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**LEARNING TO LIVE WITH GHOSTS**  
**Postcolonial Haunting and Mid-Mourning in David Dabydeen's**  
**"Turner" and Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts***

*by Stef Craps*

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

—William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

Jacques Derrida's reflections on spectrality and mourning suggest a productive and responsible way of engaging with unresolved histories of racial and ethnic oppression. In this essay, I will draw on the Derridean concepts of "hauntology" and "mid-mourning" to analyze how two literary works by contemporary British Caribbean writers memorialize the Middle Passage, a history which has come to epitomize the experience of people of African descent throughout the Atlantic world: David Dabydeen's epic poem "Turner" (1995) and Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997). These two texts, I argue, open up a space of remembrance in which historical losses are neither introjected nor incorporated, neither "properly" mourned nor melancholically entombed within the self, but constantly re-examined and re-interpreted. Disrupting popular understandings of history as a linear progression from a colonial or slave past to a liberated "postcolonial" present, they invite an ethico-political practice of anamnestic solidarity with the oppressed of the past *and* the present.

In *Specters of Marx*, the book which initiated the perceived "ethical turn" in his work, Derrida argues that the possibility of a just future depends on our readiness "to learn to live *with* ghosts" (xviii). He insists on an obligation to live not solely in the present but "beyond all living present," aware of and attentive to those already dead or not yet born. Being neither fully present nor fully absent, ghosts do not have a determinate ontological status but belong to a liminal "hauntological" domain which allows for an ongoing politics of memory and a concern for justice:

No justice . . . seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism. (xix)

This responsibility involves facing up to what Derrida terms the “*non-contemporaneity of the living present*” (xix), the “disjuncture in the very presence of the present,” which makes it possible to “*think the ghost*” (25). As Derrida points out, traditional scholars do not believe in ghosts: they maintain an ontological perspective, drawing a sharp distinction between the living and the non-living, being and non-being, the past and the present (11). However, he anticipates the coming of “another ‘scholar’” (12), “the ‘scholar’ of the future,” who, unlike his or her predecessor, would be capable of “thinking the possibility of the specter” and of having commerce with the *revenants* and *arrivants* of history (176).

As is well known, Derrida launched this call for an ethico-political engagement with a present that is not ontologically fixated on “what is” in opposition to the end-of-history triumphalism of Francis Fukuyama, who argued that the end of the Cold War signaled the end of the progression of human history. Fukuyama envisaged the end of history as the universal incarnation of liberal democracy and the final eradication of the specter of communism. Derrida, in contrast, insists on the continuing relevance of Marx, or a certain spirit of Marx, to the world today, which, despite Fukuyama’s protestations to the contrary, is really “going badly” (77): “never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. . . . no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth” (85). He rejects Fukuyama’s attempt to exorcize Marx’s ghost and his refusal to inherit from him, assuming instead the necessity of an interminable mourning—which elsewhere he calls “*demi-deuil*,” translated as “mid-mourning” (“Freud’s Legacy” 335) or “semi-mourning” (“Ja, or the *faux-bond* II” 48), and which is to be distinguished from the traditional, Freudian understanding of mourning as a process involving the gradual withdrawal of libidinal attachment from a lost object (Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”). As Alessia Ricciardi explains, mid-mourning differs from mourning in the Freudian sense in that it “does not pretend to achieve a successful ‘dismissal’ of the lost object, but instead adopts an inconclusive psychic rhythm of oscillation between introjection and incorporation” (36). The distinction between introjection and incorporation—which was developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, and which the concept of mid-mourning unsettles—is analogous to Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia: the former integrates loss into consciousness, assimilating and digesting the other; the latter fails or refuses to do so, taking the other into the self as other. Mid-mourning hovers between the introjection of successful resolved mourning and the incorporation of pathological grieving or melancholia. It allows the subject to be “perpetually reexposed to history rather than removed from it” (Ricciardi 34), the latter being the inevitable result of both introjection and incorporation in their ideal, pure state. Introjection removes the subject from history by rendering the otherness of history entirely assimilable. Incorporation, for its part, while preserving this otherness, is really no more faithful to history than introjection as it excludes the otherness of history from the self and prevents the subject from engaging with it (Derrida, “Fors” xvii, xxi–xxii). Mid-mourning, however, which keeps introjection and incorporation in a permanent state of tension, is a continual working-over of a history which remains enigmatic and irreducibly other.

Derrida’s hauntological politics of memory can help to counter the premature and obfuscatory celebration of the “post” in “postcolonial,” a concept which has been the

subject of criticism by Anne McClintock, Ella Shohat, Stuart Hall, and others. Insofar as it implies that colonialism is now a matter of the past and, therefore, over and done with, the postcolonial partakes of an apocalyptic discourse, a discourse on or of the end. However, the traumas sustained by the formerly colonized and enslaved are collective in nature and impossible to locate in an event that took place at a singular, historically specific moment in time. They are part of a long history of racism and exploitation that persists into the present. Hauntology, as a discourse on the end of the end which proceeds in the name of justice, can be of great epistemological as well as ethico-political value in such a context.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will try to illustrate this by examining the inscription of the trauma of the Middle Passage in “Turner” and *Feeding the Ghost*. Both texts bear literary witness to the *Zong* massacre of 1781, a true incident in which a slave-ship captain murdered 131 sickly and allegedly dying Africans by throwing them over the side of the ship in order to be able to claim insurance money.<sup>2</sup> A chilling example of the horrors of the slave trade, the *Zong* massacre became a *cause célèbre* for eighteenth-century abolitionists, and in 1840 inspired J. M. W. Turner to paint his famous portrait of a ship jettisoning its human cargo during a violent storm, entitled *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon [sic] Coming On* but better known as *The Slave Ship*. In their own way, Dabydeen’s poem and D’Aguiar’s novel both resist the temptation to leave the reader with the sense that the story has been told, consigned to the past; that it has been taken care of and can therefore now be forgotten. Instead of clearing away the dead, they permit this traumatic history to live on as a haunting, troubling, foreign element within the present.

Dabydeen’s “Turner” is a long narrative poem, divided into twenty-five sections, which gives a voice to the submerged African in the foreground of Turner’s painting. The drowning slave struggles to fabricate a new self and a new history, but remains trapped by the powerful forces of the past, which keeps resurfacing in the present. The sea, so the speaker claims, has transformed him: it has “bleached” (IX. 15) him of color; washed his skin clean of “the colour of sin, scab, smudge, / Pestilence, death, rats that carry plague, / Darkness such as blots the sky when locusts swarm” (XI. 20–22). However, his desire for newness is counterpointed by racist name-calling. The word “nigger” is hurled at him time and again by a stillborn child tossed overboard from another slave ship:

“Nigger,” it cries, loosening from the hook  
 Of my desire, drifting away from  
 My body of lies. I wanted to teach it  
 A redemptive song, fashion new descriptions  
 Of things, new colours fountaining out of form.  
 I wanted to begin anew in the sea  
 But the child would not bear the future  
 Nor its inventions . . . (XXV. 1–8)

As Dabydeen suggests in the poem’s preface, this child, which may be seen as the speaker’s unconscious and origin, serves as an “agent of self-recognition” (8) in the poem. The child, “drowned as it is in the memory of ancient cruelty” (8), sees through “the sea’s disguise” (XI. 18), “recognis[es] [him] below [his] skin” (XI. 19), making him realize that the stains left by a collective history of racial abuse cannot be washed away so easily. The

recurrent scene of the child calling the speaker “nigger” and its effect on him are reminiscent of Frantz Fanon’s famous account of encountering racial prejudice in a little white boy: “‘Dirty nigger!’ Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’ I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects” (109).<sup>3</sup> Confronted with his body’s representation within a history that denies his humanity, Fanon finds his own bodily experience altered: “Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema” (112). Like that of the speaker of Dabydeen’s poem, his body is exposed as a “body of lies” (XXV. 3) by this encounter, which makes him realize the crushing impact of centuries of racist exploitation and stereotyping: “I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism [sic], racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (Fanon 112).

In “Turner,” the oppressive weight of this history is apparent from the opening line, in which the child is described as “[s]tillborn from all the signs” (I. 1): the ubiquity of racializing and “othering” discourses destroys the promise of new life and a fresh start traditionally associated with birth imagery. While the speaker desired to “so shape / This creature’s bone and cell and word beyond / Memory of obscene human form” (XVIII. 12–14), the child “made me heed its distress at being / Human and alive, its anger at my / Coaxing it awake” (XVIII. 15–17). It is a ghost which refuses to be transfigured and thereby consigned to oblivion—which, the poem suggests, would in fact amount to another violation, comparable to the slave-ship captain’s pedophilic acts: indeed, “the hook / of [the speaker’s] desire” (XXV. 1–2) from which the child loosens itself in one of the excerpts quoted above recalls the captain’s “hook / Implanted in our flesh” (XXIV. 10–11) from the previous section of the poem.<sup>4</sup> Like the specters of which Derrida writes, the child continually recalls the speaker to the out-of-jointness of the present. In an interview, Dabydeen has spoken of his identification with the stillborn child of the poem, which, he says, was prompted by his own experience of contemporary racism:

I mean, I feel as if I’m an abortion, at times. I feel like the stillborn child in “Turner,” definitely. Or even worse than that, I feel like an abortion; messy and bloody and unborn, and that’s partly because of a racism, where other people are trying to reduce you to nothing all the time and erase everything that you brought with you, or else they remind you of what you could have brought with you had they not taken it away. (qtd. in Dawes 219–20)

The stillborn child effectively frustrates the process of introjection to which the speaker has devoted himself for most of the poem: indeed, in response to the child’s indignant cries, he negates his entire imaginative creation in the final section of the text:

No savannah, moon, gods, magicians  
 To heal or curse, harvests, ceremonies,  
 No men to plough, corn to fatten their herds,  
 No stars, no land, no words, no community,  
 No mother. (XXV. 38–42)

While the poem may seem to end on a pessimistic note,<sup>5</sup> its unmaking of itself need not be seen as purely negative: the text's refusal of an affirmative and redemptive ending can also be interpreted as a gesture of deference to, or a sign of sympathy with, the hauntological.<sup>6</sup>

A confrontation between a wish for renewal and the indelible stains of history is also enacted in *Feeding the Ghosts*, a reconstruction of the *Zong* incident in prose form which centers on the experience of a fictional female slave, Mintah, who miraculously survives being cast overboard for insubordination. The novel is divided into three main parts and framed by a prologue and an epilogue. The first and longest part recreates the tragedy from the perspective of different characters, including black slaves as well as white crew members. The second section is an account of the 1783 court case brought by the insurers, at which Mintah's written record of the events on board the *Zong* surfaces but is not admitted as evidence. The last section begins with Mintah's written account of the *Zong* and continues with her life in Maryland and Jamaica, haunted by memories of the *Zong*. The narrative ends in 1833, with Mintah, in her old age, observing the celebrations for the abolition of slavery in Jamaica. The novel sets out to commemorate the 131 victims of the *Zong* massacre, whose souls, as the prologue puts it, "roam the Atlantic with countless others" (4). Mintah, who acts as the novel's moral center, dedicates her entire life after the *Zong* to keeping alive their memory, an occupation which the text refers to as "feeding the ghosts": "Ghosts needed to be fed. She carved and wrote to assuage their hunger" (222). Not only does she set her memories of the *Zong* down in writing and carve 131 figures out of wood, but she also plants 131 trees and helps twice as many slaves escape to freedom from Maryland to the North.

Despite all this commemorative activity, the history of the *Zong* remains fundamentally unresolved. The novel uses various means to drive this point home, including the well-worn device of the false ending, which is provided by Mintah's euphoric description of the abolition celebrations. Finding herself at the center of the festivities, she recognizes the dancers in the square as the wooden figures she had carved, and realizes she has misread these all along:

I thought the shapes were trying to rise from the sea, but now I know they were dances. Each figure made by me was in this square. A man, woman or child in some movement to the music. Not movements to the music of the sea, as I had thought. These were dances of freedom. The faces were not scared on those figures but excited. I had made them then read them wrong. Now they were here before me showing me their meaning, and I had helped to shape it. They were dancing not struggling. Ecstatic not terrified. (218)

Mintah and the community appear to have successfully overcome the past, as her carvings are stripped of their traumatic meaning and as she is honored by the community and finally even reunited with Simon, the one good white crew member of the *Zong*. However, at this point Mintah (and the reader with her) wakes from her dream—a fantasy of introjection—to find that in reality none of this is the case. The freedom celebrations come to ring hollow as in actual fact the community cannot "take what she had to say," "doubt[s] that the events had taken place" (223), and has no taste for her uncanny or "unhomely" sculptures: "They

love what I do with wood but cannot keep such a shape in their homes. Such shapes do not quench a thirst. They unsettle a stomach. Fill the eyes with unease" (209).<sup>7</sup> The present can will the past away but cannot actually rid itself of its haunting power.

That a truly new, unencumbered future cannot be born yet is also signaled by Mintah's infertility, a direct consequence of her experiences on the *Zong* ("The sea had taken my blood from me and my ability to bleed"), which prevents her from being "made into newer shapes of people" through reproduction (210). Her only progeny are the wooden figures, which represent and are inhabited by the ghosts of the uncared-for dead of the *Zong*. When at the end of the narrative proper Mintah's house burns down with everything in it, "[t]he spirits carved in those figures fled into the wooded hills" (226). The ghosts, in other words, are still at large by novel's end. The inconclusive ending—the real one, that is—thus belies the confidence expressed in the oft-quoted final sentence of the epilogue: "The past is laid to rest when it is told" (216). So, in fact, does the very form of the novel, which, as Ian Baucom points out, is marked by a "melancholy reiterativity" (79). In each of the five sections of the text, the same events are told and retold. The novel "finds itself obliged to tell its tale not once but serially" (77), as if it were condemned to an endless repetition compulsion. This is in keeping with the author's own claim, in his 1996 article "The Last Essay about Slavery," that there is a compulsive need to revisit slavery for every succeeding generation of black writers. Rather than it being the case that the past is laid to rest when it is told, D'Aguiar argues, "each articulation, each imagining, feeds the need for a further act of retrieval" ("The Last Essay" 138). The fact that *Feeding the Ghosts* is already his second novel about slavery—after *The Longest Memory* (1994)—bears out the truth of this statement even in the context of D'Aguiar's own oeuvre.

The epilogue reveals the reason why the *Zong* incident cannot be successfully mourned. A ghostly voice, belonging to a slave thrown overboard on the *Zong*, insists that this traumatic history resonates far beyond its original moment: "All the cruelties we sustained were maintained by us. Made over hundreds of years, our behaviour could never cease to exist. . . . That ship was in that sea and we were in it and that would be for an eternity in a voyage without beginning or end" (229). The case of the *Zong* is lifted out of time to suggest the persistence of racist attitudes and practices throughout the ages. The voice goes on to directly address the reader, implicating him or her in the events of 1781:

I am in your community, in a cottage or apartment or cardboard box, tucked away in a quiet corner, ruminating over these very things. The *Zong* is on the high seas. Men, women and children are thrown overboard by the captain and his crew. One of them is me. One of them is you. One of them is doing the throwing, the other is being thrown. I'm not sure who is who, you or I. There is no fear, nor shame in this piece of information. There is only the fact of the *Zong* and its unending voyage and those deaths that cannot be undone. Where death has begun but remains unfinished because it recurs. (229–30)

The past surfaces again and again in the present: past injustices keep repeating themselves in present relations.

In an interview, D'Aguiar makes the link between slavery and present-day racism even more explicit. He speaks of there being "a double narrative" in *Feeding the Ghosts*, with "the narrative of [his] own experience" forcing him to find "a precedent from history" which could "sustain [him] in the racist present" ("Building Bridges" 420). When asked, "To what extent has slavery personally dehumanized you," he offers the following answer, which also touches on his motivations for writing about slavery:

My black ancestry and Caribbean experience aligns me with a history of slavery. My skin has drawn a lot of static from whites who hate blacks, both in my teenage years growing up in London and since my arrival in the US in 1992 to teach. Stories from the past about the auction block are automatically my stories. I feel on behalf of those who suffered these things. Racism is not over by any means. There are examples of it every day in the media. People die every day at the hands of racists. I deplore these things. I feel them. I write about race to keep the idea of one race as superior to another strange and unacceptable. ("Building Bridges" 424)

D'Aguiar expresses similar sentiments in "The Last Essay about Slavery," whose publication predates that of *Feeding the Ghosts* by one year. In the essay, he rejects calls "for slavery to be confined to the past once and for all" on the grounds that slavery has a "direct bearing on how the races fail to get along today" (125). Though he would only be too happy to see slavery finally laid to rest, the present unfortunately "refuses to allow slavery to go away" (126). In order to understand and solve present-day conflicts between the races, D'Aguiar argues, it is necessary to examine the slave past (135–36). In his view, the point of engaging in an imaginative act of looking back by writing "another slave novel" (139) is to affect readers' "view of themselves and of the multi-racial world they inhabit"; to get them to redraw "their coveted maps of empathy" by activating "their ability to experience fellow-feeling for someone of a different race, the opposite gender and the power-brokered relationships between and within such groupings" (139). Speaking to the reader "about now as much as about then" (143), contemporary slave novels such as his own "believe any notion of the past being past. In fact they prove, through character, the presence of the past and perhaps even the past in the future. Mexico's premier poet, Octavio Paz, said, 'our greatest enemy is history.' In this instance history is our greatest ally in shaping the future" (144).

At the heart of D'Aguiar's testimonial enterprise—and this is also true, it seems to me, for Dabydeen—there is a concern with justice, not only for the dead, but also for the living and the as yet unborn. Their works conjure the ghosts of victims of racial violence without, ultimately, conjuring them away in the name of a supposedly redeemed present, free from the burdens of the past. Rather than affirm a clear distinction between the past and the present, they demonstrate how those two are imbricated in one another, as the past continues to structure the present. Thus, they challenge triumphalist conceptions of the postcolonial which risk obscuring the continuing oppressive effects of racial and colonial traumas. Dabydeen's and D'Aguiar's relationship to history should be construed, then, not as a pathological attachment but as an assumption of ethico-political responsibility. Moreover, their extension of hospitality to ghosts invites a similar response from the

reader, who is given an opportunity to learn to live with ghosts and thereby, perhaps, to become a scholar of the future.

#### NOTES

1. This claim, which I hope the ensuing analysis will bear out, goes against the view held by many materialist postcolonial theorists—most famously, perhaps, Aijaz Ahmad—that Derridean deconstruction is irrelevant if not indifferent or even inimical to postcolonial concerns because of its alleged “textualist” bias and its location in the Western academy. It aligns me instead with theorists such as Robert Young, who argues—in *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, “Deconstruction and the Postcolonial,” and elsewhere—that Derrida’s thought effectively challenges colonialist ideology. For a recent overview of and contribution to this debate, see Syrotinski.
2. The *Zong* massacre also features in Michelle Cliff’s novel *Abeng* (1984), Dabydeen’s novel *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999), and M. NourbeSe Philip’s poetry collection *Zong!* (2008), a further testimony to the centrality which this event has assumed in the contemporary literary imagination of the slave past.
3. The echo from Fanon has been noted in passing by Erik Falk (191). However, Falk’s reading of “Turner,” which sings the praises of creative amnesia—“the loss of memory, history and identity . . . constitutes a history that must, ultimately, be ‘forgotten’ for a new and unpredictable future to be possible” (188)—seems to me to assimilate the poem to an apocalyptic discourse which, as I argue here, it critiques rather than affirms.
4. This is just one of many ways in which symbolic and physical violence are connected in the poem. The most obvious example of such intermingling is Dabydeen’s decision to call the slave-ship captain “Turner,” which suggests a direct link between the artist’s pictorial representation of slaves and the captain’s sadistic abuse of the slave children under his care (see also Dabydeen, Preface 8). In fact, the poem exposes both Turner’s painting and the “fable” (l. 22) which the speaker sets out to tell as harmful forms of denial. If, as Tobias Döring argues, the poem engages in “a critique of the cultural commodifications by which the terrors of the [slave] trade have become transfigured as aesthetic objects produced for the delectation of spectators and perceived as icons within English identity construction” (39), the speaker’s own attempts at transfiguration are not immune from this critique.
5. Dabydeen himself has described “Turner” as “a great howl of pessimism about the inability to recover anything meaningful from the past” (qtd. in Dawes 200)—an interpretation which, to my mind, takes too negative a view of negativity.
6. Louise Yelin also ascribes liberating potential to the poem’s “rhetoric of negation”: in “remember[ing] his own history as negation,” she argues, the speaker “negotiates a provisional escape route from the bondage of Turner’s economy of representation” (362).
7. “Unhomely” is a literal translation of Freud’s term *Unheimliche*, which is commonly translated as “uncanny.” *Das Unheimliche* refers to a peculiar kind of anxiety resulting from the return of a familiar phenomenon made strange by repression (Freud, “The Uncanny”)—in this context, the history of the Middle Passage embodied by Mintah’s discomfiting sculptures, which the (about-to-be-ex-) slave community has repressed, banished from the domestic sphere of the home.

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