

Muñoz Meditation

Tracie Morris

He *ghost*.

Recalling turntables jerry-rigged between street lamps along the East Coast, the articulated mélange of the global and American South, proto-technology of repurposed analogue sounds in scratches of DJs, defined the Queer, colored and experimental communities that became the populist pointillism of Jose Muñoz's generation.

Earlier Hip Hop inflected iterations of *leaving* an aspect of impermanence, vulnerability and transparency this is a primary verb of minoritarian subjects. The *subject* of leaving, that came to be the parlance of the "grown folks" we've now become, that we've been *immortalized* as, went from "They [he/she/I'm] out of here"/ "outta here", to "outtie" to "Audi 5000" to "[They, etc.] ghost" to "[They] Swayze, yo." This one narrative/linear stream from English to something beyond/past conventional English constraints, was blending and (re-)emerging *space-time* before the unification via the *lingua omni* of digitized and simultaneous dispersion.

From "I'm out of here" to/through "I'm Swayze" is an apt baseline for Jose's *meaningfulness*. The reconfiguring of an English phrase to a reference of an actor who's known as much for playing a disembodied spirit as for playing a

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drag queen (and now who's also unencumbered by limitations of one "form") is the temporal marker for many of Muñoz's disidentified subjects/subjectivities.

Through the meta-consciousness of youth of color at the time, the designation "Swayze" rather than, say "Sam Wheat" (or a variation thereof)—the name of the actor's character in the film *Ghost*—precognized his trans-cultural value between races, realms sexualities and presentations of gender in people's everyday lives.

He outtie/He ghost: Swayze is now "out" with his ghostliness and his iterations of outness are also ghosts. These phrases and metaphors are apt *etiologies* but differently than J.L. Austin's framing of the term. Swayze's inverted/invertebrate "shadow" has been fore-fronted since the 1990s (preceding his actual death). *Swayze* as a term, was the primary understanding of how a certain age and congregation of people related to Patrick, as a performer, for more than a quarter century.



Embodiment and the presentation of the body of the marginalized subject is always subject/suspect/suspicious/scary. The heightened sibilant prompted in these well-used terms, is an intangible sound: a rustling that draws one's attention but can't quite be placed when heard. It echoes its/it's whispers. It's doing something but we're not sure what it is. Sibilants might be the *sound* of ghosts. We can't be sure of what we're hearing. What's up?

Etiolation, shadow and sound, the Hip-Hop originating Swayzean presence, has been my personal relationship with José since I met him before attending NYU in 2001. I *heard* of him before meeting him, when Fred Moten referenced him at a conversation circa Fall, 2000. Meeting Jose, in the flesh, for the first time occurred with Fred and Robin Kelley soon after. José was the only person who was new to me at that meeting.

He be all up in there: As my teacher, my boss (when I was his graduate assistant), and later as the chair of my area exam and dissertation committees (not to mention my doctoral program's department), José maintained his etiologic relationship with me. It was a mutual agreement. He accepted, and reinforced, my "terms." At the time, I was establishing myself more securely as an artist after being on the scene for about a decade and a half in various capacities. I was also a part-time professor at Jose's alma mater and invited him to speak while I was still employed there (during his visit, José gave a talk in front of **his** former mentor, ironically). Because of these intangibly non-hierarchical dynamics (and because José and I were closer in age than most of the incoming doctoral students in the program), I felt guilty about imposing my needs on him, asking him for the kind of mentorship that people who were even newer artist-scholars in the field might need. I felt, that I should be more independent and "grown."

And yet, his presence was a keystone, a stabilizing force. He was there whether I saw him there or not. He intervened in ways I didn't, and won't ever know. Ensuring a level of protection that was disembodied akin to Swayze's character in the film. *He ghost* but in that way that can make things happen in the "real world" (a positive poltergeist).

Much of this was as performative utterance, as text: The official performances of designating me ABD or a doctor of philosophy, the writing down and signing off of legal documents but more importantly, it was the knowing by me, and many others—including a graduating student that was both mine (as an undergraduate) and his (as a PhD candidate)—that he would *be there*, pragmatically and ephemerally.



He ghost on the real, doe: The passing of Jose, his sudden, devastating departure, didn't feel as romantic, resolved and deliberate as Swayze's character or the usual use of the term "ghost" in Hip-Hop based utterances as we knew it. *Ghost* wasn't that *final*. This leaving of Jose's didn't *feel* right. I, along with everyone else, went through the typical Kubler-Ross stages starting with denial, as shock, about the way that he, and many men of color, tend to neglect their bodies, often in service to people under their care. Jose's death also clarified, quantified, the hair's breath between hidden/shadow and totalizing absence, the *infelicity*, the *sadness*, of absolute *unmeaning*.

Unmooring: The managing of this stark reality of lack, hardened the silence of those rustling papers and other sibilants, was managing a Cagean absence of sound. (Where is *that* music?) The absence of shadow leaves bleakness but also naked truth. Part of that truth was/is that I knew, we all knew, he wouldn't be about a pity-party, even when earnest. For him it was about the work. The meaning we leave and are left with.

The year of his passing coincided with the next step of work that he was a direct maker of, through my hands, and those of others he knew, like artists Jennifer Miller and theorist Ira Livingston: in 2013, that making manifested in the nascent creation of what would become the MFA program in Performance and Performance Studies (I'm Coordinator of) at the art school Pratt Institute. Pragmatically, this fact of his essential role in this new program is based upon credentials he conferred upon me. Ephemerally, it was through example: Many people, including the former dean of the Tisch School of the Arts, Mary Schmidt Campbell, remarked on Muñoz' extraordinary administrative skill, a heretofore unknown superlative aptitude he had that was made clear when he became chair of NYU's PS program. "Water seeks its own level," is a familiar phrase among a certain age of older Black folks and, once in the chair, José presented another aspect in his formidable arsenal of excellent work... I have a photocopied pic-

ture of him, from the PS department's immediate impromptu memorial, put together based on the outpouring of community need. He's sitting in his chair, working. I don't know if it's administrative work, theoretical work, or professorial work, but he is working, serious, and slightly pleased at what he's looking at.

The conflation of these tasks, these roles, their deep meaning to him, his pleasure and its articulation, his sometimes very present, sometimes invisible hand, was all of the same matter: a steady empowering agent for those who are less likely to have the supportive scaffolding they need and to help them, those who've been in his care, to fully bloom. I don't pretend to know if I'll reach his abilities in any of these ways, but his invisible Muñoz *manos* are certainly guiding mine.

Today, as I picked up the pieces of threads and tears to write these notes, I printed another photo of him that I found online. He has his glasses off, has a thick mop of curly black hair and he's looking mischievous and smart. I've *never* seen him without his glasses and I'd never seen him that age (he looked "student"). I wasn't sure exactly *who* I was looking at. I wasn't sure of who was looking at *me*. He was literally a shadow and an etiolation of his former self. But anyone could see the "what" in there, the José Muñoz he was to become. I put that picture next to the memorial program on my wall because I want his shadow to peer, to remind me that one of my brilliant, creative, artistic grad students is, or will become, someone great like *José* (who he will be, who he was, who he always is, seen and unseen).

We knew, when we said someone was *ghost*, back *in the day*, that it meant they were gone, they were *out*—but also, they'd be *coming back* (to (tell) all y'all).



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