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Postcolonial Ghosts. Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

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Ghosts do not roam in limbo. They only come into existence when they are met. They have no other place than their apparition. When they disappear, they do so completely. They have no inner life, they do not have a life somewhere else, they have neither psychology nor memory. They do not suffer. They are born because we are haunted by them — we light them and blow them, poor, oscillating candles. They are only for us.¹

Marie DARRIEUSSECQ.

This collection of essays springs from an international conference held at Paul-Valéry University, Montpellier III, in November 2007, organised by the Cerpac (Centre d'Étude et de Recherche sur les Pays du Commonwealth/Research Centre on the Commonwealth). It proposes a selection of the papers that were presented over the three-day conference. First and foremost, we would like to address

1. *Les fantômes ne rôdent pas dans les limbes. Ils n'existent que dans la rencontre. Ils n'ont d'autre lieu que leur apparition. Quand ils disparaissent, c'est totalement. Ils n'ont pas de vie intérieure, ils n'ont pas de vie quelque part, ils n'ont ni psychologie ni mémoire. Ils ne souffrent pas. Ils naissent de notre hantise, qui les allume et les éteint, oscillants, pauvres chandelles. Ils ne sont que pour nous'*. DARRIEUSSECQ, Marie, *Le Pays* (Paris: POL, 2005): 297.

our warmest thanks to the writers Pauline Melville and Karen King-Aribisala for accepting our invitation. We would also like to thank the two keynote speakers, John McLeod (University of Leeds, UK) and Gerry Turcotte (University of Notre Dame, Sydney, Australia). The four of them put in practice once more what has become a tradition at the Cerpac conferences, initiating a true interaction between the critical and the creative fields. The interview Pauline Melville gave John McLeod, followed by a reading, and the reading performance of Karen King-Aribisala were highlights of the conference. Gerry Turcotte was not satisfied with delivering only a keynote address, he also delighted us with a reading of his own texts. Even if it has been impossible to reproduce those events in the published format of this volume, some of the spirit is hopefully translated into the few texts that Gerry Turcotte has generously agreed to let us include. A proper conclusion was brought, even if belatedly, by the fact that Karen King-Aribisala was granted in March 2008 the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Africa Region for the novel she had read extracts from, *The Hangman's Game*.

The conference was made possible thanks to the support of the University and particularly the Conseil Scientifique, the Équipe d'Accueil 741 'Étude des Pays Anglophones', as well as the Pôle Universitaire Européen du Languedoc-Roussillon. Our thanks also go to the City of Montpellier for letting us use the quite wonderful venue of the Maison des Relations Internationales. With its location and its resourceful team, it is almost a guarantee of success in itself. The international bookshop Sauramps also played its part. This publication is also the result of collaboration between two research centres, the Centre Interlangues Texte Image Langage, Équipe d'Accueil 4182, at the University of Dijon (Mélanie Joseph-Vilain) and the Cerpac at the University of Montpellier III (Judith Misrahi-Barak). Last but not least, all the participants must be thanked for the quality of their papers and the high degree of enthusiasm and friendship they displayed.

Quite a few seminars and conferences have most probably been held on the topic of 'Ghosts', and from Scotland to India to Australia, it is quite a popular theme in reading and academic circles. From Shakespeare to Freud to the gothic novel, the ghost is a recurrent figure in culture and literature. However, adding 'Postcolonial' to 'Ghosts' has implied a radical change in perspective and this accounts for the fact that there was such a wide and eager response to the call for papers that circulated widely before the conference—ancient problematics were being formulated anew.

Of all the conferences organised by the Cerpac so far, it is definitely the one that has attracted most interest across the world. Of all the haunting phenomena, is there one type of haunting that would be postcolonial? Is there a specifically postcolonial ghost? A specifically postcolonial kind of haunting? Who are those ghosts and how do they make themselves manifest? Can they be conjured up or exorcised at all? Is it enough to speak about them to dispel them? How are our collective and individual ghosts to be laid to rest?

Ghosts are liminal beings. They lie at the threshold between present and past, between life and death, between presence and absence, between the visible and the invisible, between here and there, between self and other. Their capacity to blur boundaries and to question dichotomies makes them apt figures to interrogate the postcolonial condition. This volume explores the specificity of postcolonial ghosts: what makes them so emblematic of postcoloniality? How can ghosts be used to understand the postcolonial condition?

What makes the figure of the ghost particularly meaningful in the postcolonial context is probably its strong link with place. As Jean-Michel Rabaté reminds us: 'to haunt comes from the frequentative form of 'to live', or else it derives from the Germanic root *heim/home*'¹. Rabaté concludes from the close link between haunt-

1. RABATÉ, Jean-Michel, *La Pénultième est morte. Spectrographies de la modernité* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, coll. 'L'Or d'Atalante', 1993): 51–52.

ing and inhabiting that the ghost is a nodal figure linking the locative to the subjective (Rabaté 1993: 52). In the postcolonial context, where inhabiting a place is perhaps even more a challenge than elsewhere, the ghost appears as the ideal figure to try and negotiate 'homeness'. Postcolonial ghosts are certainly one of the manifestations of the process of negotiation at work in all cultures¹, and one of the symptoms of the conflicts between indigenous and settler cultures and peoples.

Postcolonial ghosts often manifest the return of repressed/hidden events, which *took place* in the conflict-ridden context of colonization. From this point of view postcolonial cultures are often 'fantasmophoric'—they carry the ghosts 'of *other* ancestors who must not *take place*'². Postcolonial ghosts often express the unsolvable conflict between cultures which are irremediably different—irremediably other. They are often the manifestation of a past which cannot pass and resurfaces into the present in the only guise allowed to it: the spectral. Colonization itself is a ghostly process which turns native peoples and cultures into spectres which haunt both their descendants and those of the conquerors/settlers. Hence the two main types of postcolonial ghosts: native ghosts looking for recognition or revenge, or colonizers' ghosts manifesting the collective guilt of the victors of history.

Postcolonial ghosts often bridge the gap between past and present: they can only make sense and take shape because they are seen by postcolonial subjects. In other words, the postcolonial ghost can only *take place* in front of the postcolonial subject, illustrating Derrida's 'ontopology'³, the close link between ontological presence and place. In the postcolonial world, more than elsewhere, the Derridean conception of hauntology is illustrated:

1. BHABHA, Homi K., *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

2. DEPIERRE, Marie-Ange, *Paroles fantomatiques et cryptes textuelles* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, coll. 'L'or d'Atalante', 1993): 109.

3. DERRIDA, Jacques, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993): 137.

Therefore 'I am' would mean 'I am haunted': I am haunted by myself who am (haunted by myself who am haunted by myself who am . . . and so forth). Wherever there is Ego, *es spukt*, 'it spooks'. (. . . not simply 'it spooks', as we have just ventured to translate, but 'it returns', 'it ghosts', 'it specters'). The essential mode of self-presence of the cogito would be the haunting obsession of this '*es spukt*'. (Derrida 1993: 212)

In the postcolonial world, *being* means *being haunted*, by colonization and its aftermath, but also by oneself as a postcolonial subject. Haunting as a basic component of postcolonial identity accounts for the two main modes of postcolonial haunting, in which the subject can be either passive or active. In the first mode, the ghost comes to be incorporated, sometimes hidden¹, within the subject, who becomes a ventriloquist, entrapped in the sterile repetition of someone else's words and actions. Such ghosts can be read as the manifestation of the violence of colonization, whose impact continues to inhabit every dimension of the postcolonial world.

But the postcolonial ghost can also be conjured up voluntarily by the postcolonial subject who wishes to exorcise past evils. From this perspective, the ghost does not only link past and present: it also shows the way to the future, closing or opening perspectives for the postcolonial subject. As Derrida puts it, 'at bottom, the spectre is the future, it is always to come, it only presents itself as what might come or come back' (Derrida 1993: 71). Whether actively conjured up or carried as a burden, whether benevolent or malevolent, the meaning of postcolonial ghosts largely depends on the context in which they appear.

In all cases, it has to be noted that in the postcolonial world ghosts are prominently textual, which is not surprising; as Jean-Michel Rabaté puts it, 'the ghost is produced by discourse, since, if almost nobody has seen ghosts for himself, everybody knows at least their diffuse rumour. The spectre is a discursive being made

1. See Abraham and Torok's twin concepts of the ghost and the crypt, developed in *L'Écorce et le Noyau* (Paris: Flammarion, coll. 'Champs', 1987).

up of rumours, of a diffuse hearsay which relies on the heavy burden of the past' (Rabaté 1993: 214). Postcolonial ghosts are no exception: they can be histories, stories or dead people who 'want to be recounted. They don't want to be voiceless; they don't want to be pushed aside, obliterated. They want us to know'.¹ In the postcolonial world ghosts are textual, and even linguistic. They express the voices of the past, and as such they can create haunted/haunting voices. French linguist Alain Fleischer once described accents as 'phantom tongues'². The image could be used to describe art in the postcolonial world. There, the voice of the artist is always ghostly, always a 'phantom tongue' carrying the various layers of a complex history. Even creoles can be described as haunted languages, whose hybrid nature testifies to the various linguistic layers involved in their creation and bearing the linguistic traces of the colonial encounter.

More than elsewhere, perhaps, in the postcolonial world ghosts ask the fundamental question of heritage: how are history, culture, identity transmitted—or not transmitted—in cultures born from conquest, conflict, and sometimes obliteration? What exactly is transmitted and what is repressed? The figure of the ghost, used consciously or unconsciously, can be read as a manifestation of the complexity of these issues in the postcolonial world. In the literary field, the ghost is linked with one of the privileged modes of writing used to explore the palimpsest-like reality of the postcolonial world: magic realism, which allows for an exploration of a metamorphic figure whose elusiveness characterizes the postcolonial condition. Clearly, then, the postcolonial space can be defined as the haunted space of negotiation, where you have to 'explain yourself with more than one'³.

1. ATWOOD, Margaret, *Negotiating with the Dead. A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 162.

2. FLEISCHER, Alain, *L'accent. Une langue fantôme* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).

3. 'On n'hérite jamais sans s'expliquer avec du spectre et, dès lors, avec plus d'un spectre. Avec la faute mais aussi l'injonction de plus d'un' (Derrida: 46).

The articles that constitute this volume are a selection of the papers presented at the conference itself which brought together many scholars from across the world with diverse interests. But even though the participants' fields of research were multiple, the conference brought their preoccupations together and the result was as stimulating and energizing as could be. It seemed logical to start the volume with a few of the articles that chose to focus on what we have chosen to call **Historical Ghosts**, those ghosts that never stop returning. It is almost as if the function of those historical ghosts was precisely to raise the question of *how* their dispelling is to be done. Who is haunting who? Is the ghost of the victim of historical atrocities haunting the victimizer, or is the victimizer's ghost haunting the victim? How many generations are needed for the haunting to stop?¹ Is time enough to lay the ghosts to rest? Is a discursive act such as a public apology, be it individual or collective, enough? This is what Ashraf Rushdy focuses on in his article 'Ghosts of Sorrow: the Haunted Dialectic of Historical Apologies'. Apologies are indeed one of the means for the states or the churches to undo historical knots that have been at the throats of the generations following a trauma. There can be other means to try and transcend the ghosts attached to colonialism. In 'Commonwealth Diplomacy Today: Transcending Colonial and Post-colonial Ghosts?', Mélanie Torrent presents the Commonwealth and Commonwealth diplomacy as one of those means, as a tool to move beyond colonial history and oppression through the expansion of its fields of action and through practices that forge new types of relations. Within the context of the Commonwealth, it seemed par-

1. Marianne Hirsch calls this phenomenon of second generation haunting, 'post-memory'. She introduced the term in relationship with the survivors of the Holocaust, and the survivors' children, in an essay 'Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile', in *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, Susan Rubin Suleiman ed., (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998): 418-446. She also expanded the scope of the use of the term in 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14: 1 (2001): 5-37.

ticularly interesting to focus on the difficulties of setting up a state which would turn its back on colonial throes and forge democratic rules. The example taken by Virginie Barrier-Roiron in 'A Colonial Ghost Never to Be Banished? The Case of Zimbabwe' has something tragic about it since the volume was prepared at a time when democratic elections in 2008 turned out to be utterly impossible and Zimbabwe was plunging into chaos again. The ghost is indeed a trope that is particularly suited to thinking the postcolonial.

From the ghosts of time and history to **Haunted Places**, only a short step is needed. This part is opened by Gerry Turcotte's article, 'First Nations Phantoms and Aboriginal Spectres: the Function of Ghosts in Settler-Invader Cultures', which was delivered during the conference as one of the two keynote addresses. Linking Canada and Australia has autobiographical grounds, it also abides by an inner logic, bringing together two Commonwealth countries whose histories have been complicated by the tensions of colonial possession and dispossession, appropriation and removal. The ghost is shown as intimately connected to settler-invader policies—the Indigenous Indians and the Aborigenes were after all being erased, they were transformed into the ghosts of themselves. But the ghost is also what refuses to be incorporated, and it is symptomatic that Indigenous and minority writers have used precisely the figure of the ghost in their process of interrogating and reversing deterritorialisation. Repossession is shown by Turcotte as being played out by Indigenous writers and artists through precisely what had become spectral in the dominant structures and dominating discourses. John Potts, in 'Rough Justice and Buried Country: Australian Ghosts', foregrounds the Australian specificities of the ghost story and shows how the ghost functions as a preserver of collective memory. It makes manifest something that was hidden, it brings to the surface something that was buried, even more so in the violent context of Australian colonisation, leading to undeserved deaths and unacknowledged suffering. For Sheila Collingwood-

Whittick too, Australian ground is made of those buried corpses that come to the surface, of those ghosts that just will not go away, be they those of the Aborigines or those of the convicts' ancestors. In 'The Haunting of Settler Australia: Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*' Collingwood-Whittick shows how literature is the locus where silence can be shattered so that one can come to terms with one's descendants' ghosts.

The space between location and colonial history is also underlined by Tithi Bhattacharya in 'Deadly Spaces: Ghosts, Histories and Colonial Anxieties in Nineteenth-century Bengal' and by Anthony Carrigan in 'Haunted Places, Development and Opposition in Kamau Brathwaite's 'The Namsetoura Papers''. The context is colonial Bengal in the former, with Bengali and British ghosts competing. What is at stake is the effort on the British side to maintain the illusion of permanence, erasing all signs of ephemera so as to consolidate a British rule that meant to be everlasting. It is the contemporary Caribbean in the latter, Carrigan focusing on Brathwaite's invocation of the ghosts of Namsetoura, a slave woman who asks him to defend her burial ground against development projects in Barbados. The 'buried country' is once more coming to the surface, but this time it is called to the rescue of the living.

John McLeod's 'Business Unbegun: Spectral Subjectivities in the Work of Jackie Kay and Pauline Melville' was the second keynote address at the conference and initiates another movement in the volume, **Textual Hauntings**. McLeod explores the ways the histories of subaltern subjecthood are articulated through text, focusing particularly on the fiction of Jackie Kay who explores the problematics of transracial adoption in postwar Britain, and the short fiction of Pauline Melville. The rhetoric of postcolonial ghostliness raises a few 'revenants', the raising of which will make it possible to *begin business* with the self in contexts which have prevented lives to be fully lived. Postcoloniality is complexified when adoption and ghost writing step onto the stage. In parallel, the way

McLeod weaves textual references and particularly the presence of Salman Rushdie is in itself an illustration of the many layers of post-colonial text as palimpsest. Textual hauntings are the main problematics underscored by Maurizio Calbi in 'Writing with Ghosts: Shakespearean Spectrality in Derek Walcott's *A Branch of the Blue Nile*' or Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère in 'Rattling Perrault's Dry Bones: Nalo Hopkinson's Literary Voodoo in *Skin Folk*'. Be it Shakespeare's plays or Perrault's fairy tales, how is the familiar articulated to the foreign within postcolonial texts such as those by Derek Walcott or Nalo Hopkinson? Ghosting, appropriating, revisiting, are all ways of circulating the trauma so as to alleviate it.

Revising colonial history through the trope of ghosts is also at the heart of Margaret Laurence's and Thomas King's writing, as Eleonora Sasso and Teresa Gibert contend in "'It's only by our Lack of Ghosts we're haunted": Margaret Laurence and the Spectral Process' and in 'The Politics and Poetics of Thomas King's Textual Hauntings'. The Canadian context is one that has long been said to be without ghosts. Loosening the grip ghosts have on us also sets up alternative forms of subjectivity. Canada and Australia will keep rubbing shoulders in this part, echoing—ghosting—in many ways the article by Gerry Turcotte in the previous part. If Canada is mostly represented by the writers Margaret Laurence and Thomas King, Australia is through the writer David Malouf in Colette Selles's article 'David Malouf's Haunted Writing'. In both settler-invader countries, the encounter between Europeans and the Aboriginal communities is the central trauma that the writers delve into. If Sylvia Plath could be seen hovering about the fiction of Jackie Kay, Salman Rushdie looms in many postcolonial primary and secondary texts, and Ovid certainly shows through Malouf's text. Michela Vanon-Alliata examines in "'Waiting for a Ghost": J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*' the presence of Dostoevsky writing *The Possessed* in Coetzee's novel, and how pre-revolutionary Russia highlights post-colonial South Africa. Transtextual dialogue

is part of the haunting process, and part of the liberating process. Revisiting the past and revising history is also instrumental in the process that renews one's engagement with the present, as contends Dave Gunning in 'History, Anthropology, Necromancy: Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*'.

Esther Peeren's article 'The Postcolonial and/as the Spirit World: Theorizing the Ghost in Jacques Derrida, Achille Mbembe and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*' opens the last part of the volume, **Translational Ghosts**. By confronting the postcolonial reading of Achille Mbembe to the western perspective of Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, in the context of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Peeren shows how suitable a figure the ghost is in order to think the postcolonial and more generally the notions of disempowerment and oppression, or agency and resistance. These last two concepts are also instrumental in Prudence Layne's exploration of the avatars of Legba, the West African god of bridges and crossroads. In 'Reincarnating Legba: Caribbean Writers at the Crossroads', Layne examines the perspectives offered by the hybrid, liminal figure of Legba as it is reincarnated in the fiction of Caribbean writers. Legba, a figure of transitions and transformations, introduces the translational ghosts of this final part, and particularly the fact that the figure of the ghost, embodies, if such a phrase can be used here, the necessary transition, the necessary translation that no existence could do without. Timothy Weiss in 'The Living and the Dead: Translational Identities in Wilson Harris's *the Tree of the Sun*' precisely illustrates this interrelatedness of beings through a reading of Wilson Harris's novels, as does Kerry-Jane Wallart in 'The Ghost in Wilson Harris's *The Guyana Quartet: Matter that Matters*'. It is also the interrelatedness of texts that comes to the surface, playing against a deeper amnesia. The spectral reverie around a lost world brings within its folds a reverie about the world that is. It is also the ghost as a liminal but possibly potent figure that inhabits Elsa Sacksick's article 'Ghosting in the Novels by Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie'. Traumatic

and/or redemptive, ghosts articulate themselves through, around and behind every word of a language haunted by another one, wandering in a territory of beyond. Myriam Suchet's article 'Tutuola and the Haunted Translation or Zazie in the Ghost Train', with its use of Queneau's translation into French of Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* and its focus on the heterolingual palimpsest and on translation as metaphor is an apt conclusion to the volume.

An enlightening example of the ghost as both an emblem of the colonial and postcolonial condition and a creative force can be found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, 'The Custom House', an early 'post-colonial' text which literally swarms with words linked with haunting. In the very first lines Hawthorne presents himself as 'fantasmophoric', to use Depierre's terminology, since he refers to an 'autobiographical impulse' which has 'taken possession' of him¹. Exposing the reasons why he had to tell the story of the eponymous 'scarlet letter', Hawthorne dwells on his own connection with the town of Salem. Three elements are worth noting: first, Hawthorne emphasizes his attachment to the very soil of Salem, suggesting a strong relationship between identity and place; second, he explains this attachment to the place by 'the deep and aged roots which [his] family has stuck into the soil:

It is now nearly two centuries and a quarter since the original Briton, the earliest emigrant of my name, made his appearance in the wild and forest-bordered settlement which has since become a city. And here his descendants have been born and died, and have mingled their earthly substance with the soil, until no small portion of it must necessarily be akin to the mortal frame wherewith, for a little while, I walk the streets. In part, therefore, the attachment which I speak of is the mere sensuous sympathy of dust for dust.

(Hawthorne)

1. HAWTHORNE, Nathaniel, 'Introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*', 1850. Online edition: Page by Page Books, 2002.
www.pagebypagebooks.com/Nathaniel_Hawthorne/The_Scarlet_Letter/index.html.

The third stage in his explanation is the figure of the first ancestor who transplanted the family to American soil:

It still haunts me, and induces a sort of home-feeling with the past, which I scarcely claim in reference to the present phase of the town. I seem to have a stronger claim to a residence here on account of this grave, bearded, sable-cloaked, and steeple-crowned progenitor—who came so early, with his Bible and his sword, and trode the unworn street with such a stately port, and made so large a figure, as a man of war and peace—a stronger claim than for myself, whose name is seldom heard and my face hardly known.

(Hawthorne)

The haunting figure of Hawthorne's ancestor finds an echo in Surveyor Pue, who literally exhorts him to write. In Hawthorne's words, the weight of transmission and its inescapably ghostly nature are clearly perceptible:

With his own ghostly hand, the obscurely seen, but majestic, figure had imparted to me the scarlet symbol and the little roll of explanatory manuscript. With his own ghostly voice he had exhorted me, on the sacred consideration of my filial duty and reverence towards him—who might reasonably regard himself as my official ancestor—to bring his mouldy and moth-eaten lucubrations before the public. 'Do this,' said the ghost of Mr. Surveyor Pue, emphatically nodding the head that looked so imposing within its memorable wig; 'do this, and the profit shall be all your own. You will shortly need it; for it is not in your days as it was in mine, when a man's office was a life-lease, and oftentimes an heirloom. But I charge you, in this matter of old Mistress Prynne, give to your predecessor's memory the credit which will be rightfully due' And I said to the ghost of Mr. Surveyor Pue—'I will'. (Hawthorne)

To Hawthorne, then, writing *The Scarlet Letter* meant performing some kind of exorcism: the aim was not only to produce a work of art; he was, above all, driven by the perspective to free himself and his fellow citizens from a haunting—and haunted—past. Hawthorne's relationship to America's then recent colonial past

offers an interesting illustration of the postcolonial world's ghostly relationship to the past and to the present, and of the inescapably ghostly — 'hauntopologic' — nature of postcolonial culture.

The ghost is a trope that enables one to revisit the past but also to bridge gaps and cross boundaries — if only the ones between past, present and future — and eventually reinvent a dynamics of engagement with one's nation and with oneself. The ghost can be 'unfinished business' or 'business unbegun', it may also herald the possibility of *beginning business*. It may be a figure of disjuncting, it may also be one that will enable us to *re-joint* time and consciousness. It is a figure that allows *trans-lation* and as such, a tool of revelation.