other hand, was anything but palatable, and the narrative had to communicate this without being unpalatable itself.

Lydia Maria Child, a famous abolitionist of the time, shows her awareness of this problem in her introduction to *Incidents*:

I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belongs to a class some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This particular phase of

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5 Ibid, 5.
Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I am willing to take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn.\textsuperscript{6}

The metaphor of a veil drawn or withdrawn is apt for describing the nature of the slave narrative: it was a balancing act between revelation and concealment. The narratives operated on the assumption that if people were to understand the horror of slavery, it could no longer be supported. However, this revelation needed to be wrapped up in such a manner as it to appear both believable and palatable.

This is something that Morrison reflects upon in “The Site of Memory”:

Whenever there was an unusually violent incident, or a scatological one, or something ‘excessive,’ one finds the writer taking refuge in the literary conventions of the day. […] Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, ‘But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.’ In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things.\textsuperscript{7}

Morrison is concerned with the loss this “veil” entailed, especially for what she describes as the “interior life” of slaves.\textsuperscript{8} Although the narratives were written by slaves about their lives, they had to refrain from expressing too much subjectivity, for even though the narratives were about slavery, they were not really about the slaves. Jacobs wrote that, “I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings.”\textsuperscript{9} Jacobs wants to leave herself out of the discussion, something that likely shows her awareness that the discourse on slavery was not really interested in her opinion, nor her subjectivity. As Morrison maintains, being black, or belonging to a marginalized category, historically meant that “we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.”\textsuperscript{10}

The loss that this veil constitutes becomes Morrison’s motivation in writing. She writes that:

\textsuperscript{6} Lydia Maria Child, cited in Jacobs, \textit{Incidents}, 6.
\textsuperscript{7} Morrison, “Site,” 109–110.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, 110–111.
\textsuperscript{9} Jacobs, \textit{Incidents}, 5.
\textsuperscript{10} Morrison, “Site,” 111.
For me—a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after the Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman—the exercise is very different. My job becomes to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate.’

Her fiction is invested in rediscovering “interior lives,” through the methods available to her, memory and imagination. While the slave narratives are primarily about the institution of slavery, not about the slaves themselves, neo-slave narratives such as Beloved are invested in the slaves themselves and in their experiences. As Morrison puts it:

The book was not about the institution—Slavery with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves…. When I say Beloved is not about slavery, I mean that the story is not slavery. The story is these people—these people who didn’t know they’re in an era of historical interest. They just know they have to get through the day.

Although Beloved and Incidents share many of the same interests, they approach them in different ways. As Vint observes, the motive of the neo-slave narrative is necessarily different from that of the slave narrative. While the 19th-century slave narrative was primarily concerned with providing information and changing public opinion on slavery, the neo-slave narrative is concerned with history, with how slavery is remembered and understood in the present. Due to these differences in motive, the focus and form of these different forms of narrative are also necessarily different.

This is seen, for example, in Beloved’s emphasis on physicality and embodied experience, which is one of the ways in which the novel distinguishes itself as a neo-slave narrative. Vint argues that the neo-slave narrative presents an embodiment of the slave experience that was not previously available in the slave narrative, as the slave narrative needed to be careful of how it presented the body. She writes:

As slave narratives aimed to show their black protagonists’ humanity, they required the demonstration of bodily suffering to guarantee authenticity and to spur the reader into sympathy, yet they also needed to avoid reducing the narrating subject to his or her suffering body.

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13 Vint, “Only by Experience,” 244.
Add to this the need, as discussed above, to be palatable; to avoid describing anything “unusually violent” or “excessive.”\textsuperscript{14}

Vint’s reading of \textit{Beloved}, along with Octavia Butler’s \textit{Kindred}, suggests that American culture, and particularly African-American culture, needs to come to terms with the unresolved trauma of slavery, something that will only happen through the focus on the embodied experience of slavery. \textit{Kindred} tells the story of a young African-American woman, Dana, who is drawn back in time to the antebellum south, where she becomes enslaved by her white ancestor at his plantation. Throughout her experience at the plantation, Dana realizes that her contemporary notions about slavery were naive, as they failed to take into account the constant threats of violence and degradations the slaves had to live with.\textsuperscript{15} Vint suggests that \textit{Beloved} also works in this manner, by restructuring the narratives about slavery in a way that forefronts embodied experience. She argues that neo-slave narratives such as \textit{Beloved} and \textit{Kindred} offer “a corrective to official discourse by adding the interior life of the slave; both emphasize the importance of the body and embodied experience for coming to terms with the past of slavery and its pernicious effects.”\textsuperscript{16}

As \textit{Beloved} very distinctly demonstrates, the neo-slave narrative is also less restricted by realism. While the slave narrative needed to adhere to a rather strict form of realism in order for its political project to be taken with the seriousness it deserved, the neo-slave narrative is free to play with the reader’s sense of reality in a completely different manner. While the inclusion of a ghost as one of the central characters in a slave narrative may have seriously hurt the narrative’s observed authenticity and believability, this is not so for the neo-slave narrative.

Although the presence of fantastic elements in \textit{Beloved} had the effect of leaving some critics “extremely uncomfortable,”\textsuperscript{17} it is rather safe to say that the inclusion of these elements have in no way hindered the novel’s success—if anything, they might have enhanced it. It is also, admittedly, very difficult to imagine \textit{Beloved} without these

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
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\item Morrison, “Site,” 109.
\item Octavia Butler, \textit{Kindred} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).
\item Vint, “Only by Experience,” 245.
\item Marilyn Atlas cited in Holland, \textit{Raising the Dead}, 1.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
elements, as they are so central to the novel’s core, both thematically and for the plot. Contrary to the slave narrative, *Beloved* is not interested in making its messages either palatable or comfortable for its readers. In her introduction to the novel, Morrison frames the reader’s entry into the novel as a form of forced removal that is comparable to how the slaves themselves were moved around without warning or protection:

> There would be no lobby into this house [124] and there would be no “introduction” into it or the novel. I wanted the reader kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to any other, without preparation or defense.  

This shared experience involves, as I have already argued in the introduction, that the reader must accept a version of reality that is (probably) foreign to them, in which the return of the dead is as natural as the sun in the sky.

To Morrison, the use of the fantastic is important in order to bring the past back to life. She writes that in order to remove “that veil” of the slave narrative, she needs not only memory and recollection, but also invention: “If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic.” This seems to reflect the argument made by Hayden White that, “The conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information.” Art involves invention and imagination. Similarly to Doctorow, Morrison is not interested in the distinction between fact and fiction, instead she focuses on the distinction between facts and truth: “Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot.” In this way, imagination proves a way to discover truth about that “interior life” of the slaves that is lacking from the slave narratives. This truth is not concerned with realism, but with a reality of experience, regardless of the fantastic. She writes: “I consider that my single gravest responsibility (in spite of that magic) is not to lie.”

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18 Morrison, *Beloved*, xii.
19 Sethe and Denver understood “the source of the outrage [of the baby ghost] as well as they knew the source of light.” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 4).
21 White, “Introduction,” 149.
23 Ibid, 110.
24 Ibid.
1.2 Forms of Haunting

In the following three sections I will investigate the different forms of haunting that can be found in *Beloved* and discuss what effects they have. This thesis maintains that haunting is something that can happen in any narrative, regardless of whether or not there actually is a ghost present. *Beloved* is not short of this type of haunting, as the main characters all are in various ways traumatized and haunted by their respective pasts.

The concept of “rememory,” as presented by Sethe in the novel, can be seen as a theory of a form of haunting that takes place without the presence of a ghost. What exactly Sethe, or Morrison, means by this term is somewhat ambiguous, and different critics provide different interpretations. My interpretation of the term is influenced by Marisa Parham, who in *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture* contends that rememory represents “a theory of how memory circulates, how it crosses boundaries between people, how it haunts.”

This is seen in the novel as Sethe tells Denver about how her own experiences of slavery at Sweet Home in Kentucky not only haunts herself, but may also haunt her daughter. She tells 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 someone 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.

There are a number of different things going on here: the concept seems to describe a conflation of time, space, and person—in which experience moves freely in between. This conflation characterizes rememory as a form of haunting: the characters are haunted by a past that will not stay in the past, and by experiences from the past, some of which, are not even their own (this is especially true for Denver), but that regardless, define their present existence.

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26 Morrison, *Beloved*, 43–44.
An example of rememory in action can be found at the beginning of the novel, in which Sethe, occupied with the present and with everyday undertakings, finds herself drawn into the past. This passage starts somewhat ironically by stating that, “Nothing else would be in her mind,” only to present images that certainly do not belong to Sethe’s present:

The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back were where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made.

Although the novel is yet to reveal their significance, these images function as shorthand for some (but not all) of Sethe’s most traumatic memories. This event effectively shows how Sethe, despite all her efforts, is unable to live just in the present. Her conception of rememory is based in a fixed view of time:

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.

Through rememory, time is conflated so that past and present cannot be separated. Rememory functions in the novel as figure for the return of the past. This shows the ways in which the characters of the novel have not been able to move on from their past trauma, which still possesses them.

Rememory’s ambiguous form of haunting is however easily overshadowed by the appearance of Beloved—an actual ghost. Beloved’s character is remarkable for many reasons. One of these is her physicality—she is a strikingly physical ghost. Ghosts are usually seen and heard, but not that often touched. That is not the case for Beloved. From her first appearance and onwards, the text gives special attention to the reality of Beloved’s body. The narrative describes how “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water,” to spend a day and a night gathering herself after what appears to have been an

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27 Morrison, Beloved, 6.
28 Ibid, 6.
29 Ibid, 43.
30 Ibid, 60.
exhaustive journey. The narrative spends more than a page at just describing the physical state of Beloved, as she rests on a stump close to 124:

All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in her straw hat. Everything hurt but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids. [...] It took her the whole of the next morning to lift herself from the ground and make her way [...].

The first impressions of Beloved is of someone who is so physically exhausted that it completely defines their being, she is not able to do anything.

As Beloved is discovered by Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, something even more curious happens. As Sethe lays eyes on Beloved’s face, she finds herself in desperate need to urinate:

And, for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe’s bladder filled to capacity. [...] Not since she was a baby girl, being cared for by the eight-year-old girl who pointed out her mother to her, had she had an emergency that unmanageable. She never made the outhouse. Right in front of the door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless.

This sudden emergency seems to contain more than just the need to urinate; Sethe “voids water,” which is suggestive of the womb. Furthermore, she is reminded of her water breaking in the boat over the Mississippi river, on her way to escape Kentucky and Sweet Home—she mentally connects what is happening to giving birth: “there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now.”

Somehow, this sudden emergency is connected to Beloved’s appearance—she transfixes Sethe both physically and mentally: she needs to urinate, she is reminded of the experience of giving birth. Some of Beloved’s nature is indicated already in this scene: she is not a completely ordinary woman, her presence has an uncanny effect on other people, both to transfix their bodies and to spur what can be seen as rememory, a reemergence of the past. Although the hold the past maintains over the characters is already well established at this point, the arrival of Beloved exacerbates it.

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31 Morrison, Beloved, 60.
32 Ibid, 61.
33 Ibid.
In the aforementioned scene, the language used in describing and characterizing Beloved continuously directs attention to her body, while the effect of Beloved’s appearance on Sethe is also primarily physical—it triggers a reaction in her body. The attention on water (as well as urine) is interesting: when Sethe arrives inside 124, she finds “Paul D and Denver standing before the stranger, watching her drink cup after cup of water.”34 Beloved arrives from water, but is nevertheless incredibly thirsty, exhausted and disoriented—something that is suggestive, not only of being born, but also of the middle passage, which would leave one in similar (if not worse) physical condition. The water not only establishes Sethe and Beloved’s mother–daughter relationship, but re-enacts some of the physical experiences of slavery upon them—out of context: Sethe has the experience of giving birth, while Beloved has that of arriving through the middle passage (something that is also supported by her later monologue). Beloved’s condition in this sequence hints about of the trauma she carries with her, as a sort of vessel of trauma connected to slavery. Interestingly, the sequence shows that trauma not only affects the people Beloved comes into contact with, but also herself.

While, as I have pointed out, there is much focus on the physical experiences of both women, these experiences also have cognitive effects: Sethe is reminded—or experiences a rememory—of her water breaking in the boat over the Mississippi river, on her way to escape Kentucky and the slavery of Sweet Home. This connects her meeting with Beloved, and her need to urinate, to giving birth: “there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now.”35 As I wish to show in my further analysis, this is very indicative of Beloved’s mode of haunting, which happens both to body and mind simultaneously. As pointed out by Vint, the novel rejects the liberal humanist tendency to see the subject as defined by the mind/body dualism, in favor of a view of mind and body as integral to each other.36

Beloved is also remarkable because of the mystery she represents. Throughout the novel, she is an enigma, neither the readers, nor the characters in the novel do ever truly get to know what, or who she is. Her character is also very different from what you

34 Morrison, Beloved, 61.
35 Ibid.
36 Vint, “Only by Experience,” 244.
would typically find in any slave narrative, she is neither identifiable, coherent, nor plausible. Even when considered along with other ghost characters, she does not really fit in. Most ghosts characters are actually more easily definable than Beloved. Shakespeare serves as an apt example of this: his ghosts are usually clearly identified, and further, serve a specific function in the plot, either, as the ghost of the old king in *Hamlet*, to present information and set the plot into action, or as Banquo in *Macbeth*, to reflect on Macbeth’s mental state.

As pointed out by Robert L. Broad in “Giving Blood to the Scraps: Haints, History and Hosea in Beloved,” this kind of definition is completely lacking from Beloved’s character. He writes: “The question ‘Who the hell is Beloved?’ must haunt every reader of the novel, just as it hounds the characters Sethe, Denver and Paul D.”37 Beloved is never properly identified in the novel, although several of the characters assume for the larger part of the novel that she is Sethe’s “crawling-already? baby,” returned from death. There are signs that support this assumption: Beloved shares her name with the one on the baby’s tombstone and she also bears the marks of Sethe’s fingernails at her forehead, and of her handsaw at her throat—and she knows Sethe’s three tone tune, that Sethe only shared with her children.

As Broad sees it, this conception of Beloved as the ghost of Sethe’s daughter appears reasonable until the reader arrives at her interior monologue at the end of the second part of the novel: “Only when we gain access to [Beloved’s] thoughts, with the benefit of the interior monologue beginning on page 210, does this tidy conception fly apart.”38 At this point in the novel, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved each have a monologue. Both Sethe’s and Denver’s confirm the previous suspicions, claiming Beloved as their daughter/sister: “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine,”39 and “Beloved is my sister.”40 The expectations are set up for Beloved to repeat this as well—she does not. Similarly to Sethe and Denver, Beloved also opens with a statement about her identity. However,

38 Ibid.
in contrast to them, her claim is only about herself, and not about her relation to any-
body else: “I am Beloved and she is mine.”[41] What follows is a passage that Broad cha-

terizes as “excessively demanding” and “incomprehensible,”[42] which is written in a

style that is exceptionally convoluted, and that manages to complicate Beloved’s iden-
tity significantly.

From what can be gathered from reading the monologue, Beloved has memories

of the middle passage, of Africa and of a journey on a slave ship over to the Americas.
As part of this, Beloved as claims Sethe to be hers, in seemingly in harmony with the

two previous monologues. It does however appear that she conflates Sethe with a diffe-

rent mother figure, who similarly to Sethe acts out a kind of “betrayal” of her child, by

pretending to be dead and being thrown off the slave ship:

Sethe went into the sea. She went there. They did not push her. She went there. She

was getting ready to smile at me and she saw the dead people pushed into the sea she
went also and left me there with no face of hers.[43]

This betrayal is perhaps comparable to the one Sethe acts out against her child by killing

her. This suggests that Sethe’s betrayal is not just a one-time event. Rather, it presents

an archetype of what happens to mother-daughter relationships as result of the violation

of enslavement.

Not long after the monologues, Beloved’s identity is further complicated by

Stamp Paid telling Paul D that, “Was a girl locked up in the house of a whiteman over
by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that’s her. Folks
say he had her in there since she was a pup.”[44] This suggests that Beloved may not even

be a ghost at all, but a victim of sexual enslavement and imprisonment.

This compiliation of Beloved’ identity indicates that whatever Beloved is, she is

more than just Sethe’s daughter. This suggests that one may read Beloved as more than

just any one daughter—as an amalgamation of daughters, hurt and betrayed through the

processes of racial violence and enslavement. The novel plays different suggestions

[41] Morrison, Beloved, 249.
[44] Ibid, 277.
about Beloved’s identity and nature against each other in a way that creates a system of
deferral, where nothing can truly be known, only intimated. Beloved is defined, more
than anything else, by her multiplicity. Her character is set in juxtaposition, she appears
both young and old simultaneously:

A young woman, about nineteen or twenty, and slender, she moved like a heavier one
or an older one, holding on to furniture, resting her head in the palm of her hand as
though it was too heavy for a neck alone.45

She moves as though there is more to her than what meets the eye. Nevertheless, when
she first appears at 124, she is curiously unmarked, appearing almost as a blank slate;
with new skin, “She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her
hands;”46 and empty eyes, “It was that deep down in those big black eyes there was no
expression at all.”47

The best answer to who Beloved is in the novel is perhaps the one Denver gives
to Paul D at the end of the novel:

“Uh, that girl. You know. Beloved?”
“Yes?”
“You think she sure ‘enough your sister?”
[…] At times. At times I think she was—more.”48

What Beloved is, and what she brings with her, is more than one story of neglect and
maltreatment. Because she is not identifiable, Beloved becomes something more than
just one story. As Brogan points out:

When the ghost in Morrison’s Beloved speaks about her life in the grave in terms ap-
propriate to the slave ships, she clearly becomes more than an externalization of one
character’s longing and guilt; her return represents the return of all dead enslaved
Africans.49

Beloved becomes an emblem of those “Sixty million and more” lost through the Atlan-
tic slave trade, mentioned in the novel’s epigraph, as well as the nameless and forgotten

45 Morrison, Beloved, 66–67.
46 Ibid, 61.
48 Ibid, 314, my italics.
49 Brogan, Cultural Haunting, 5.
people who lived and suffered through slavery, without ever having the chance to tell their story, or to put it in a slave narrative.

Beloved is thus the amalgamation of the “Disremembered and unaccounted for,”\textsuperscript{50} those Butler describes as the “unreal,”\textsuperscript{51} who are “interminably spectral,”\textsuperscript{52} as violence attempts to negate their existence, but can never be entirely successful in doing so. At the end of the novel, Beloved is exorcised and forgotten, but she does not disappear entirely. The haunting goes on:

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but they don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do.\textsuperscript{53}

As is repeated several times at the end of the novel, “This is not a story to pass on.”\textsuperscript{54} What Beloved brings with her is what people would rather forget than remember. But unseen and uncared for, we must assume from the ending that Beloved is out there still.

*Beloved* can thus be seen as a conjuring act. It is a novel that not only contains the story of a haunting, but also figures one at a larger level: it brings us, as readers, face to face with her, Beloved. The novel works to “re-realize” the lives of the slaves and their experiences which again must have the effect of restructuring what narratives we can form about American history and culture. *Beloved* suggests that there is something of the past that still lingers on, something that has remained forgotten for too long, and that is in need of attention.

This has to do with the “interior life” of the slave that Morrison found missing form the slave narratives,\textsuperscript{55} which is present in Sethe’s “rememory,” as well as Beloved’s experiences. Harriet Jacobs writes, “Only by experience, can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is [slavery] that pit of abominations.”\textsuperscript{56} Morrison, like Jacobs,

\textsuperscript{50}Morrison, *Beloved*, 323.
\textsuperscript{51}Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33.
\textsuperscript{52}Ibid, 34.
\textsuperscript{53}Morrison, *Beloved*, 324.
\textsuperscript{54}Ibid, 323–324.
\textsuperscript{55}Morrison, “Site,” 110.
\textsuperscript{56}Jacobs, *Incidents*, 5.
works to share that experience, but the way in which she does so is quite different. *Beloved* brings the reader into a confrontation with the past, where they can not only learn about, but also relate to, the slave experience through that “interior life.”

Marisa Parham, in *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture*, provides a framework for understanding haunting as a form of relation. She contends that haunting presents a way in which experience can shared between the subject and the other:

> Being haunted means struggling with things that come to us from outside our discrete experiences of the world, but which we nonetheless experience as emerging out of our own psyches. Such experiences trouble boundaries between self and other in their disintegration of boundaries between personal and political.\(^{57}\)

In Parham’s conception, haunting designates how the subject may have experiences that do not, strictly speaking, belong to them, but that are transmitted from someone else’s experience—the other. This experience is nevertheless experienced as integral to the subject themselves, Parham exemplifies this difference by comparing the difference of being told about of a “catastrophic event,” and dreaming about the same event as if it happened to you:

> Someone might tell you, for instance, of a catastrophic event that he or she has experienced. A basic emphatic desire might prompt you to declare: ‘I feel your pain,’ even as you know this is not fully possible; you do not feel this pain. But how do you talk about the next morning, when, after a night of sweating through your own dream-versions of the story, you realize that despite your waking something has stayed with you, something has changed about you?\(^{58}\)

Haunting, like dreaming, describes how the subject may experience the other’s experience; not from an outside position, as if reading of something in the newspaper or listening to the radio, but in the subject position. Parham presents this form of experience (or re-experience, as it really is a re-experience of someone else’s experience) as powerful enough to change the subject themselves. Parham maintains that haunting can have the effect of making experiences that do not belong to you accessible from a subjective position. In other words, it can provide a way to consider events from an in-

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\(^{58}\) Ibid, 2, author’s italics.
volved position. This can contribute to a “re-realization” of history, as events that otherwise may appear removed and unreal are provided with actuality.

Similarly to Parham, Caroline Rody, in the article “Toni Morrison’s Beloved: History, ‘Rememory,’ and a ‘Clamor for a Kiss,’” Rody sees haunting as form of relation. She suggests that this relation forms an access to the collective history. She argues that this happens through rememory, which “postulates the interconnectedness of minds, past and present,” and thus has the effect of “neatly conjoin[ing] the novel’s supernatural vision with its aspiration to communal epic, realizing the ‘collective memory’ of which Morrison speaks.”

Rememory functions, not only as a way of describing trauma as it haunts the characters of the novel, but as a way of framing a form of collective memory.

Both Parham and Rody thus suggest that, haunting, as figured through Beloved and rememory, not only functions as a narrative device to illustrate the trauma of the individual characters of the novel, but also suggests a way in which the experiences of history can be shared and actualized, both within the novel, and in a larger cultural context.

1.3 Obscurity

Beloved is concerned with people that have been disregarded, and with offering them a form of “re-realization.” The epigraph of “Sixty Million and More,” speaks about a loss that is difficult to comprehend, as Hortense Spillers puts it, it is “unimaginable from this distance.”

Conventional forms of history has little to offer to address this kind of loss, this is, in many ways, a blind spot of history. But as Morrison makes a case for, “We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily ‘not-there’; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum.” Narratives such as Beloved venture into that void,

60 Morrison, Beloved.
62 Toni Morrison cited in Holland, Raising the Dead, 11.
which involves a kind of conjuring act, conjuring up the ghosts that remain somewhere out of sight so they can finally be confronted. Beloved’s character brings with her some of the experiences of those “Sixty Millions and More.” Although her monologue about the middle passage is “excessively demanding,” it provides a path to, at least, begin to understand something about this loss.

As Butler points out, lives are supported differently. The characters of Beloved, including Beloved herself, but also Sethe and Paul D, and most of the rest of the cast of the novel, belong to the category of lives that Butler describes as the “derealized Other,” whose lives were lived in a position of utmost vulnerability, and whose memory has been missing from official discourses of history almost ever since. The novel’s venture into this void of disremembered history is not uncomplicated. As much as Morrison is set on uncovering the “interior lives” of the slaves, this has to happen on the slaves own terms, leaving the reader to be “kidnapped” into the “alien environment” of the text.

It is important for me in writing this thesis to address something that is not always given that much attention in literature criticism, that Beloved is in fact a quite difficult novel. Although criticism aims to interpret literature in different ways, and to suggest connections, it is important also to acknowledge that this process in itself can be difficult. This difficulty is worthy of recognition as it can in itself be meaningful, as I will argue, is the case with Beloved. Considering the initial bewilderment caused by the baby-ghost, and later by Beloved’s arrival, to the even more perplexing ways in which Beloved transfixes the household of 124, causing Sethe to starve herself and Paul D to flee into the basement of a church, Beloved’s impenetrable monologue and her sudden mysterious disappearance at the exorcism the end of the novel, the fact that we never get to know for sure who, or what, Beloved really is—Beloved is an obscure novel.

This obscurity is not merely caused by the novel’s involvement with unquestionably dark topics, although these certainly do contribute. Rather than being difficult just due to the depiction of dark subject matters, the novel is also difficult to navigate. Eve-

63 Butler, Precarious Life, 33.
64 Morrison, “Site,” 110.
65 Morrison, Beloved, xii.
Everything is entangled and happens out of order. Little is explained. It is not hard to see
what Morrison meant by being “kidnapped” into an “alien environment,” as one begins
reading the novel: “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s vomen. The women in the house
knew it and so did the children.”⁶⁶ …What is going on?

A possible way of addressing this obscurity is to consider the novel in terms of
the Gothic. As expressed by David Punter and Glennis Byron in The Gothic, the Gothic,
as a field or a genre, is hard to define. It is often thought of as a historical European tra-
dition of the late 18th-century, far removed from the writings of Morrison, in other
words. However, Punter and Byron also suggest an alternative, and to this context more
applicable, approach: “that there are few actual literary texts which are ‘Gothic’; that the
Gothic is more to do with particular moments, tropes, repeated motifs,”⁶⁷ a text is not
Gothic necessarily by definition, but may exhibit Gothic elements. Some of the most
recognizable elements are the ghost or specter, accompanied by the uncanny;⁶⁸ and “bo-
dily harm and the wound,” which signifies trauma;⁶⁹ all of which elements central to
Beloved. The Gothic’s function, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is “to open hori-
zons beyond social patterns, rational decisions, and institutional approved emotions.”⁷⁰
In other words, it provides a space in which to articulate forms of trauma that cannot be
articulated in rational forms of discourse. The Gothic is thus relevant as a mode for
accessing disremembered history and trauma, as this thesis is concerned with, especially
through the trope of the ghost story.

The relevance to Morrison is made increasingly obvious when considering the
postcolonial Gothic. This sub-genre of the Gothic utilizes Gothic elements in order to
represent postcolonial experience. Alison Rudd claims that the Gothic provides a strate-

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⁶⁶ Morrison, Beloved, 3.
⁶⁸ I will return to the uncanny later, for now, this definition from Freud should suffice: “the un-
canny is that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long
Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. XVII: An Infantile Neurosis and other Works
David Punter (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012), 2.
⁷⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick cited in Alison Rudd, Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Ca-
ribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 3.
gy for postcolonial writers to “articulate the unspeakable history of colonialism and to uncover the obfuscation, silences and omissions inscribed by colonial discourses.” The Gothic mode enables writers to subvert dominant colonial narratives in order to reclaim history, to give attention to the silences and invisibilities of history, and redefine them in their own terms.

Punter and Byron give *Beloved* as “One of the most obvious” examples of the postcolonial Gothic, “although it may not at first glance seem to be set in a ‘postcolonial’ context.” Similarly to my own observations, they point out that the novel is characterized by “a penumbra of unclarity,” for although, as they say, it is clear that “the strange figure known as Beloved [...] is in some sense the phantom of the dead baby, the question remains: in what sense?” They suggest that one cannot “lay to rest” the problem of Beloved’s identity, but that this is perhaps not either that important, as what is important is rather the effect Beloved has in the novel, which is to illustrate that the slavery itself cannot either be laid to rest. They suggest, much as I have argued, that Beloved’s haunting in the novel speaks about the legacy of slavery as a cultural haunting, and the need to restructure historical narratives. The Gothic, as “an arena in which those shadow battles, struggles between versions of history, have been fought in the European context,” provides a framework for this struggle.

This discussion of the Gothic suggests that obscurity may provide a space in which history can be reconsidered. However, this far it has not accessed what it is about obscurity that makes it so. I will suggest that the obscure may present a logic that is not defined by dominant discourse; this logic allows the past to be articulated without being defined in any way that is untruthful or disrespectful to those involved in it. Hence, obscurity presents a way of ensuring that historical narratives remains flexible and open, rather than “mythic,” as Doctorow puts it.

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72 Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, 55.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid, author’s italics.
75 Ibid, 56.
76 Ibid.
In the postcolonial context, this can be seen as an approach to representation that avoids colonization. Édouard Glissant explores this with the concept of opacity, which describes how the colonizer, by the application of their own terms of understanding, both reduces and misinterprets the colonized. Glissant’s argument is that in the Western tradition, the need to understand the Other leads to the Other’s reduction, as understanding necessitates transparency, the notion that everything about the Other is available to be understood. Opacity is what cannot and should not be understood: “the irreducible density of the Other.” Glissant is critical of the Western need to understand, which he sees, as Celia B. Britton puts it, as “an act of aggression because it constructs the Other as an object of knowledge.” Glissant writes:

If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce.

In order to understand the Other, the subject will use themselves as scale and measure, which has the effect of disallowing any substantial forms of difference between the subject and the Other—the Other is reduced to the terms of the subject. Glissant argues that transparency “aims at grasping,” a word that not only expresses the meaning of “understanding,” but also that of appropriation: “In this version of understanding the verb to grasp contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of closure if not appropriation.” Glissant suggests opacity as an alternative to this transparency.

To Glissant, opacity has a wider reach than the post-colonial context. He frames opacity as a right that should be available to everyone, “We clamour for the right for opacity to everyone,” and suggests that it should be the foundation of every form of

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78 Celia M. Britton, 19, author’s italics.
80 Ibid, 191, author’s italics.
81 Ibid, 194.
human relation. Accordingly, opacity provides an alternative to humanism, which Glissant is highly critical of. He suggests a move away from the homogeneity of humanism to a system of opaque structures that allows for difference; the need “to develop everywhere, in defiance of a universalizing and reductive humanism, the theory of specifically opaque structures.”

Beloved approaches the past specifically through the kind of opaque structures that Glissant describes. Hence, I will suggest that what I propose as narrative structures of haunting must be understood as those that involve the obscure and opacity. In this thesis I write about Beloved as a conjuring act, that through haunting brings the readers face to face with a past that has been forgotten and disremembered. It is however important, considering the obscurity of the novel, that this is not an uncomplicated process. The loss that Beloved’s presence in the novel speaks of, is one that is impossible to fully comprehend from this distance. Instead of falsifying this loss by providing answers that do not exist, Morrison remains respectful of this fact.

By incorporating obscurity, and opacity, into her narrative structure, Morrison refuses to reduce the people, and the events she is describing in the kind of simplified forms that are recognizable within dominant historical narratives. Her use of obscurity thus suggests a more respectful approach to the past, in which she refuses to reduce the impenetrability of the past to the terms of the present. Thus, Beloved’s haunting is double-sided: it both uncovers and covers at the same time: it realizes the past for us, but also shows us that this realization has limits—there are parts of the past we cannot reach.

Obscurity and opacity may also lead to alternative insight. Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization revolves around literature’s capacity to make the familiar appear unfamiliar. This is based in the observation that the mind has the tendency to grow accustomed to perception. Shklovsky sees this as a economization of the perception that leads it to be automatized. Objects appear “algebraic,” as they are shortened

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82 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 194.
into recognizable shapes rather than being perceived in their entirety. Shklovsky argues that it is the aim and property of art to reverse this process of perceptual economization by making perception difficult:

And art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exist to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.

While Shklovsky sees this extension of the perception process as an end in its own right, I am interested in what insights defamiliarization can lead to. One of the examples Shklovsky gives of defamiliarization is from Tolstoy’s “Kholstomer,” in which a horse considers the institution of private property. Not surprisingly, this institution makes little sense to the horse. As Shklovsky points out, the point of view of the horse makes the subject matter, that otherwise is quite familiar, appear unfamiliar. Defamiliarization brings the reader to reconsider private property, and perhaps to realize its constructed nature. From this, it is obvious that defamiliarization has radical potential. The use of estrangement in literature can work to deconstruct established notions and norms and to provide new insights. Historical narratives may utilize defamiliarization in order to create counter-narratives to already existing and dominant forms of history. This, as I will get more deeply into in the following sections, is key to Beloved, which utilizes the obscure, the strange, and the uncanny, in order to provide new insight into a history that may otherwise appear quite familiar.

1.4 The Uncanny
In this section, I will consider the Gothic concept of the uncanny in relation to Beloved’s mode of haunting. This concept has some similarity to defamiliarization, as it has to do with the relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In the essay “The Uncanny,” Sigmund Freud suggest that the concept describes, “that class of frightening

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84 Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 51.
85 Ibid, 52.
which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.” The uncanny is something that is frightening, but simultaneously familiar. This makes this concept particularly apt to apply to Beloved, as her mode of haunting has the effect of unearthing exactly “what is known of old:” a past that is familiar but also frightening, both for the characters of the novel, but also for the readers. The history of slavery is familiar, just as the personal trauma of the characters is familiar, but this is a familiarity that is hard to handle, that often is left out of sight. As the last passage of the novel suggests, Beloved herself is such a familiar figure. After her disappearance, the people of the town “forgot her like a bad dream,” but, “Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar.” I will suggest that Morrison employs the uncanny as a literary device which transmits specific meanings about the experience of enslavement and how this experience haunts.

The uncanny comes from the german “unheimlich,” which connects it to the home as it also can be translated as “unhomely.” Beloved is a novel that in many ways is centered on the home, but this is a home that at times becomes unhomely. Freud points out that, “heimlich” (“homely”), has a double meaning: it both describes that which is, “belonging to the house, not strange, tame, intimate, friendly,” and so on, and the opposite, that which is, “concealed, kept from sight, so that others don’t get to know about it, withheld from others.” As result, the homely also contains the unhomely, as Freud indicate: “Thus heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich. Unheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich.” This suggests that the homely has the possibility of containing the unhomely; the familiar, the unfamiliar.

The uncanny seems to lie in the threshold between things; where the familiar becomes unfamiliar, or where the home becomes unhomely. 124 contains both the homely and the unhomely. The house is not like an ordinary house, it has moods. The

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87 Morrison, Beloved, 323–324.
88 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 222.
89 Ibid, 225, author’s italics.
novel opens perplexingly with the observation: “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s vemon.”90 Later on, 124 becomes “loud,”91 before it in the end turns “quiet.”92 Beloved’s presence in 124 has the effect of making 124 increasingly unhomely. The behavior of the inhabitants changes accordingly: Paul D is driven away from Sethe, whom he loves, and a home he wants to participate in. This is seen as Beloved starts to “move” Paul D around, and ultimately rapes him (I will return to this later in this section). This process towards the strange and perplexing culminates as the third and final part of the novel opens. The household of 124 is turned on its head as Sethe, finally fully believing Beloved is her dead daughter returned, falls into an obsession in which she devotes everything she has to Beloved, regardless of the detrimental effects this has for her and Denver’s health and well being. Beloved’s appetite, which, to begin with, is natural and healthy, turns into something akin to cannibalism, and Beloved and Sethe’s love and devotion for one another turn into an unhealthy and dangerous obsession. Denver sees them, “limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everybody out.”93

Beloved’s appetite is an apt example of how something as natural as appetite and a need for attention and love turns into something far more sinister. This is also an example of the novels continued interrelation of the physical and the cognitive, as Beloved’s appetite is not only for food, but also for attention, love and devotion. As she moves into the household of 124, the other characters take note of her sweet tooth:

From that moment and through everything that followed, sugar could always be counted on to please her. It was as though sweet things were what she was born for. Honey as well as the wax it came in, sugar sandwiches, the sludgy molasses gone hard and brutal in the can, lemonade and taffy and any kind of dessert Sethe brought home from the restaurant.94

Beloved is constantly hungry, especially for sweets. This insatiable need for sustenance emphasizes her physical presence in the house. However, the narrative connects Beloved’s need for food to her need of attention, making them appear as two sides of the

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90 Morrison, Beloved, 3.
91 Ibid, 199.
92 Ibid, 282.
93 Ibid, 286.
94 Ibid, 66.
same thing: “Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling.”\textsuperscript{95} The hunger affects both mind and body equally.

This hunger, although peculiar, appears innocent enough at the beginning of her stay in 124, but develops into something quite different by the end of the novel. Sethe, having come to the conclusion that Beloved is in fact her daughter, becomes increasingly obsessed with her—an obsession that is only matched by Beloved’s returned obsession for Sethe. Beloved’s haunting of 124 thus has distinctly physical effects for all the inhabitants of the household, as Sethe in her obsession, stops taking care of herself and Denver, and also neglects and loses her job. As the food runs out, she stops eating, saving everything for Beloved, whose appetite is insatiable. Beloved’s appetite, both for food and attention, thus has the effect of eating Sethe up, both body and mind. Denver sees herself and her mother starve meanwhile Beloved swells grotesquely:

Listless and sleepy with hunger, Denver saw the flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb fade. Saw Sethe’s eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved […] everything except her basket-fat stomach. She also saw the sleeves of her own carnival shirtwaist cover her fingers; hems that once showed her ankles now swept the floor.\textsuperscript{96}

This image, of Sethe starving and fading away, set up against the grotesque, swelling Beloved, is decidedly unsettling.

Beloved relates to the people that surround her in an uncanny way. This is also seen in her rape of Paul D. The scene in itself is perplexing and disturbing. Beloved comes into the cold house and tells Paul D, “I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name.”\textsuperscript{97} Although Paul D initially tells her to go away and attempts to refuse her, she somehow gets her will, although exactly how it happens is unclear. As he reaches “the inside part,” the tobacco tin opens and he is left calling out, “Red heart. Read heart. Red heart.”\textsuperscript{98} If not Paul D’s attempts to have Beloved go away is enough to demonstrate that this is rape, her control of his will is. Beloved is somehow able to “fix”
and “move” him according to her will: “She moved him […] and Paul D didn’t know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving himself. Imperceptibly, downright reasonably, he was moving out of 124.” From sleeping with Sethe in the upstairs bedroom, he moves to various sleeping locations until he ends up in the cold house. Only when he arrives there, where Beloved wants him to be, does he realize that he is not moving according to his own will, but someone else’s.

When compared to how other interactions are depicted in the novel, especially how Paul D interacts and has sex with Sethe, it is obvious that this scene presents the interaction between Beloved and Paul D as very strange. Their conversation reads more like a set of repeated phrases than a natural conversation. Beloved tells Paul D, “I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name,” which in itself is an unusual way of phrasing things, but it does not help that she keeps repeating this and little else as Paul D tries to tell her to go away. By the end of the scene it is however Paul D who speaks in unnatural phrases, as he repeats “Red heart” over and over. Rape, in itself, can be seen as uncanny, as it transforms what should be a natural and positive form of relation into the opposite—abuse. It also has the effect of reifying the victim, as they are treated merely as an object of the perpetrator’s desire, not as a person on their own.

Freud discusses whether the feeling of uncanniness may arise from the presentation of a figure that may or may not be alive. The examples he gives of this is primarily that of lifelike, but inanimate, dolls and automatons. While he after some consideration refutes this idea, arguing instead, not surprisingly, but also not that convincingly, that the feeling of uncanniness must derive from the fear of castration, I believe that the initial idea might have been on to something.

Beloved is a figure that is alive and not alive, a ghostly figure who neither the readers nor the characters are ever able to discover the truth about. She eats and drinks, but her way of sustenance seems unnatural, she does not get energy from it. Denver ob-

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100 Ibid, 136.
101 Ibid, 137.
102 Ibid, 138
103 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 226.
104 Ibid, 232.
serves that, “They grew tired, and even Beloved, who was getting bigger, seemed nevertheless as exhausted as they were.” Instead, her feeding becomes a form of cannibalism, she drains Sethe of energy:

The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used to never look away became slits of sleeplessness. […] Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller with it.

In this, Beloved appears not as living herself, but as a figure of the undead, that drains her mother of her life. By the end of the novel, Beloved takes the form of a pregnant woman, as she is seen by the community of women who has come to drive her away:

The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunder-black and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling.

Pregnancy is made uncanny here; what should be a natural and life-creating process is turned on its head, as we know whatever Beloved is swelling up with cannot be a child, but rather what she has stolen from Sethe and Paul D.

The uncanny seems to have the property to make natural processes become unnatural. This can be seen as a form of *reification*. The concept has its base in Marxian *commodity fetishism*, which describes how the commodity in the capitalist economy has become detached from the people and labor of its production. This causes the commodity to be considered not in relation to its social production, but in relation to other commodities. This has the effect of relative, dynamic, social relations appearing as if fixed and objective. Relations between people appear as relations between things. Georg Lukács applies this concept not only to economic relations, but social relations in general, insisting that commodity fetishism “must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem of economics, but as the central, structural problem of ca-

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106 Ibid, 295.

107 This notion of Beloved as a figure of the undead, is as mentioned above, key to Barnett’s conception of Beloved as a succubus-figure, which I will return to shortly.


pitalist society in all respects.”110 This means that society is defined by the same terms
that define the commodity. This has the effect of producing a mechanical understanding
of society, in which people are considered things that can be described and understood
by the application of unified “natural” laws.111

In a reified system of relation, people relate to each other not as persons, but as
things. In Beloved, Schoolteacher is the chief representative of this kind of view of soci-
al relations. This is illustrated not only by his “research” into Sethe’s “human” and
“animal” characteristics,112 but also by the fact that he “knew the worth of
everything.”113 The scene in which Paul D learns his “worth” illustrates what this en-
tails:

Paul D hears the men talking and for the first time learns his worth. He has always
known, or believed he did, his value—as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on
a farm—but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dol-
lar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future.114

Here, Paul D is not considered in terms of his personhood, his agency, and right to a fu-
ture of his own, but in terms of his physical attributes and their market value. Sethe is
also drawn into this consideration, and it is made clear that her value is defined exclu-
sively by reproduction, even to the extent that Schoolteacher refers to her only as “the
breeding one.”115 As Paul D later contemplates, Sethe’s value must had been greater
than his own, as she was “property that reproduced itself without cost.”116

Beloved’s presence in 124 seems to recreate this environment of reification,
which is presented through the device of the uncanny. This was previously established
by the institution of slavery and maintained by white racists and slaveholders such as
Schoolteacher. Schoolteacher’s view of society is comparable to Beloved’s way of rela-
ting to the people around her. However much Beloved may appear to want to relate the
people around her in a natural way, she is not able to. Both Sethe and Paul D become

110 Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness (Bibliotech Press, 2017), 65.
111 Ibid, 72.
112 Morrison, Beloved, 228.
113 Ibid, 269.
114 Ibid, 267.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid, 269.
objects that she takes advantage of, rather than persons she relates to. Her love and adoration for Sethe becomes cannibalism; her attempt at closeness with Paul D becomes rape. In this way, Beloved acts out simultaneously both the role of the perpetrator and that of the victim. This has the effect of suggesting that the victims of reification may come to internalize the reified worldview that brought about their victimization in the first place.

This view of Beloved’s character is central to Pamela E. Barnett, who in “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in Beloved,” argues for reading Beloved as a figure of the undead, as a succubus or vampire-figure. The succubus is a folklore figure, a female demon who is believed to sexually assault men in their sleep to drain their semen, while the vampire (in Barnett’s description) is a sexualized figured believed to drain people of vital fluids, that in the African American folklore has taken the shape of “shapeshifting witches who ‘ride’ their terrified victims in the night.” According to Barnett, Beloved’s form of haunting inhabits the qualities of both figures, as she “drains Paul D of semen and Sethe of vitality.” She declares that Beloved’s haunting of both Sethe and Paul D constitutes a reenactment of the trauma of slavery, and specifically the trauma of rape, upon them.

This is based on the notion of draining someone of their vitality, or vital fluids (both blood and semen are as examples of this), as metaphors both for the institutionalized rape that was practiced under slavery, as well as for slavery in itself, as a vampire-like institution, that fed on the bodies of other people. She maintains that:

The succubus, who rapes and steals semen, is metaphorically linked to such rapes and to the exploitation of African American reproduction. Just as rape was used to dehumanize enslaved persons, the succubus or vampire’s assault robs victims of vitality, both physical and psychological.

According to Barnett, Beloved reenacts the experience of rape upon Sethe and Paul D in separate assaults; like a vampire, she drains Sethe of vitality, and as a succubus, she drains Paul D of semen. This particular haunting does not only speak about the personal

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118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
trauma of that Sethe and Paul D suffer from, but also of the collective trauma of the African American people, as it represents “the effects of institutionalized rape under slavery,” which constituted of a commodification of the reproductive potential of a people.

Barnett argues that, “While Morrison depicts myriad abuses of slavery like brutal beatings and lynchings, the depictions of and allusions to rape are of primary importance.” Several of the main characters are rape victims: Sethe is left traumatized by the “two boys with mossy teeth,” who held her down and stole her milk; while Paul D, along with the other prisoners at the labor camp in Alfred Georgia, was forced to give oral sex to the white guards. Ella was locked up by a father and son who repeatedly raped her, those she calls “the lowest yet;” while Baby Suggs was pressured into having sex with a straw boss; Sethe’s mother was “taken up many times by the crew” during the middle passage; and Stamp Paid’s wife, Vashti, was forced to have sex with her master. If this was not enough, there are also scenes of prostitution out of desperation that must be understood also as a forms of rape: Sethe exchanges sex for the engraving of the tombstone for her dead baby, the Saturday girls’ work at the slaughterhouse is a different example. Barnett contends that of the many abuses that haunt the novel, rape has a central position:

Of all the memories that haunt Morrison’s characters, those that involve sexual abuse and exploitation hold particular power: rape is the trauma that forces Paul D to lock his many painful memories in a “tobacco tin” heart, that Sethe remembers more vividly than the beating that leaves a tree of scars on her back, that destroys Halle’s mind, and against which Ella measures all evil.

Barnett’s reading of Beloved suggests a framework to consider the strange and uncanny effects Beloved has on Sethe and Paul D. She points out that the Beloved’s

\[121\] Barnett, “Figurations,” 418.
\[122\] Ibid.
\[123\] Morrison, Beloved, 83.
\[124\] Ibid, 127.
\[125\] Ibid, 74.
\[126\] Barnett, “Figurations,” 419.
\[127\] Ibid.
\[128\] Ibid.
treatment of Paul D and Sethe recreates the conditions of enslavement. While her focus is on the centrality of rape, I will suggest that in a broader sense, Beloved’s way of relating to Sethe and Paul D recreates the reified social structure of enslavement, in which Sethe and Paul D become objects, rather than persons. These conditions are presented through the device of the uncanny, which shows how natural and organic processes become unnatural and reified.

1.5 Fragmentation

Building on Barnett’s argument, I will argue that Beloved’s haunting of Paul D and Sethe presents a reactualization of the conditions of enslavement. For this, I will suggest that the concept of derealization can be applied, not only to describe the cultural devaluation and dehumanization of the slave, but also the actual experience of enslavement, which Beloved forces Paul D and Sethe to re-experience.

Schoolteacher’s reified view of the slave enables what Butler describes as derealization: it defines people as “non-people,” which marks them as available for enslavement. Derealization is a violation that should be considered on two levels: the level of discourse; that defines the slave in terms of animal characteristics, as reproductive potentiality, as a sum of money, and the physical level; that constitutes the physical treatment of the slave. Butler writes:

How do we understand this derealization? It is one thing to argue that first, on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture. It is another thing to say that discourse itself effects violence through omission.129

Derealization happens both at the level of discourse and the level of physical violence, so that both forms of violence support and enable the other. The slave is made available for the physical violation of enslavement by the discourse that defines the slave as non-human. Simultaneously, the physical violence of enslavement delivers the message of dehumanization.

129 Butler, Precarious Life, 34.
*Beloved* investigates what it means to be at the receiving end of the violence of derealization. When Paul D learns his “worth;” his price, it causes him to consider himself not as a unified person, but as a sum of parts; he considers “his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future.” Enslavement is continuously connected to the image of bodily disintegration in the novel. For instance, “slave life ‘had busted [Baby Sugg’s] legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’” leaving her with “nothing left to make a living but her heart.” Morrison’s repeated portrayal of the characters as alienated from their own bodies, even to the extent that Paul D loses the use of his hands as he arrives at Alfred, Georgia, suggests that the discourse of enslavement not only affects how the slave is perceived and treated by others, but also how the slave is able to relate to themselves; enslavement causes the fragmentation of the enslaved person.

In order to connect the conditions of enslavement to fragmentation, I will consider two different theoretical frameworks that describe fragmentation of the subject on different levels. Firstly, I will return to Lukács’ reification. In Lukácsian terms, slavery can be understood as an extreme radicalization of the reified worker. However, Lukács’ concept of reification stems from the context of an industrialist capitalist economy, in which the workplace is rationalized and scientifically managed, so that the fragmentation of the work process, and the product, leads to the fragmentation of the worker. This picture does not align with the economic structure of slavery. Although the slave body is clearly “commodified,” and thus reified, the process of slave labor is not rationalized in the same manner as the labor of the worker.

Lukács’ theory does not access the physical state of the slave. As Spillers writes, enslavement marked “a theft of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire.” The separation of the body from its will suggests that the slavery involves reification in a

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131 Ibid, 102.
132 Ibid, 126.
more literal sense; “reification” means to be turned into a thing. Slavery defined people as literally things; as property. This aligns more closely to Axel Honneth’s reworking of reification, which is defined through recognition. Reification is the “forgetting” of recognition, in which either others or the self, is conceived of and treated as a thing.\footnote{Christian Lazzeri, “Reification and Recognition: A Discussion with Axel Honneth,” \textit{Revue du MAUSS} 2011/2 (No 38), III–IV.} Reification is thus a form of extreme disrespect. In \textit{The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts}, Honneth argues that, “the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of a person as a whole to the point of collapse.”\footnote{Axel Honneth, \textit{The Struggle for Recognition}, trans Joel Anderson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 1995), 131–132.}

While Honneth discusses various forms of disrespect, the most fundamental form, which also is the one most relevant to this discussion, and which is given an especially central position in \textit{Beloved}, is the “type of disrespect that affects a person at the level of physical integrity.”\footnote{Ibid.} This should be seen in connection to Spiller’s “theft of the body” as it involves “The forms of practical maltreatment in which a person is forcibly deprived of any opportunity to freely dispose over his or her own body,” which he claims is the “most fundamental sort of personal degradation.”\footnote{Ibid, my italics.} This is because this form of disrespect, apart from being painful and humiliating, damages the subject’s personal integrity. He writes:

\begin{quote}
For what is specific to these kinds of physical injury, as exemplified by torture and rape, is not purely the physical pain but rather the combination of this pain with the feeling of being defenselessly at the mercy of another subject, \textit{to the point of feeling that one has been deprived of reality}. Physical abuse represents a type of disrespect that does lasting damage to one’s basic confidence (learned through love) that one can autonomously coordinate one’s own body.\footnote{Ibid.
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\end{quote}

Physical disrespect damages the integrity of the subject by making them lose agency of their own bodies, even to the “the point of feeling […] deprived of reality,”\footnote{Ibid.} to feel derealized, in other words.
In *Beloved*, the physical disrespect that the ex-slaves have experienced has set lasting marks on how they are able to relate to their own bodies. Even long after the abolition, this alienation is still very much a part of the everyday life of Paul D and Sethe. This is perhaps most notably seen in the repeated references to Sethe’s “chockecherry tree” in her back, and Paul D’s “tobacco tin heart.” What Sethe refers to as a tree in her back is really the scarring she received after having been beaten while she was pregnant for protesting having her milk taken. As Sethe expresses it: “Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree.” She has the experience of that tree and cannot any longer feel her back. Similarly, Paul D locks away parts of himself and his trauma in “that tobacco tin buried in his chest where his heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut.”

The novel portrays how reification can take place, not only in the social relations between people, as seen for example in the way Schoolteacher treats Paul D and Sethe, but also, as a result of this treatment, in the person’s relationship with their own self. This is seen in the repeated references to the chockecherry tree and the tobacco tin heart, where Paul D and Sethe experience themselves as partly reified; parts of their bodies are things. Both the chockecherry tree, Sethe’s back; and the tobacco tin, Paul D’s heart; are integral parts of their bodies, that should be dynamic and feeling; but that they experience as inanimate objects apart from themselves. This illustrates how Sethe and Paul D are possessed by the past, and how this unable them from fully taking possession of themselves and from moving on.

This can be considered in contrast to Baby Suggs, who upon being set free discovers her own body and works to reclaim her ownership of it:

suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, ‘These hands belong to me. These *my* hands.’ Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along?

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142 Ibid, 86.
144 Ibid, 20.
145 Ibid, 86.
146 Ibid, 166, author’s italics.
As Baby Suggs settles in 124, she starts to preach to her community about loving flesh. Interestingly, in her rhetoric, the body is still disintegrated: she says, “love your […] flesh […] hands […] mouth […] neck […] liver […] heart […] feet […] lungs […] womb […] private parts.” I read this as Baby Suggs addressing the problem of fragmentation and suggesting a remedy, however. In her sermon, every part becomes reconnected; both rhetorically, through the way which her sermon is put together, which reads like one long chanting sentence in which every part is connected; and through her insistence on love, which seems to connect and unite everything. As result, Baby Suggs reclaims possession of herself and is able to move on from a past in a way that does not seem to be available to Sethe and Paul D. The slavery that once legally possessed their bodies now takes a different form of possession of them. To become a thing is to be fixed, which is what Sethe and Paul D are, both temporally and emotionally.

1.6 Theft of the Body

It is my argument that both Beloved’s starving of Sethe and her rape of Paul D can be seen as different kinds of “theft of the body.” Cannibalism is a literal form of reification, as a person is turned into the sustenance of another. The “theft of the body” was also the literal theft of African bodies across the Atlantic. Alan Rice in “Who’s Eating Whom’: The Discourse of Cannibalism in the Literature of the Black Atlantic from Equiano’s Travels to Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” argues that colonialism and slavery “literally ate away at the cultures of indigenous peoples.”\(^\text{147}\) Rice maintains that Morrison’s use of the cannibal trope “reverses the stereotype of black bloodthirstiness, by showing the actual bloodthirsty character of white racists.”\(^\text{148}\) This has the effect of presenting slavery as in itself cannibalistic. As Barnett point out, it was a system that was had its base in “a human being becom[ing] the source of another’s sustenance.”\(^\text{149}\) Thus, slavery can be


\(^{148}\) Ibid, 117.

\(^{149}\) Barnett, “Figurations,” 422.
considered as an institution that, as Rice puts it, “were after all to consume generations of Africans.”

Beloved’s starving of Sethe, as a form of cannibalism, thus metaphorically represents how the institution of slavery “fed” on African-Americans; something that is illustrated quite literally by the “mossy toothed” boys stealing Sethe’s milk. As Barnett identifies, there is a link between trope of cannibalism and sexual violence. Eating imagery is continuously connected to sexual violation, as seen for example in Alfred, Georgia, where the prisoners are asked if they are hungry for “breakfast,” in the form of forced oral sex; while the men that forcibly suck Sethe’s milk have “mossy teeth, an appetite.” As Barnett points out, the particular trauma of both Paul D and Sethe takes the form of being sucked or being forced to suck.

Rape presents a different form of “theft of the body,” which speaks of the sexual exploitation involved in slavery. The novel examines this history through the depiction of the experiences of Sethe and Baby Suggs, who both have children while enslaved. Baby Suggs gives birth to eight children, with six different fathers, but everyone apart from Halle is taken from her, while Sethe’s need to protect her children from enslavement is what motivates the central event of the novel in the first place, with her murder of her child. Barnett argues that Beloved’s rape of Paul D signifies the ways in which African-American reproduction was commodified under slavery, as he is drained of semen against his will.

As Barnett points out, by depicting of a male victim of rape in Paul D, Morrison shows that rape and the commodification of reproduction also affected African-American men. Barnett contends that Morrison’s focus on a female rapist with a male victim foregrounds race, rather than gender, as the axis in which violation occurs, which has the effect of constructing “a discourse for the rape of black women and men that has

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151 Morrison, Beloved, 127
152 Ibid, 38.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid.
been largely absent in twentieth-century America.”156 Rape is usually only described in terms of gender, not race; the most persistent cultural notion of interracial rape is the myth of the black rapist, meanwhile white rape of black women and men goes unrecognized. Barnett maintains that:

Beloved serves as a powerful reminder that rape was and often still is a racial issue, that is not […] ‘a process of intimidation in which all men keep all women in a state of fear.’ While male and female do not formulaically describe rapist and victim in the novel, white and black almost always do.157

This argument is somewhat complicated by the fact that Beloved is herself black, so her rape of Paul D is not interracial. The rapes that she reenacts were, however, originally perpetrated by white men. Barnett suggests that, while Beloved is black, she “embodies memories of whites’ assaults on blacks.”158 Morrison’s depiction of rape thus shows rape not as something that keep women in fear of men, but as “a process by which some white men keep some black women and even some black men in a state of fear.”159

The depiction of Paul D’s experiences directs attention to the complexities of navigating manhood as a slave and ex-slave. Mr Garner at Sweet Home had called his slaves “men,” rather than the more common “boys,” a definition Paul D used to take pride in, as it expressed respect:

He grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to.160

Being called “men,” rather than “boys,” signaled that Garner respected the Sweet Home men as persons that were able to think and act for themselves, that, “they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to.”161 This is ironic, as their status as slaves signaled the opposite, as Paul D later realizes. This proves problematic when Mr Garner dies and Schoolteacher, who has completely different opinions on what constitu-

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157 Ibid, author’s italics.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid.
160 Morrison, Beloved, 147.
161 Ibid.
tes manhood, arrives. Paul D comes to realize that, “they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race.”

Lee Edelman argues that the rape at Alfred, Georgia forces the prisoners to express homosexual desire, as they are forced to fellate the white guards; a violation that is both racist and homophobic in nature as it signifies a symbolic “castration” of the black man. The men are forced into a passive and receiving role, into emasculation. As both Edelman and Barnett point out, emasculation is instrumental in racist endeavors to devaluate and dominate black men, which often conflates racial domination with sexual domination, as the white man endeavors to sexually dominate the black man.

As illustrated so chillingly in James Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man,” the white supremacist mentality connects sexuality and masculinity to racial domination, violence and castration.

While I consider “emasculation” to be a problematic term due to its connection to toxic masculinity, where it seems to suggest that the value of a man depends on his ability to perform masculinity, it can be considered in this context as addressing the way the idea of masculinity is employed as a racist device in order to devaluate black men. Moreover, as Barnett brings to attention, the scene in which Paul D is humiliated by the cock “Mister,” shows that what Paul D is experiencing has more to do with dehumanization (or derealization) than emasculation:

“Paul D […] tries to explain to Sethe that the greatest humiliation of all was ‘walking past the roosters looking at them looking at me’ […] Paul D believes that the cock, which significantly, is named Mister, has smiled at him. This episode makes Paul D feel that he is “something else” and that “that something else [is] less than a chicken, […]” the scene is unequivocally one of dehumanization rather than emasculation.

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162 Morrison, Beloved, 147–148.
That Paul D identifies himself as “something less than a chicken,” shows that his problem is not with masculinity, per se, but with perceiving himself as something worthy of recognition in any way at all.

As Honneth points out, physical disrespect damages a person’s self integrity. Rape is especially destructive not only due to the physical pain involved, but rather due to “the combination of this pain with the feeling of being defenselessly at the mercy of another subject.”167 Paul D connects this integrity to manhood, feeling deeply shamed by his experiences of rape in Alfred Georgia. Unable to navigate these feelings, he locks them into his “tobacco tin heart,” which nothing “of this world could pry […] open”168 before he meets Beloved.

Curiously, it is Beloved’s rape of Paul D that undoes the “tobacco tin.” Faced with the contends of the tobacco tin, Paul D is no longer sure that he can certify his manhood. He wonders if Schoolteacher may have been right:

If schoolteacher was right it explained how he had come to be a rag doll—picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter. Fucking her when he was convinced he didn’t want to.169

He sees himself as a “rag doll,” a thing to be moved around and played with at the whim of another. More than being humiliated by the event of the rape itself, he is humiliated that he cannot act according to his will:

But it was more than appetite that humiliated him and made him wonder if schoolteacher was right. It was being moved, placed where she wanted him, and there was nothing he was able to do about it.170

This is connected to Honneth’s point that physical disrespect “does lasting damage to one’s basic confidence […] that one can autonomously coordinate one’s own body.”171 Honneth writes that the experience of disrespect “carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of a person as a whole to the point of collapse.” This is what happens to Paul D. His lack of ability to move according to his will damages his basic

167 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, 132.
168 Morrison, Beloved, 133.
169 Ibid 148.
170 Ibid.
171 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, 132.
confidence. Paul D’s sense of his manhood here means something different, or at least more than, just being recognized as manly or masculine, something more akin to being recognized as a person, and as someone whose worth cannot be summed up by dollar value.

Beloved’s possession of Paul D and Sethe shows how the deprivation of reality becomes an internalized process for the person that experiences it. Paul D is rendered unable to recognize himself as a person of worth, and unable to autonomously coordinate himself; while Sethe on the other hand surrenders her entire being to Beloved in order to try to make up for her feelings of guilt. In this way, derealization does not only affect how persons are perceived as from the outside, but also from within, as neither Paul D nor Sethe considers themselves as “real.”

As pointed out earlier in this chapter, Beloved considers the lives and experiences of those who were left out of history, which includes the “Sixty Million and More,” but also people like Paul D and Sethe, “who didn’t know they’re in an era of historical interest. They just know they have to get through the day.” In order to provide them with something like “re-realization,” Morrison investigates what this violation meant at the individual, as well as communal level.

As Sethe falls into her desperate obsession with Beloved, she attempts “to make up for the handsaw.” Sethe attempts to make Beloved understand …

that worse than that—far worse—was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you.

In this, Morrison’s aim with the novel coincides with what Sethe attempts to communicate to her daughter. She wants to present that which has been left out of the historical narratives, even out of the slave narratives; what “the interior life” of the slave was like. Key to this experience is a destructiveness that reaches down into the self, that

172 Morrison cited in Angelo, Bonnie, “The Pain of Being Black,” 120.
173 Morrison, Beloved, 295.
174 Ibid.
175 Morrison, “Site,” 110.
destroys it, causes it to be dirtied, that causes one to forget oneself, to be unable of liking oneself: “Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up.” In this, Sethe expresses the destructiveness that slavery represented, that caused her to kill her own child rather than seeing the same thing happen to her:

And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. [...] And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no.

Sethe expresses a situation that cannot be fully understood for those who have not experienced it, but that must be considered, nevertheless, in order to try to make sense of the past.

Sethe’s attempt to explain this to her daughter is not successful. The experience, as expressed by the end of the novel, is perhaps not a story to be passed on. Nevertheless, her attempt to explain her actions to her daughter, who never experienced slavery, can be seen as a metaphor for the historical work Morrison does with her novel. And although Beloved does not listen to her, Denver does—and it is perhaps this that motivates her to finally leave the house and seek out help for her mother.

Morrison’s employment of structures of haunting thus provides narrative space to address experiences that have been left out of historical narratives. Furthermore, the use of structures of haunting in historical narratives constitutes a restructuring of what kind of narratives that we can form about history: it provides a way to approach the experiences of the derealized Other without defining them in our own terms. Approaching the derealized from a position that does not seek to define or reduce enables their experiences of violence and derealization to be represented, which may have the effect of finally returning some sense of reality to them.

176 Morrison, Beloved, 295.
177 Ibid, 295–296.
Derealization in *The Book of Daniel*

As discussed in the introduction, the concepts of haunting and derealization can be seen as closely connected. Haunting is what is left out of dominant narratives about history, which means that it also has to do with what is left after derealization. While in the previous chapter, I focus on haunting as a means to regain a sense of reality to those that have been derealized, I will in this chapter turn the attention to the processes of derealization themselves.

In this chapter, I will consider derealization in the context of Doctorow’s exploration of narrative in *The Book of Daniel*, as well as the essay “False Documents.” I will argue that this exploration of narrative provides a framework for which to understand the link between violence and derealization that Butler describes in *Precarious Life*.

Through the employment of electric metaphors in the novel, Doctorow examines the inherent violence that resides in forming certain forms of narrative structures, that, as I will argue, have the ability to bring about derealization. This examination of narrative structures is in the novel set up against a discussion the prevalence of these forms of narrative in American culture and history. In this way, Doctorow elucidates the cultural practices which enable derealization to happen in the first place. As Doctorow shows, these practices not only bring about death and derealization, but also disable the individual from forming meaningful connections about theirselves and their history, as is seen in Daniel and Susan’s struggle to find meaning about their past in the novel.

2.1 Narrative

In the essay, “False Documents,” Doctorow differentiates between narratives that are fact-oriented and narratives that are based on imagination. He claims that narratives based in imagination, such as fiction “gives to the reader something more than informa-

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1 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 34.

2 While Doctorow uses both “narrative” and “language” interchangeably in his writing to express the same idea, I will primarily use “narrative,” which I find clearer and more appropriate to the discussion.
tion.” They produce “Complex understandings, indirect, intuitive, and nonverbal” that have the effect of presenting “instructive emotion in the reader from the illusion of suffering an experience not his own.” Different forms of expression are available for narratives that are based in imagination rather than factuality; they allow for complexity, indirectness, intuitive understandings and emotional responses.

Doctorow argues then that there is a crucial difference between “a sentence spun from the imagination, i.e, a sentence composed as a lie,” and “a sentence composed with the most strict reverence for fact.” In order to discuss this difference, he suggests two categories of narrative: “the power of regime,” and “the power of freedom;” where “the power of regime” has to do with the reference to fact; in opposition to “the power of freedom,” which is free of this limitation, and rather defined by imagination. Where the “power of regime” is limited by the need to stick to facts, “the power of freedom” is free to invent. This distinction is important to Doctorow because it gives him the tools to criticize how we in modern western society use and understand narratives.

As already discussed in the introduction, Doctorow rests his arguments upon the view that modern Western society values facts over imagination. This influences the way we view and understand narrative:

But it is true that we live in an industrial society which counts its achievements from the discoveries of science and which runs on empirical thinking and precise calculations. In such a society language is conceived as primarily a means by which facts are communicated. Language is seen as a property of facts themselves—their persuasive property.

Within modern Western society, realism is seen as the proper mode of language, as it is to describe that which are the verifiable facts of our world.

It is apparent that “the power of regime” is not a neutral form of narrative; that the use of the word “regime” is not incidental. In Doctorow’s view, there are no truly objective forms of narrative. He cites Nietzsche: “There are no facts in themselves. For

3 Doctorow, “False Documents,” 151.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid, 152.
6 Ibid.
a fact to exist we must introduce meaning.” In order for facts to be recognized, they must be set into a system of meaning; as Doctorow points out, judgement is required if meaning is to be formed: “Meaning must be introduced, and no judgement does not carry the passion of the judge.” For facts are not discovered by society, but created by it; they are not God-given, but man-made, which means that they are “infinitely violable.”

Doctorow maintains that facts do not express any form of essential truth, but instead reflect our cultural dogmas, which are also subject to historical change. Facts are merely “the questionable world we ourselves have painted […] that prescribes for us […] what we may be permitted to see and not to see.” Claims that earlier were considered as facts are now disproven, such as Doctorow’s example that it used to be considered as fact that women were intellectually inferior to men.

“The power of regime” is thus a form of narrative that is in service of the established dogmas of our society, in service of the “regime,” in other words. In this way, the different forms of narrative are in political conflict with each other, while “the power of regime” is in service of the “regime” (which also can be understood as discourse or ideology), “the power of freedom” presents the possibility of subversion; while “the power of regime” is concerned with “what we are supposed to be,” “the power of freedom” is concerned with “what we threaten to become.”

Doctorow uses this distinction to criticize the Western devaluation of creative writing. “Literature is less a tool for survival than it once was,” he writes. Literature used to be a tool, “as valuable as a club or a sharpened bone,” that was used to form meaning within communities: “It bound the present to the past, the visible to the invisible, and it helped to compose the community necessary for the continuing life of its members.”

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8 Doctorow, “False Documents,” 160.
9 Ibid, 153.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid, 154.
14 Ibid.
its primary aim was to give counsel. In this, Doctorow sees a certain wisdom that has
been forgotten and devalued as fact and fiction have become separate entities. From en-
joying a privileged potion in the community, at “a spot near the fire,”¹⁵ because of the
importance of their craft, the storyteller, in the modern incarnation as writer, is dele-
gated to a position where they are “at best inconvenient, like some old relative in mis-
matching pants and jacket who knocks on our door during a dinner party to remind us
from what we come.”¹⁶ Western democracies have lost respect for the writer and the va-
ue of their craft.

Doctorow connects this to industrialization and democratization, arguing that the
most industrially advanced countries are also those that emphasize the primacy of empi-
ricism the most. Whether this argument is as supportable now as when Doctorow wrote,
is open for discussion; as his examples demonstrates, the world has changed since he
wrote this in 1977. His argument is that:

In those countries which are not advanced industrial democracies the writer is treated
with more respect. In Burma or Iran or Chile or Indonesia or the Soviet Union, it is
understood that a writer using the common coin of the political speech or the press
release or newspaper editorial to compose facts in play has the power to do harm.”¹⁷

Although this respect may take the form of censorship, imprisonment and torture, at
least these countries recognize what we in Western democracies fail to do:

[The writer] is recognized to have discovered the secret that the politician is born
knowing: that good and evil are construed [sic], that there is no outrage, no monst-
rousness that cannot be made reasonable and logical and virtuous, and no shining act
that cannot be turned to disgrace—with narrative.¹⁸

The crux of Doctorow’s argument lies in the fact that we do not recognize the
power of narrative. As Doctorow sees it, narrative is not a passive agent, used merely to
describe reality, but an active one, that shapes it as well; narrative is a tool for shaping
reality. Both “the power of regime” and “the power of freedom” share this ability, as
their distinction really only has to do with how the forms of narrative are apprehended

¹⁷ Ibid, 158.
¹⁸ Ibid.
in our societies, not with their nature and function, which remain the same. Doctorow asserts: “there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: There is only narrative.”

This has implications for history as well. In Doctorow’s view, history is essentially a form of narrative, which means that it “shares with fiction a mode of mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning.” To Doctorow, history is a narrative practice; the facts of history do not exist on their own, but are created as they are set into the system that give them meaning by the historian. He cites Roland Barthes, who observes that, “By structures alone historical discourse is essentially a product of ideology, or rather of imagination.” Structurally, there is nothing that separates history from fiction, which also means that history can also be fiction—as Doctorow points out, “We all know examples of history that doesn’t exist.” History is routinely falsified and recreated to reflect the values and dogmas of the present. History is thus never stable, but rather an ongoing process—it has to be “written and rewritten from one generation to another. The act of composition can never end.”

2.2 The Trial

Of the many examples Doctorow draws on in this discussion, the trial is of special interest. Doctorow points out that the criminal trial is a form of history writing, put into the formalized language of law. The most important criminal cases of history have a way of staying relevant, as opinion on them becomes part of the process that creates history, which must be made and unmade with every generation. “The most important trials in our history,” Doctorow writes, “those which reverberate in our lives and have most meaning for our future, are those in which the judgment is called into question: Scopes, Sacco and Vanzetti, the Rosenbergs.” In these cases, “Facts are buried, exhumed, deposed, contradicted, recanted,” and the case is therefore subjected to repeated judge-

20 Ibid, 161.
23 Ibid, 161.
24 Ibid, 160.
ments after the initial decision of the court, that considers not only the evidence of the case, but also “the historical and prejudicial context of the decision.” In this way, “the trial shimmers forever with just that perplexing ambiguity characteristic of a true novel...”

This is very relevant to both Beloved and The Book of Daniel, as both novels are based on historical events that involved criminal trials. These trials’ respective fictionalizations demonstrate that they are, as Doctorow puts it, characterized by an ambiguity similar to that of a “true novel.” Doctorow writes that trials like these are trials “in which the judgement is called into question.” This questioning does not merely have to do with basic questions such as the guilt of the accused, but also with the function of the court altogether. Doctorow writes, “Consider those occasions—criminal trials in court of law—when society arranges with all its investigative apparatus to apprehend factual reality.” The court not only decides whether a person is guilty of a crime, it also decides what is to be defined as “reality.”

This can be seen, for example, in the case of Margaret Garner, which provided Morrison with the framework for Sethe’s story in Beloved. As Avery F. Gordon indicate in Ghostly Matters, Garner’s trial had more to do with her status as slave than with her guilt. That Garner had committed murder was never doubted nor denied, in fact, the strategy of Garner’s lawyers was to have her tried for murder, in the hope that she would get acquitted. Being defined as slave would prevent this however, as she was considered not a person, but as property. Only a person could be tried for murder. The chief occupation of the trial was concerned with whether Garner and her family should be considered slaves or not, and whether they were to be returned to their previous owners. The central question was thus not to decide whether Garner was guilty of murder,
but to decide whether she was to be regarded as a person, or as property. In contrast to what happens to Sethe in *Beloved*, Garner was returned to slavery and disappeared not long after from historical records.\(^{31}\)

In this way, the court had the power to decide who were to be considered as people and who were not, as Gordon puts it:

> the law disallows her even the subjectivity of a criminal. In the eyes of the law, Margaret Garner is not a judicial subject. [...] *In spite of touching appeals* [...] Margaret Garner’s predicament remains a question of property. The court says she belongs to someone else.\(^{32}\)

This provides an example of a situation in which the court had the power to define the reality of Garner and her family. By defining them as property, rather than people, the court denied their reality as people to be recognized—this is, in other words, an example of derealization in practice.

Also when considering the Rosenberg case, it is clear that it is not merely the question of guilt that causes the trial to remain controversial. Regardless of whether the Rosenbergs were guilty of the crimes they were accused of, their trial remains controversial for different reasons. As Staughton Lynd points out:

> The prosecution obtained the ultimate punishment by means of a kind of evidence universally recognized to be unreliable, that is, the ‘snitch’ testimony of accomplices in exchange for benefits. The punishment of the defendants was disproportionate and barbaric.\(^{33}\)

Both the evidence used for conviction and the sentence itself has been disputed, as the evidence for the conviction rested mainly on the testimony of Ethel’s brother, David Greenglass, who was himself convicted for espionage and may very well have suffered the same fate as the Rosenbergs had he not testified against them.\(^{34}\) He has later admit-

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\(^{31}\) Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 158: Gordon writes further that Garner was sent southwards on the river, perhaps to be sold in Arkansas. On the way, there was either an accident, or a suicide attempt, with the result that Garner and one of her other children fell—or jumped—into the water. The child drowned but Garner was rescued. After this event, there are only speculations about her further whereabouts.


\(^{33}\) Staughton Lynd, “Is There Anything More to Say About the Rosenberg Case?”

ted that he testified falsely in order to protect himself and his wife.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, as Molly Hite points out in “‘A Parody of Martyrdom’: The Rosenbergs, Cold War Theology, and Robert Cover’s The Public Burning,” the secrets the Rosenberg had supposedly passed to the Russian were probably not as secret as the sentence seemed to suggest:

The electrocution of the Rosenbergs was a stunning overreaction to a purported crime—passing the ‘secret’ of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union—for which there was little direct evidence and which could have had little effect in any case, according to such nuclear physicists as Albert Einstein and Harold Urey, who maintained that there was no secret to the atom bomb and thus nothing of importance that a spy ring, even if one existed, could have passed on to the USSR.\textsuperscript{36}

Considering that the sentence rested on unreliable evidence and the uncertainty surrounding the secrecy of the atomic secrets, the sentence appears especially harsh; the Rosenbergs were the only American civilians executed for espionage-related activities connect during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{37}

This treatment of the Rosenbergs cannot be considered without taking into account the historical circumstances of the case. Just as it is impossible to separate Margaret Garner’s trial from the history of slavery, it is impossible to separate the Rosenbergs from the history of the Cold War and McCarthyism. At their sentencing, Judge Irving Kaufman blamed the Rosenbergs not only for leaking secrets of the atomic bomb to the Russians, but also of having caused the Korean war, blaming them for the thousands of American war-casualties, as well as possible millions more in the future, that their actions had changed the direction of American history:

I consider your crime worse than murder. […] I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused, in my opinion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000 and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason. Indeed, by your betrayal you undoubtedly have altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} “False testimony clinched Rosenberg spy trial.”
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
In this, Judge Kaufman connects the Rosenbergs to a larger narrative that he forms about the Cold War and American history, which he uses to justify the use of the death sentence. This shows that, just as with the Garner case, the judgement of the court brings with it a definition of what is to be considered real; Judge Kaufman’s narrative presents a reality in which the the Rosenbergs actions alone are able to bring about the deaths of millions.

This narrative’s connection of the Rosenbergs to the Cold War demonstrates just what Doctorow writes about in “False Documents,” that “good and evil are construed.”39 The Cold War, as Doctorow explores in The Book of Daniel, relied on a construction of the Soviet Union and communism as evil in contrast to the good, “free world” represented by the United States. In the novel, Daniel explores the narrative connections that went into making the Cold War:

The Truman Doctrine will not be announced as a policy of providing military security for the foreign governments who accept our investments, but as a means of protecting freedom-loving nations from Communism. The Marshall Plan will be advertised not as a way of ensuring markets abroad for American goods but as a means of helping the countries of Europe recover from the war.40

Here, Daniel brings to attention the constructed nature of the Cold War: that the Cold War was “announced,” and “advertised,” as part of a narrative the American state was forming about itself and its relationship to the Soviet Union. As Daniel sees it, the formation of this narrative was motivated by the idea that American interests would benefit economically from a simplified world view in which the United States came to be perceived as the defender of the “free world.” This narrative reduces the complexities of international history after the Second World War into a simplistic narrative that functions by the employment of simple binaries: us vs. them, good vs. evil, freedom vs. communism.

In their trial, the Rosenbergs were caught up in narratives like this, where their communism made it possible for the justice system identify them with the “wrong” side of the same, artificial binary that had come to define the Cold War. The Rosenbergs

39 Doctorow, “False Documents,” 158.
40 Doctorow, Daniel, 290, my italics.
became caught up in an American narrative effort to explain how the Soviet Union had come to develop the atom bomb years earlier than what was expected. This narrative effort brought about their derealization, as the narrative, in reducing them to scapegoats, disregarded their lives. As Doctorow writes, “there is no outrage, no monstrousness that cannot be made reasonable and logical and virtuous, and no shining act that cannot be turned to disgrace—with narrative.”

Even the conviction of two American citizens to death on the basis of little or no reliable evidence, can by the employment of narrative be presented not only as the right thing to do, but also a good thing to do, as Judge Kaufman’s comment demonstrates.

Considering this, I will suggest that the continued relevance of these trials does not merely have to do with a question of “what really happened?” As John G. Parks in E.L. Doctorow points out:

A trial is supposed to resolve a conflict or point of law—and most do. Some trials, however, are so controversial that they never fully resolve their conflicts even long after a verdict has been issued and punishment administered. In such trials much more is at stake than a point of law or the determination of guilt or innocence. In such trials some fundamental values of the culture itself are in conflict.

These trials are intriguing events of history because they represent moments in which the dominant narratives of a society are set down and decided. In defining “what really happened,” the court also defines the dominant system of reality that society operates by at that given time. This is what enables the court to function as an agent of derealization. Court rulings are similar to history writing, their aim is to set events into a system of meaning. This involves judgment, and this judgement reflects the values and dogmas of those in a position to judge, those in a position to decide the correct narratives to be formed. The only difference is that these events, at the time of the ruling, (usually) still belong to the contemporary. It can thus be perceived as a way of writing history about the present.

This effort to establish a particular version of reality in connection to the Rosenberg trial is also discussed by Hite. She indicates that the writings of a contemporary

41 Doctorow, “False Documents,” 158.
commentator on the Rosenberg case, literary critic Leslie Fiedler, exhibit the cultural effort to deny the Rosenbergs any sense of reality. Fiedler wrote about the letters the Rosenberg had exchanged between themselves while in prison. His aim with this appears to have been to discredit the political convictions of the Rosenberg, to hinder their deaths from attaining political meaning, and that they would become martyrs for the American Left. He proclaims that, “It is a parody of martyrdom [the Rosenbergs] give us, too absurd to be truly tragic, to grim to be the joke it is always threatening to become.” As Hite observes, central to Fiedler’s effort to diminish the Rosenbergs is the declaration of their non-reality:

The phrase ‘parody of martyrdom’ trivializes the political significance that the Rosenbergs tried to assign to their own deaths. But Fielder goes further, insisting on the ultimate unreality of the event. He declares the Rosenbergs so ontologically lacking that their deaths are not, properly speaking, deaths at all: his essay climaxes with the rhetorical question, “What was there left to die?”

Fielder’s verdict on the Rosenbergs shows the cultural need to derealize the Rosenbergs, the need, even after their death, to reassure the public that there really was no death at all, no crime committed. This need to diminish the Rosenbergs even in their death can perhaps be illuminated by Butler, who maintains that violence done against those who are derealized, can from the perspective of the perpetrators of violence never be entirely successful, as this violence “fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives already are negated.” This is also something that Doctorow explores within The Book of Daniel. As Paul Isaacson awaits his trial, he considers other, similar events of history:

Nor is death what it seems to be. When the ruling class inflicts death upon those they fear they discover that death itself can live. It is a paradox. Ma Ludlow is alive. Jo Hill is alive. […] Socrates was tried. He was found guilty. He was forced to drink hemlock. By this act his persecutors raised him to eternal life and consigned themselves to the real death and total obscurity of persecutors everywhere.

Although this is probably not much comfort to those on the receiving end of violence, this ensures that the process of negation must go on endlessly, and that the derealized

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43 Fiedler in Hite, “A Parody of Martyrdom,” 85.
44 Butler, Precarious Life, 33.
become ghost-like entities, who “have a strange way of remaining animated and must be negated again (and again).” The dominant culture is thus haunted by the lives they have attempted to negate. Fiedler can in this way be seen as attempting cultural exorcism. American culture is haunted by the memory of the Rosenbergs, just as *The Book of Daniel* is haunted by the memory of the Isaacsons.

This haunting is addressed by *The Book of Daniel*. This is present in Parks’ suggestion that the novel can in itself be considered as a form of trial:

> The Book of Daniel […], is not just about a trial, it is a trial—a ‘re-hearing,’” or perhaps better, a ‘re-speaking’ of the crucial issues connected to the trial of the Rosenbergs in 1951 in the context of the New Left in the late 1960s. It’s a ‘re-speaking’ so that neglected or forgotten voices can be heard or heard again. The attempted monologue of the cultural regime is challenged by the heteroglossia of a novel that believes that truth can best emerge from dialogue occurring in freedom.47

This idea presents a radical subversion of the trial. In the novel, Paul Isaacson sees the trial as concerned with maintaining privilege, through a system of “corruption and hypocritical self-service.” Parks’ vision of the trial as “a re-speaking” in which “neglected and forgotten voices can be heard or heard again,” presents a far different and more inclusive ideal for the trial. In the sense that any trial is history writing, *The Book of Daniel* is certainly a trial. In this sense, the novel, by the way it is put together, is also however a criticism of the conventional trial’s way of producing history.

While I agree that this is a useful way of thinking about the novel, I think it is important to remark a rather obvious, but crucial difference. While both the Rosenbergs Trial and *The Book of Daniel* in some ways are hearings of the same events, the actual Rosenberg trial was connected to a system of power that Doctorow’s writing is not. To Doctorow, it is important to keep in mind that narratives not only describe, but also shape reality. This is especially true considering narratives that are constructed by systems of power, such as a judicial court. Although I would never argue that a novelist cannot be influential, or even shape reality as result of their writing, the trial of the no-

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47 Parks, *Doctorow*, 34–35.
vel is not connected to the same systems of power as a judicial trial. This is something that Paul Isaacson sees in his analysis:

The sole authority of the law is in its capacity to enforce itself. That capacity expresses itself in Trial. There could be no law without trial. Trial is the point of law. And punishment is the point of the trial—you can’t try someone unless you assume the power to punish him.  

The novelist does not have authority over people’s lives and freedom, their narratives are less likely to kill. This is important to Doctorow, who is occupied with the possible danger and violence connected to narratives.

Nevertheless, Parks’ vision of the novel as a trial addresses how the novel approaches the past. As with Beloved, The Book of Daniel is a novel that is concerned with the derealization of history and with bringing back a sense of reality to the past. In the novel, voices that would otherwise be forgotten are given room to speak their own stories. Daniel’s grandmother, who arrived in the U.S in the early 19th century as a refugee of the prosecution of the Jewish people in Russia, as well as both of Daniel’s parents, speak about their experiences in the first person. Further, in his attempts to make sense of the past, Daniel approaches the Isaacsons from many different angles, interviewing different people about their interpretation of the case.

As argued above, a trial can be seen as a form of history writing. Haunting consists of what has been left out of this history writing. Consequently, Parks’ vision of the novel as a more open form of trial; a “re-speaking,” in which “neglected or forgotten voices can be heard or heard again;” expresses a subversive ideal for history writing. By addressing haunting, history writing may challenge derealization, or as Parks puts it, “the attempted monologue of the cultural regime.” This is seen in both The Book of Daniel and Beloved, which both work to form different pictures of history. Both novels allow for “neglected or forgotten voices” to be heard; by doing so, they challenge the derealization of official historical narratives. In this way, both novels present an alternative, and more inclusive, vision for what history writing should be like.

49 Doctorow, Daniel, 224.
50 Parks, Doctorow, 34–35.
2.3 Making Connections

*The Book of Daniel* works to problematize the formation of narratives. One of the ways in which this is done is through visual metaphors that represent narrative connections. Daniel’s discovery of a poster with the picture of his parents in his sister’s car after her attempted suicide opens for a discussion of historical representation and the individual’s ability to create meaningful connections to the past. The poster of the Isaacsons represents a flattened out, historical reduction of Daniel parents:

One picture poster, 36 x 24, used in demonstrations. Like new! Black and white double portrait depicts Isaacsons two faces historical curiosity cheap very cheap worthless comes in its own up-yours tube corners slightly deteriorated weighted with plaster amuse your friends with this historical curio free them.51

The description of this visual image provides a metaphor for what kind of narratives it is possible to form about the Isaacsons. In the picture, the Isaacson’s complexities as people are erased as they are projected onto a flat, two-dimensional surface, printed in black and white. Rochelle and Paul Isaacsons are reduced into “the Isaacsons,” two-dimensional figures that are used to form certain a narrative about American history and the Cold War in which they play the part of the scapegoats. In this way, the poster presents a de-realization of the Isaacsons. The poster, though originally meant to protest the conviction and execution of the Isaacsons, does not manage to communicate their reality, or their complexities as people. It is impossible to maintain a meaningful connection to people when they are considered in this manner, as Daniel and his sister Susan find out.

When Daniel returns to this image later on, he attempts to open the closed narrative of the picture by questioning everything that it represents:

But this isn’t the couple in the poster. That couple got away. Well funded, and supplied with false passports, they went to New Zealand or Australia. Or Heaven. In any event, my mother and father, standing in for them, went to their deaths for crimes they did not commit. Or maybe they did commit them. Or maybe my mother and father got away with false passports for crimes they didn’t commit. How do you spell comit? Of one thing we are sure. Everything is elusive. God is elusive. Revolutionary morality is elusive. Justice is elusive. Human character. Quarters for the ciga-

51 Doctorow, *Daniel*, 37.
rette machine. You’ve got these two people in the poster Daniel, now how are you going to get them out?\textsuperscript{52}

In this, Daniel brings attention to how pictures can present historical events as irrevocable fact although the actual truth remains elusive. By doing so, he changes the pattern of the narrative the picture represents from a closed circuit to an open ended one; he attempts to bring his parents “out of the poster” by bringing them out of the closed narrative circuit that caused their death.

The Isaacson’s poster has a counterpart in the collage that Artie Sternlicht’s girlfriend, who is just called “Baby,” is making. Like the Isaacson poster, Baby’s collage provides a visual metaphor for narrative connections about history. It is, however, something of a visual opposite to the Isaacson-poster:

The wall is interesting. It is completely covered with a collage of pictures, movie stills, posters, and real objects. Babe Ruth running around the bases, Marlon Brando on his bike, Shirley Temple in her dancing shoes, FDR, a bikini sprayed with gold paint, Marilyn Monroe on her calendar, Mickey Mouse, Gilbert Stuart’s Washington with a mustache penciled on, a real American Legion cap, Fred Allen in the front of a microphone, pinch-mouthed Susan B. Anthony, Paul Robeson, […]—\textsuperscript{53}

Where the poster is a flat, unitary picture, that does not open for any different perspectives, and seems to represent factual and historical truth; the collage is the opposite, it is a juxtaposition of different moments, perspectives and cultural arenas, from American popular culture, represented by Hollywood, \textit{Gone With the Wind} and Mickey Mouse; to more “serious” parts of American history represented by the chain gang, the lynched black man, and Paul Robeson. The collage is not finished, Baby is still working on it, and thinks about “covering, y’know, everything, the whole house.”\textsuperscript{54} In this way, the collage, as a mediation on American culture and history, serves as a metaphor for an open ended narrative in which widely opposing parts must be considered together. The opposition between these different parts seems to ensure that the collage cannot be brought together into a closed narrative, but must remain open-ended.

Nevertheless, Baby’s aim to cover “everything” can also be understood differently. This becomes apparent as a reporter asks for a title for the collage: “They answer

\textsuperscript{52} Doctorow, Daniel, 52–53.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 166–167.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 167.
in unison, and their friends chime in: ‘EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE IS ALL THE SAME!’” Everything in the collage, “everything that came before”—all of history, that is, “is all the same.” Consequently, the collage also represents a flattening of history into meaningless images that are of no consequence for the present—in other words, a derealization of history.

The collage thus functions as a metaphor for the narrative connections that Baby’s boyfriend, Artie Sternlicht, presents about history. Sternlicht is a figure of the New Left, whom Susan contacted in order to discuss the possibilities of creating a political foundation in the name of the Isaacsons. By comparing the New and the Old Left, the novel examines how radicalism often finds its foundation in reductive narratives of history. Sternlicht’s project involves a fashioning of the self as a Christ-like figure who by his way of being brings about the revolution: “A revolution happens. It’s happening! It’s a change on the earth. It’s a new animal. A new consciousness. It’s me! I am Revolution!” In the article “Genealogy/Narrative/Power: Questions of Postmodernity in Doctorow’s The Book of Daniel,” T.V. Reed argues that Sternlicht’s role as revolutionary figure is undermined by his “denial of all historical forces beyond his will.” The collage thus becomes “emblematic of Sternlicht’s complicity in the erasure of history.” As Reed accurately points out, “Sternlicht has confused the revolution with his own ego […] thereby fatally overestimating the revolutionary capacity of the times.” Sternlicht sees himself as something new and entirely different from the past. In order for him to maintain this vision of himself, he needs to reduce the past into a narrative of non-revolutionary sameness. The lack of revolutionary insight in this vision of history is demonstrated by the similarity between this vision, and the one presented by Disneyland later on in the novel, which, as I will return to, represents the triumph of capitalist culture.

55 Doctorow, Daniel, 168.
56 Ibid, 169, author’s italics.
58 Ibid.
Sternlicht’s vision of history can be seen in contrast to the one proposed by Daniel’s father. Like Sternlicht, Paul Isaacson’s radicalism also has its foundation in a narrative about history:

He ran up and down history like a pianist hitting his scales. Reading to me the facts and figures of economic exploitation, of slavery in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Putting together all the historic injustices and showing me the pattern and how everything that had happened was inevitable according to the Marxist analysis: Putting it all together. Everything was accounted for.

In contrast to Sternlicht, Paul Isaacson does not disregard history, instead he sets it into a pattern of Marxist analysis. Just as with Sternlicht, however, this involves a reduction of the past, as the Marxist analysis sees history set into a fixed pattern of historical inevitability. In Sternlicht’s vision, “everything is all the same,” in Paul Isaacson’s, “everything [is] accounted for.” Both historical narratives represent totalized versions of history.

From his observations, Daniel proposes a theory about how narratives are formed, which he articulates through the idea of “making connections.” Making connections is necessary in order for meaning to be formed, but it is also problematic, as within this there inherently lies the danger of making closed narratives in which everything becomes connected. Daniel lays out a theory of “the dynamics of radical thinking:”

The idea is the dynamics of radical thinking. With each cycle of radical thought there is a stage of genuine creative excitement during which the connections are made. The radical discovers connections between available data and the root responsibility. Finally he connects everything. Nothing is left outside the connections. At this point society becomes bored with the radical. Fully connected in his characterization it has achieved the counterinsurgent rationale that allows it to destroy him. The radical is given the occasion for one last discovery—the connection between society and his death.

Daniel’s observations suggest that making closed narratives is not only problematic, because doing so inherently involves falsification, but also destructive. As pointed out by Reed, electricity acts as a metaphor for connections in the novel. Electricity simultaneously represents the productive and destructive powers of connection:

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60 Doctorow, Daniel, 43.
61 Ibid, 173.
Throughout the novel complicitous ‘connections’ and the power they enable to circulate are metaphorically embodied in the literal power of electricity. Ubiquitous electrical metaphors come to embody the simultaneously destructive and productive nature of power.⁶²

Reed brings to attention that the novel is filled with references to electricity, which often appear in mundane and unexpected places: Daniel’s baby son feels the “current” as Daniel argues with the Lewins and Dr. Duberstein about Susan; as a child, Daniel feels an “electric connection” to a baseball; Daniel’s father is “tireless, full of electricity;” his grandmother’s hair looks “shockingly, like electric wire” … and so forth.⁶³ This creates a sense of ominousness, as the constant presence of electricity hints about the central, painful event of the novel, the electrocution of Isaacsons. The section that describes “the dynamics of radical thinking” has its counterpart as Daniel describes his parents electrocution: “Electricity flows in circuits. If the circuit is open or incomplete electricity cannot flow. In electrocution the circuit is closed or completed by the human body.”⁶⁴ Here, narrative connection is replaced with electric connection. Interestingly, the result is the same in either version of the events: a closed circuit is formed and the radical ends up dead.

Throughout the novel, both Daniel and Susan struggle to make meaningful connections to their past, as both search for ways in which to acknowledge their connection to their parents. Reed suggests that this can primarily be seen as a crisis of narrative, arguing that Daniel experiences “the ruptural moment of the sixties as a crisis in narrative and historical authority, encapsulated in his inability to tell or know the truth about his parents.”⁶⁵ For Daniel, this takes the form of a sort of personal crisis: “But I, Daniel, was grieved, and the visions of my head troubled me and I do not want to keep the matter in my heart.”⁶⁶ To “keep the matter in his heart” seems to signify for Daniel a way for him to negotiate his strange visions, his own experiences and those of his family, as well as other parts of history:

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⁶² Reed, “Genealogy/Narrative/Power,” 296.
⁶³ Doctorow, Daniel, 34, 56, 59 and 83.
⁶⁴ Ibid, 361.
⁶⁵ Reed, “Genealogy/Narrative/Power,” 289.
⁶⁶ Doctorow, Daniel, 21.
As Parks suggests, Daniel has “heart trouble,” he needs to find a way of negotiating history without making the same mistakes that Sternlicht and Paul Isaacson make, without reducing the past into totalized narratives in which “everything is all the same” or “everything [is] accounted for.” A narrative problem haunts both Daniel and Susan; they are not able to form meaning about their parents, what happened to them, and their connection to themselves and their own lives in the present. As Doctorow insists, narratives shape reality, and thus their narrative problem is not only a problem of meaning, but one that comes to dominate their lives.

2.4 Disneyland

Daniel and Susan’s struggle to make meaningful connections to their past is set up against a culture that is invested in the reduction of its own history. The scene at Disneyland is the clearest example of this in the novel. At the end of the novel, Daniel goes to see Selig Mindish, his parents’ friend, who testified against them in their trial. Daniel goes there in hope of finding the truth of what happened to his parents from someone who was there and experienced it. As pointed out by Reed, there is an “impeccable logic” to Daniel meeting Mindish specifically at Disneyland: “Mindish […] like the nation’s historical memory, is frail, senile, barely able to speak.” Instead of any answers, Daniel gets a kiss on the head from Mindish.

As with the collage Baby is making, Disneyland also constitutes a collage of American history and culture:

Within the thematic unities of Disneyland, there are numbers of references, usually in the form of rides, exhibits or stores, to figures or works of our literary heritage. Some of these are Alice in Wonderland (Mad Hatter’s Teacup Ride), Peter Pan (Peter Pan Flight), Life on the Mississippi (Mark Twain Riverboat) […] In addition there are implications of proprietary relationships with various figures of history, myth and legend such as King Arthur, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Casey Jones, Mike Fink,
Jean Lafitte, and Abraham Lincoln. It is hard to find a pattern in the selection of these particular figures. like Baby’s collage, Disneyland presents a juxtaposition of seemingly random moments of American culture and history, which has the effect of reducing the complexities of culture and history into an inconsequential sameness. As Reed points out, the cultural arrangement of Disneyland, like Baby’s collage, “proclaims that ‘everything that came before is all the same,’ only here there is no redeeming anarchy; everything is white and clean and fun.”

Disneyland brings together disparate parts of American history and literature, only to erase their complexity, turning them into, “glistening surfaces without depth or affect,” as Reed puts it. In this, different representations of literary works such as Alice in Wonderland, and Huckleberry Finn, contain none of the complexities of the original works, and neither do they require any previous knowledge or insight from the audience. Historical events are subjugated to the same processes of reduction:

The life and life-style of slave-trading America in the 19th century is compressed into a technologically faithful steamboat ride of five or ten minutes on a HO-scale river. [...] Piracy on high seas, a hundred and fifty years of harassment of European mercantile exploration and trade, becomes a moving diorama of all the scenes and situations of the pirate movies made by Hollywood in the thirties and forties.

Disneyland, as Daniel sees it, represents a “radical process of reduction,” that reduces the events of American culture and history into simplistic emblems that function as substitutes for meaningful connections:

What Disneyland proposes is a technique of abbreviated shorthand culture of the masses, a mindless thrill, like an electric shock, that insists at the same time on the recipient’s rich psychic relation to his country’s history and language and literature.

The use of the term “electric shock” seen in this context, suggests that the apparent harmless entertainment of Disney contains a threatening element. At Disneyland, the

70 Doctorow, Daniel, 348–349.
71 Ibid.
72 Reed, “Genealogy/Narrative/Power,” 300.
73 Doctorow, Daniel, 350.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid, 351.
moments of American history and literature are interspersed with electric shocks; the violent and destructive force of electricity appears to be what connects the disparate moments of American life.

The latent violence of the electric shocks at Disneyland also represent the danger of authoritarian control. Electricity is utilized by those in power to manage people that act in ways that are not “acceptable.” This can be seen in Dr. Duberstein’s suggestion of using electroshock therapy in order to treat Susan. Daniel presents electroshock therapy as a way to make the patient act in a certain way:

A strong current is applied by means of electrodes fastened to the scalp earlobes shoulders nipples bellybutton genitals asshole knees toes and soles of the feet, to the nervous system of the patient. The patient does a rigid dance. The current is stopped and the patient relaxes.  

This describes how the therapist, through violence and electricity, is able to control the patient fully: by the application of electricity, the therapist is given control of the patient’s motor functions, and is able to make the patient “dance.” Hence, electroshock therapy presents a way to violently force the patient to conform to the principles of power. This method of management has its ultimate culmination in the electrocution.

Moreover, like the electric shocks of Disneyland, electroshock therapy (at least in this circumstance) acts as a substitution for meaningful connections. Dr. Duberstein, in his rather diminishing attempt to help Susan, fails to address her need for connection with her parents and her past. By discouraging Susan from political involvement, he discourages her from finding meaningful connection to her past.

This effort to manage people is also demonstrated by Disneyland: “One cannot tour Disneyland today without noticing its real achievement, which is the handling of crowds.” Daniel sees that there is a troublesome dimension to this management of people, which he explores through pointing the uncanny similarities between Disneyland and the Holocaust: “The problems of mass ingress and egress seem to have been solved here to a degree that would light admiration in the eyes of an SS transport officer.”

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76 Doctorow, Daniel, 251.
77 Ibid, 351.
78 Ibid.
locating Disneyland “somewhere between Buchenwald and Belsen,” Daniel calls to attention that, although the successful management of people, culture and history demonstrated by Disneyland, may appear harmless, this kind of managements’ logical extreme is that of extermination camps and the electric chair. For both, the aim is to take control of the culture’s central narratives, and in both cases, a purging of unwanted elements is involved.

The link that Doctorow establishes between Disneyland and the Holocaust is comparable to the one Giorgi Agamben makes between the collection of biometric data at U.S. airports and the practice of tattooing prisoners at Auschwitz. Disneyland’s successful management of people and the collection of biometric data share that they are both techniques in which individuals are made into “bodies without words,” that is, they have no say in their reality. Thus, these forms of management also involve de-realization, as people are identified only as something to be managed. As both Agamben and Doctorow point out, the logical extreme of this type of management of people is that of the extermination camp. As Parks clarifies, Daniel “sees his parents’ execution, regardless of their guilt or innocence, as a small ‘holocaust’ (‘whole burnt offering’) to the savage gods of paranoid America.” The electric chair is the contemporary substitution of Nazi crematoria and sacrificial pyres: “Technology is the making of metaphors from the natural world. […] The metaphor of fire is electricity.” In the electric shocks of Disneyland that substitute memory, history, and meaningful cultural connection, Daniel sees the danger of the electric chair.

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79 Ibid, 346.
80 This use of Holocaust imagery is hardly incidental, as the main characters of the novel are all Jewish. The memory of the prosecution of Jews haunts the novel; and is represented in the memory of several characters; such as Daniel’s grandmother, who escaped Russian pogroms by coming to America; and Daniel’s adoptive mother, Lise, who fled from the Nazis as a child; as well as the repeated references to the biblical Daniel. As Paul Isaacson points out in a letter to his wife, there is an anti-Semitic dimension to their trial: “My darling have you noticed how many characters in this capitalist drama are Jewish? The defendants, the defense lawyer, the prosecution, the major prosecution witness, the judge. We are putting on this little passion play for our Christian masters.” (Doctorow, Daniel, 240)
82 Ibid.
83 Parks, Doctorow, 44.
84 Doctorow, Daniel, 273.
2.5 Violence

Violence, just like electricity, is interspersed throughout the narrative of the novel. This can be seen, for example, in one of Daniel’s childhood memories, where he witnesses a woman be killed in an accident right outside his house:

> Once, playing on the porch he had seen a woman walking along the fence right here, coming home past school. In her arms she had two bags with groceries. As he looked up and saw her, a car skidded up the sidewalk and smashed her right through the schoolyard fence, and she disappeared [...] when he went across the street to look, the woman was lying in the schoolyard; she had been carrying bottles of milk in her grocery bags, and the bottles had broken and the milk was mixed with her blood, and glass was in it.\(^{85}\)

This event seems indicative of a larger pattern within the novel: violence is mixed into everyday life like the blood of the woman is mixed with the milk and the glass. The ubiquity of electricity in the novel is only matched by that of violence: From Daniel’s various descriptions of different historical methods of execution; to his grandmother’s tragic story about her life and the deaths of everybody she loved to The Triangle Fire in 1911, the Spanish Flu, tuberculosis, a wagon accident; to the violence of political protests in the 1960’s and Daniel’s abusive treatment of his wife. Throughout the novel, violence appears to connect disparate moments of life, just as electric shocks do at Disneyland. Accordingly, the many electrical connections of the novel can also be seen as a metaphor for the prevalence of violence in American culture—electricity is, after all, a destructive force. At the end of the novel, electricity and violence combine to form the central event of the novel—the Isaacsons’ execution.

As Daniel’s analysis of Disneyland shows, this violence is not acknowledged by the dominant narratives about American life. In the narratives Disney produce about American life, everything is, as Reed puts it, “white and clean and fun;”\(^{86}\) these narratives leave no space to acknowledge the inherent violence that resides within the culture. A few days after the woman outside Daniel’s house was killed, “they came and put in a new section of fence”\(^{87}\) and nothing else happens, life goes on. The random and

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\(^{85}\) Doctorow, Daniel, 108.

\(^{86}\) Ibid.

\(^{87}\) Ibid, 109.
meaningless death of the woman is not acknowledged by anybody apart from Daniel, it appears.

Nevertheless, violence is closely connected to narrative. In the novel, both violence and narrative connections are expressed through the same metaphor—electricity. As Reed points out, electricity is a “productively destructive power,” that “connects only when it meets resistance.” Through the employment of the metaphor of electricity for narrative connections, Doctorow explores the simultaneously destructive and productive abilities of narrative connections. Like electricity, narrative is beneficial and necessary; just as we are dependent on electricity in our daily lives, and our bodies need it to operate, we are dependent on narrative in order to form meaning about our lives. Yet both electricity and narrative have destructive abilities as well, when applied wrongly, they can both be lethal—as is seen in the Isaacsons’ electrocution.

In this way, Doctorow explores how the formation of certain forms of narrative can be an act of violence. This can be considered in connection with Butler’s assertion that derealization, which, after all, is a narrative practice, “effects violence through omission.” Through his analysis of Disneyland, Daniel uncovers a violent practice of historical and cultural reduction. This practice is the same that allowed the Isaacsons to be reduced into scapegoats as part of the equally reductive narratives of the Cold War. As discussed in the previous chapter, derealization is a form of violence at the level of discourse, that “gives rise to a physical violence.” Thus, the formation of certain narratives can both be a violent practice in itself, and facilitate the practice of different forms of violence. In the novel, the Isaacsons are reduced to something less than real by narratives of derealization; this declares them as accessible for the violence that ends their lives. Derealization, as an inflexible form of narrative, has its metaphor in the closed electric circuit that brings about violent death of the Isaacsons.

This interrelation of violence and narrative is key to Daniel and Susan’s struggle to establish meaningful connections to their past. Prior to her suicide attempt, Susan attempts to establish “The Paul and Rochelle Foundation for Revolution.” She tells Da-

88 Reed, “Genealogy/Narrative/Power,” 297.
89 Butler, Precarious Life, 34.
90 Ibid.
niel: “The name Isaacson has meaning. What happened to the Isaacsons is a lesson to
this generation.”91 Through this, Susan endeavors to establish a meaningful connection
between her parents and herself, between the politics of the past and the present. This
attempt proves ultimately unsuccessful; the New Left does not share Susan’s vision of
historical connection. The New Left, which is represented in the figure of Sternlicht, is
not interested in establishing any form of connection to the Isaacsons. Where Susan as-
serts that her parents were martyrs, Sternlicht replies: “Sure they were martyrs. But the
revolution has more martyrs than it needs. […] We’ve got martyrs up the ass.”92 It is
telling that Susan carried the Isaacson-poster in order to give it to Baby for her collage.
In this way, the Isaacsons also were to be part of the collage that pronounces that “eve-
erything that came before is all the same.”

After her attempted suicide, Susan tells Daniel: “They are still fucking us.”93 Later on, Daniel echoes her in asserting that “This is the story of a fucking, right?”94
“Fucking” expresses the violent narrative practices that ended the Isaacsons life and in
their death hinder their children from forming meaning about them. As Daniel talks to
Sternlicht, he realizes what Susan meant to communicate him earlier:

They’re still fucking us. She didn’t mean Paul and Rochelle. That’s what I would
have meant. What she meant was first everyone else and now the Left. The Isaacsons
are nothing to the New Left. And if you can’t make it with them who else is there?
YOU GET THE PICTURE. GOODBYE, DANIEL.95

The New Left are not interested in establishing a connection to the Isaacsons, and neit-
her, it appears, are anybody else, except for Susan (and as the plot progresses, Daniel).
The processes that derealized Paul and Rochelle while they were alive now disable their
children from forming meaningful connections to them.

This can be considered in connection to Butler, who maintains that violence
against those who are established as unreal never can be entirely successful, as “from
the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are

91 Doctorow, Daniel, 99.
92 Ibid, 187.
93 Ibid, 10.
94 Ibid, 27
95 Ibid, 189.
already negated.”96 This ensures that the processes of derealization must go on endlessly, as Butler writes, “Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object.”97 As Susan points out to Daniel, the “fucking” that brought about the death and derealization of the Isaacsons is still going on.

As Daniel brings to attention, Susan’s attempt to establish a connection to their parents fails to produce a natural form of relation between her and her parents: “There it is, the fucking family gift for self-objectification. You hear that? She calls her mother and father the Isaacsons!”98 As Daniel calls attention to, Susan’s foundation presents a derealized image of their parents, akin to the one presented by the “Save the Isaacsons”-poster. Through this, Doctorow explores how a culture’s preoccupation with narratives of reduction and derealization not only enables violence to happen, but also inhibits the inhabitants of that culture from forming meaningful connections about their history and their identity. In a culture so invested in the reduction of history, most of the narrative structures that are available for the individual are reductive. Due to this, Susan’s attempt at establishing a meaningful connection with her parents turns into a closed and reductive narrative about the past. By establishing a connection to “the Isaacsons” as a concept, rather than as people, Susan becomes complicit in the derealization of her parents. This becomes, as Daniel indicates, a form of “self-objectification,” as Susan, through this, not only becomes complicit in her parents’ derealization, but also her own, through her connection to them.

Through her attempt at connection, Susan identifies herself with the derealized entity of “the Isaacsons.” This identification turns into a form of self-derealization comparable to the one discussed in the previous chapter, in which Sethe and Paul D come to internalize their own derealization. Through this connection to the Isaacsons, Susan puts herself in harm’s way of the structures that brought about their execution. As discussed in the previous chapter, derealization “carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of a person as a whole to the point of collapse,”99 which is essentially

96 Butler, Precarious Life, 33.
97 Ibid, 33–34.
98 Doctorow, Daniel, 99–100.
what happens to Susan as she turns into a “starfish,” before she dies of “a failure of analysis” at the end of the novel.

By considering violence and narrative together, the novel explores how dominant cultural narratives of violence and derealization become part of the individual’s imagination and comes to dictate their way of being. This is also discernible in Daniel, who appears to have internalized the violence that is so ubiquitous in the culture that surrounds him. Daniel is defined by a cruelty that he carries out towards those closest to him, in particular his wife, Phyllis. He is not able to connect to Phyllis, or express love for her; instead their relationship is centered on “fucking,” on a sexuality that is based in violence and degradation. For Daniel, the narratives that direct his life have become defined by disruption and violence. As Daniel sees it: “the pattern of our [his and Susan’s] lives is deterioration, that the movement of our lives is toward death.”

The violence that Daniel exhibits in his personal life thus mirrors the violence at work in American culture and history.

Reed contends that Daniel’s problems with making connections to the past are caused by his fear of making the same kind of narrative connections that brought about his parents’ death in the first place:

Following his own arguments, [Daniel] wonders if finding the correct historical or political analysis may somehow make him complicit in the execution of his parents. All the vast, diffuse power of the state was concentrated in the 2,500 volts that shocked life out of the Isaacsons/Rosenbergs; to correctly decode this ritual, to trace the lines of power to their source might be to complete the circuit, to reinscribe those power lines, and to make oneself vulnerable to that power.

As Reed indicates, making connections to the Isaacsons involves making “oneself vulnerable” to the possibly destructive power of narrative connections. Daniel has to avoid committing the same mistake as Susan, who in her effort to make connections reduces both herself and her parents to something less than real. This also involves avoiding making the same mistake as “the radical” who, in Daniel’s theory of “the dynamics of

100 Doctorow, Daniel, 256.
102 Ibid, 16.
103 Reed, “Genealogy/Narrative/Power,” 297.
radical thinking,” “connects everything,” and ends up with a closed circuit that brings about his own destruction.  

Daniel’s project becomes to form narrative connections about the past without allowing them to turn into a closed circuit. He does this through the formulation of the book that becomes the novel:

**DANIEL'S BOOK: A Life Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Social Biology, Gross Entomology, Women’s Anatomy, Children’s Cacophony, Arch Demonology, Eschatology and Thermal Pollution.**

As the title reflects, Daniel’s book, like Baby’s collage and Disneyland, presents widely desperate moments of American history and culture. However, in contrast to the other collages, Daniel refrains from reducing the different moments that he describes. Instead, as discussed above, his novel represents a different ideal for history writing in which “neglected or forgotten voices can be heard or heard again.” Consequently, though not overtly concerned with ghosts, *The Book of Daniel*, like *Beloved*, is a novel that is concerned with a form of haunting—it is concerned with addressing what has been left out of dominant narratives of history and with recovering a sense of reality to the derealized.

Through his explorations of different forms of narrative in *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow illustrates many of the points that he makes in “False Documents.” Considered in connection to “False Documents,” Daniel’s book can seen as narrative in the service of “the power of freedom,” rather than “the power of regime;” or, in my terms, a narrative structured by haunting, rather than derealization. Thus, the novel is not only concerned with analyzing the structures of derealization, but also with providing an alternative to them.

Through the employment of electric metaphors in the novel, Doctorow explores the inherent violence that resides within narrative connections; the violence of the electric circuit represents the hazard of closed narrative structures. Further, he explores how the employment of these kinds of narrative structures can bring about violence; the em-  

104 Doctorow, *Daniel*, 173.  
105 Ibid, 368.  
ployment of inflexible narratives brought about not only the Isaacsons’ execution, but also the Cold War. In doing this, Doctorow suggests that we should pay attention to what kind of narrative structures we use in order to make sense of ourselves and our history. Through Daniel and Susan’s experiences in the novel, he demonstrates how the prevalence of reductive narrative structures and derealization can come to inhibit the individual’s attempts to form meaning about their own life and their history.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the different ways in which fiction may provide an alternative to dominant forms of history. I have applied the concepts of haunting and derealization in order to access different aspects of this. Derealization is a narrative practice which has the effect, as Butler maintains in *Precarious Life*, of removing the sense of reality attached to certain lives, and in doing so, making them ungrievable.¹ Through my readings of *Beloved* and *The Book of Daniel*, I have explored how both novels deal with lives that have been derealized. *Beloved* is written as a literary monument to the “Sixty Million and more”² that were lost in the Middle Passage, while *The Book of Daniel* is written for the “conquer’d and slain persons.”³

Through their focus on past lives that are not represented by history at all, like the people lost in the middle passage, or lives that are only represented in reductive forms, such as Margaret Garner and the Rosenbergs, both novels work to reestablish a sense of reality to these lives and to make them grievable. In *Beloved*, the ghostly character called Beloved speaks about the experience of the middle passage, just as Sethe does about an experience appropriate to that of Margaret Garner, and as the Isaacsons do for the Rosenbergs in *Daniel*. Accordingly, both novels involve themselves with narrative structures of haunting in which to re-establish a sense of reality to those that have been derealized.

As I have explored in the first chapter, derealization is not only an outward process of recognition, but also something that can come to be internalized by those who experience it. Morrison’s depiction of Beloved haunting Sethe and Paul D, by raping Paul D and causing Sethe to starve herself, illustrates how derealization “can bring the identity of a person as a whole to the point of collapse.”⁴ In this, derealization pro-

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² Morrison, *Beloved*.
³ Whitman cited in Doctorow, *Daniel*.
ves a violation against the subject’s very sense of self, causing them to feel “deprived of reality.”

This can be considered in connection to my discussion in the second chapter about violence and narrative. Through his employment of electric metaphors to represent narrative connections, Doctorow explores how the creation of certain forms of narrative can in itself constitute an act of violence, which then again may facilitate other forms of violations. Through his conceptualization of Disneyland as a collage of American culture and history, in which meaningful connections have become replaced by electric shocks, Doctorow suggests that American culture has become caught up in a violent practice of narrative reduction that inhibits the individual’s ability to form meaningful narratives about their lives and about their history.

This kind of violent narrative practice is also at work in *Beloved*, where the dominant cultural narrative is disseminated by the white slaveholder, represented by Schoolteacher in the novel. Schoolteacher reduces African Americans into property, whose value pertains to various characteristics such as reproductive potential, that all can be summed up in monetary worth. This is a dominant cultural narrative, because Schoolteacher, and men like him, have the power to enforce this worldview upon others. Hence, Schoolteacher’s narrative not only shows “that discourse itself effects violence through omission,” as Butler puts it, but also that “this level [of discourse] then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture.” Schoolteacher has the power to define whose lives are to be considered real or not; to define who is available to be “rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized.”

In effect, Schoolteacher is thus similar to the courts of justice discussed in the second chapter. Both Schoolteacher and the court represent a narrative authority that has the power to define, who, or what, is to be considered as real. What Schoolteacher does to Paul D in *Beloved* is thus comparable the court’s judgement in the trials of Garner and the Rosenbergs; both are practices of derealization. Both the court and School-

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6 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 34.
teacher also share the authority that ensures that the narrative they present will be realized by physical violence. As Paul Isaacson observes in *The Book of Daniel*, “The sole authority of the law is in its capacity to enforce itself.”

As seen with Paul D, the victim of derealization may come to internalize their own derealization as the only way to make sense of the violations that they experience. After having been raped by Beloved, Paul D questions his manhood; he cannot explain how he can simultaneously be a man, and be treated as a thing by Beloved:

> If schoolteacher was right it explained how he had come to be a rag doll—picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter. Fucking her when he was convinced he didn’t want to.

This shows that, as Doctorow explores in *The Book of Daniel*, in a culture defined by violent narratives of reduction, the individual may come to be complicit in their own reduction. In *The Book of Daniel*, this is most distinctly seen with Susan, who, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, becomes complicit in both her own and her parents’ derealization through her unsuccessful attempt at forming a meaningful connection to the past.

The connection that Susan makes to the past has, within Doctorow’s framework, its metaphorical equivalent in the closed electric circuit. Through this, he explores how making inflexible narrative connections about the past is not only unethical, as by doing so, one participates in derealization; but also how this practice may prove hazardous to the person who is making the connections. This suggests that in order to create more beneficial, as well as more sincere, narratives about the past, one needs to refrain from making the connection to the past into a closed circuit.

Traditional history writing operates on the assumption that the past is completely transparent; that instead of shaping reality, history merely reflects it. This assumption is not shared by either Morrison or Doctorow. As discussed in the introduction, both *Beloved* and *The Book of Daniel* favor “incomplete” and fragmentary forms of truth; neither novel propose that they have the answers to all the questions posed by their narratives.

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8 Doctorow, *Daniel*, 224.
We never get to know exactly who, or what, Beloved is, and neither do we get to know whether the Isaacsons are guilty of all, or any, of the crimes they were accused of. Instead, what both novels present is what can be described as narrative structures of haunting; structures that work to represent history without assuming that history is transparent or that everything can, or should, be known.

This can be considered in connection to my discussion of obscurity in the first chapter. Narratives of haunting are formed by the obscure. As the obscure operates by a logic that is opposed to that of dominant discourse, the haunted narrative may form meaning without being dictated by the demands of dominant forms of history. The haunted narrative, like Doctorow’s “power of freedom,” is based in imagination, rather than factuality, which means that it is able to approach parts of history that cannot be reached merely by an adherence to facts, such as the middle passage. Moreover, by forming narratives of opacity, rather than transparency, the haunted narrative provides a way to approach the past without either reducing or derealizing it.

This is seen in Beloved and The Book of Daniel. In both novels, the use of narrative structures of haunting work to represent parts of history that have either been left out of dominant history entirely, or that have been misrepresented. This is done without reducing this history into something else, or defining them in our own terms. Thus, these structures of haunting provide a way to approach people like Garner and the Rosenbergs, and countless others, without making them transparent or less real. In this way, these narratives also propose a restructuring of what kinds of narratives we can, and should, form about history.

Hence, this study maintains that the concepts of haunting and derealization can be considered as central to how we understand, and interact with, history. As history is inherently a narrative practice, this study proposes that we should be attentive to the various structures that this involve. As is shown in both Beloved and The Book of Daniel, forming narratives about history that are structured by haunting, rather than derealization, may prove a more honest and respectful way of approaching the past.


Coffin, Levi. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the reputed president of the underground railroad; being a brief history of the labors of a lifetime in behalf of the slave, with the stories of numerous fugitives, who gained their freedom through his instrumentality, and many other incidents*. Cincinnati: West Tract Society, 1876.


