

Learning to Live With Ghosts: Postcolonial  
Haunting and Mid-Mourning in David  
Dabydeen's Turner and Fred D'Aguiar's  
Feeding the Ghosts.

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 **Learning to Live With Ghosts: Postcolonial Haunting and  
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D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts***

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Learning to Live With Ghosts:**

# Postcolonial Haunting and Mid-Mourning in David Dabydeen's "Turner" and Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*

Stef Craps (bio)

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) [End Page 467]

This responsibility involves facing up to what Derrida terms the "*non-contemporaneity of the living present*" (xix), the "disjointure 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...

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*by Stef Craps*

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