

Postcolonial Haunting: Memory, Anxiety, Affect, and The 'Negro Writer'

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In large part, the advent of postcolonial consciousness has emphasised the all-important returning to shut-in colonial history through a reckoning with the spectres of the nation's colonial heritage. Postcolonial theory has relied, to a great extent, upon the idea of haunting in order to bring awareness of colonial history to the fragmented present cultural identities. The haunting of the colonial frequently turns on what is undoubtedly a well-intended desire to relate to the Other, the silenced, and the hidden, but it also reveals a more problematic inability to situate resistance, and mobilise memory for such purposes, in relation to ever-increasing transnational conditions that often deny or obfuscate forms of situated or positioned resistance.¹ Haunting is pervasive in postcolonial thought precisely because of its affective dimension, a dimension that creates a sense of the imminently important, present, and disruptive. This disruptive quality of postcolonial haunting is frequently portrayed as the Freudian *unheimlich* of history and is figured as an interruptive or affective moment in the course of Western consciousness where the repressed colonial scene returns. The reference to an affective and situated colonial encounter found in the deployment of haunting suggests a desire to focus a theory of resistance through reference to concrete encounters of the colonial type. Yet, the use of haunting in postcolonial theory as a placeless yet always-quotable mode of resistance also suggests a lurking anxiety concerning the ways that situated conflicts and encounters are not always aligned with the often intangible nature of new transnational realities and postcolonial forms of oppression. Viewed this way, we might say that the deployment of haunting in postcolonial theory represents a suspended condition, in-between because it is symptomatic of an era poised between the traces of an increasingly inoperative colonial history and uncertain transnational forms of hierarchy and oppression. As new forms of neo-imperialism and transnational capital become commonplace, active imperialism characterized by visible and situated forms of conflict related to nation-states has receded to a great extent. However, while we might say that colonial history becomes inoperative in this way, it is not necessarily easy to locate tangible forms of neo-imperialism, particularly given their transnational nature.

Although part of the emphasis on the haunting of the colonial past stems from a return of that which has been written out of history, another part of the widespread postcolonial reliance on the aesthetics of haunting is due to the difficulties encountered in the inscription of colonial history; difficulties primarily related to issues of place and perspective. By doing this, these writers also go against thinkers like Hegel, who in 1813, had said that Africans had no history and could not write in modern languages. Or Kant for that matter, who disregarded a perceptive observation by a black man saying, "This fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was

stupid”. However, some earlier writings were instructive, moral and obviously representative, as Toni Morrison put it. Morrison, also further writes in her work ‘The Site of Memory’ that like Mississippi river, the writers soon, much like Zora Neale Hurston says, “I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me”, writings by the negro writers was almost “a kind of literary archeology”, “the strange truth that is fiction”, like Mississippi “it remembers where it used to be” and then writes. As she puts it “Still, like water, I remember where I was before I was ‘straightened out’. These sights also happen to be spaces where lived experience is passed on from one generation to next, with hope being passed on in the darkest of areas. One instance can be the poem, “Mother to Son”:-

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

While place is frequently referenced as a means of according specificity to the effaced or hidden histories of the colonial era, position is often identified as a means of attenuating the ideological dilemmas that accompany the postcolonial recovery of places and their histories. Stuart Hall has noted the imperative of both place and position in the recovery and transmission of occulted histories: “The attempt to snatch from the hidden histories another place to stand in, another place to speak from—that moment is extremely important” (184). As Richard Wright puts it, for this a “deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary”, for these writers who further become responsible for social consciousness and thus become agents or living manifestations of a new culture emerging from the former. This he further says, “restores to the writer his lost heritage, that is, his role as a creator of the world which he lives, and as a creator of himself”. Hall's notion of historical recovery underscores the importance of the subject's position and agency in the negotiation with ideological positions of the past. Conscious of the issues surrounding place and position, postcolonial discourse theory, for instance, has noted that while the turn to place

frequently enables a recoding of history, it often produces complex dilemmas for those choosing to evoke occulted colonial histories. How, for instance, does one recover specific occulted colonial histories without participating in the imperialist gesture of appropriation and effacement so related to place, without inadvertently entering into the dynamics of lingering colonial specters in contemporary claims to cultural and national identity? How might one avoid the reinscription or exacerbation of continuing ideological conflicts from the colonial era in the return to sites of imperialist history and memory?²

Although contextual and ideological placement of formerly suppressed historical figures and their narratives incurs the risk of strategic appropriation by conflicting claims to their memory, avoidance of the commemorative act obscures the myriad positions of the past and its oppressed subjects. How, then, might the past, the pasts, be narrated? In this respect, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sneja Gunew have proposed a critical awareness of the postcolonial critic's positioning, what they term "a historical critique of your position as the investigating person," as a potential strategy for the postcolonial writing of history (197). Certain theories, drawing on a poststructuralist tone, have emphasized the ghostly figure of the trace in an attempt to attenuate the dilemmas of inscription of colonial histories and their places. Drawing attention to the disruptive quality of the "potent traces" of the colonial past in the postcolonial rewriting of history, Iain Chambers argues that, "an absence, the 'lost' world of the past...returns to haunt modernity" (17). Focusing on the delay or "time lag" that accompanies the postcolonial emergence of these spectral figures of colonial history, Homi Bhabha points to the "furious emergence of the projective past" (*Location* 254). For Bhabha, the belated postcolonial staging of colonial-era history, "impels the past, projects it, gives its dead symbols the circulatory life of the sign of the present. . ." (254). As a haunting figure, the "time lag" figures the return of the colonial repressed, the disavowed temporality of colonialism. Bhabha references "the obscure signs of the spirit world," and employs the metaphor of the haunted house found in works by authors such as Toni Morrison and Nadine Gordimer to convey how place might testify to the "haunted site" of the postcolonial appearance of once-hidden colonial histories ("The World" 450).³ Spivak has also argued for a similar mode of conceiving of the colonial erasure of the Other that would, "open our minds to being haunted by the aboriginal" ("Supplementing Marxism" 109). The postcolonial act of writing the hidden stories of subjects of colonial oppression is thus figured by the limit of consciousness where recovered histories emerge in traces as spectral figures of colonial conflict and erasure. As Toni Morrison puts it "no matter how fictional the account of these writers, or how much it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory".

Most important question, perhaps is, what if time-lagged representations of colonial-era oppression hold little relevance to new and emerging forms of neo-imperialist oppression, the strategies of which may bear little resemblance to Manichean conflicts of the colonial period? The compulsion to figure colonial history as a haunting trace does not necessarily lead to a so-called ethical relationship with the Other, nor does it result in an avoidance of some of the theoretical issues related to place, history, and appropriation mentioned above. Frequently, haunting as a mode of recovery of colonial history leads to a focus on the aesthetics of the experience of colonial oppression. Such aesthetics can, in part, be a useful point of departure for our understanding of imperialist strategies of oppression. However, when taken too far they can obsess memory and divert the critical gesture from contemporary issues requiring intervention and immediate attention.

The argument is that any memory of the colonial era that haunts, be it conventionally textual or not, might be viewed as aesthetic since it represents a structured dimension of the cultural imaginary. Therefore, attention focused on the material aspects of oppression, when driven by memories of the ways colonial-era oppression once functioned, is as ineffective as a narrow focus on the purely textual and linguistic qualities of power relationships. What becomes crucial is a theorization of the way that colonial memories function in relation to contemporary contexts that find postcolonial communities grappling with globalization as well as the sharing of diverse, often conflicting memories of colonialism.

The focus on the production of anxiety in postcolonial models of haunting, it will be argued here, suggests a postcolonial anxiety about the possibility of mapping or situating resistance under conditions of transnational empire and globalized incarnations of imperialism. These situated and affective dimensions of the return of colonial history betray a profound desire to locate and theorize resistance to contemporary forms of imperialism that remain more difficult to situate. Homi Bhabha's conception of the time-lag mentioned above represents perhaps the most concerted attempt to utilize the idea and the aesthetics of haunting as a way of rethinking notions of cultural heritage. While many critics have identified problems in Bhabha's conception of hybridity as a form of postcolonial agency, I would like to draw attention very briefly to the haunting temporality found in Bhabha's increasing attempts throughout his career to rethink "the geopolitics of the historical present" through the memory of colonial experience (Copjec 210).⁶ To be sure, haunting presents problems similar to those of agency and history identified in Bhabha's conception of hybridity, yet it is important to underline its relationship in Bhabha's work to a conception of cultural memory and intervention, since the haunting form of memory proposed by Bhabha is so widespread in postcolonial theory and culture. Much of Bhabha's theory of haunting can be traced to his engagement with what he calls "scenes" of oppression described in the work of Frantz Fanon. The opening scene of Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, describing how a Negro is subjected to racist terms, serves as a recurring scene in Bhabha's work from which he devises the notion of a haunting colonial temporality, what he identifies as, "the belatedness of the black man" (*Location* 236). Bhabha argues that Fanon's repetition of the scene/seen of oppression serves as a haunting point of identification through which the colonial past and its scenes of oppression are reiterated and projected into modernity as a means of questioning "the ontology of man" (238). This destruction of ontology, creates a hauntology, according to Bhabha, that revises the very dynamics of the black man's subjection and of the white man's supremacy.

According to Bhabha, the belated temporality of colonial history and its repressed subjects, which finds formerly displaced colonial subjects and histories reclaiming places and voices in the contemporary context, is an essentially disruptive force. As a disruptive temporality, the "[t]ime lag keeps alive the meaning of the past" (254); it provides an alternative way of understanding what constitutes time, and therefore cultural heritage, and "fractures the time of modernity" (252). According to Bhabha, within this fracture, the colonial past returns to hybridize the present, creating "a signifying time for the inscription of cultural incommensurability where differences cannot be sublated or totalized" (177). Bhabha thus draws upon the "memorial map" of "Slavery, War, Holocaust, migration, diaspora" as histories which might counter contemporary experiences of transnational culture that homogenize and create inequalities ("Anxious" 203). The colonial past is

“repeated” or “projected” through in the present (*Location*, 254), and therefore disrupts “the continuum of history,” those monumental scripts of cultural heritage (*Location* 257). Although Bhabha’s view of this return of the colonial past is designed as a disruptive intervention, it “flashes up” because it already inhabits modernity, is very much a part of its heritage (*Location* 257). The time-lag, then, is a form of cultural memory that unconsciously haunts the present. Bhabha’s time-lag transforms the colonial into a mythical experience that is always lingering as it “keeps alive the meaning of the past” even as it emerges to disrupt the present. The most important question here is how a projected haunting of the colonial past in the form of a colonial unconscious, always already present, might effectively counter new and evolved contexts of what Bhabha identifies as “transnational” forms of “destitution” (“Anxious” 203). While Bhabha claims that the “anxious,” “affective power”—the haunting nature—of the projection of occluded colonial histories provides a disruptive force, it is difficult to imagine how the memory of colonial conflict might counter those forms of neo-colonial oppression that have evolved so as to be frequently invisible or so transnational that they are intangible (222).⁷ Moreover, although Bhabha is attentive to the ways the haunting of the time lag unites different ethnic and diasporic groups through a “temporality of repetition that constitutes those signs by which marginalized or insurgent subjects create a collective agency,” he doesn’t consider how diverse and conflicting colonial memories projected into the metropolis or ex-colony might simply engender a repetition of cultural tensions (199).⁸ The hauntings of colonial history, especially when evocative of national loss, might simply fuel nationalist sentiment and cultural and ethnic conflict, as well as a sense of affiliation to a former nation in the case of diasporic individuals, particularly when the souvenir of colonial oppression installs a sense of victimization. Further, such repetitious reminders of the oppressive nature of colonial culture can create a sense of culpability that impedes those who might otherwise attempt to transform oppressive conditions. Rather than creating awareness of contemporary conditions of inequality, such a haunting can produce a retrospective gaze that tends to archive instances of colonial injustice, transforming them into colonial sites of memory. Such notions of Western culpability and formerly colonized victimization often restrict and simplify potentially productive formations of postcolonial community. Using language and themes similar to those of Bhabha, Iain Chambers focuses on the hauntings of colonial history that might interrupt or give rise to a questioning of contemporary forms of oppression while ultimately overlooking contemporary contexts suggestive of evolved forms of colonial-era inequality. Chambers turns to postcolonial France and its legacy of Arab immigration to illustrate the concept of the hauntings of colonial history without reflecting on the cultural, economic, or political conditions of French colonialism and immigration. Suggesting a supernatural experience that exceeds understanding, Chambers argues that “[w]hat comes out of the [colonial] past bears more than any individual can contain or explain” (65). For Chambers, the colonial inheritance and its “temporal interruption” produce an anxiety that suggests the limits of Western being and temporality (65). In a postcolonial version of Baudelerian *flânerie* in Paris and its Arab immigrant neighborhood of Barbès, the cosmopolitan intersection of the *Gare du Nord* and *Gare de Londres* with their high-speed Eurostar trains that cross the English Channel in under three hours, Chambers argues how the haunting encounter with the vestiges of colonial history forces a rethinking of Western time. Like Iain Chambers, Robert Young also turns to colonial scenes in the Francophone world to

formulate a theory of postcolonial resistance based on haunting, but for Young it is precisely the return to the haunting colonial archive of Franco-Algerian conflict that obfuscates the critical perspective. Young's *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, provides an exhaustive survey of how the political determination of colonial revolution proved transformative. Young argues that the organic ebullition of this movement should serve as an example of how postcolonial consciousness might cultivate its interventionist nature in the face of neo-colonial and global forms of power (ii). There is, in a great part of Young's work, an attempt to rethink political determination through a privileging of the anti-colonial liberation struggles of the Francophone world. At the same time, however, Young's return to an ethnic and gendered realm of colonial memory in his evocation of the Algerian War fascinates with images of the colonial spectacle of violence, ultimately leading to a fixation with the colonial era that haunts its claims to intervention. Young's desire to historically situate revolt as a haunting and unpredictable presence, to write the frequently overlooked history of the Algerian War into a haunting narrative, the effects of which would prove resistant to forms of power in the contemporary period, leads him to turn to the colonial dynamics of the eroticized gaze and the gendered aestheticization of terrorism. Young's particular, and sexualized, identification with the haunting quality of colonial-era conflict obfuscates contemporary resistance and further removes his critique from the contemporary context. So anxious is Young to historicize and situate postcolonial resistance in what he conceives as a haunting domain of colonial ethnic and cultural conflict, that he turns to the colonial dynamics of sexuality in his location of emancipatory struggle. In the intense gaze of the close-up shot of the two young women, Young distinguishes "a slightly sensual aura" (viii). Young repeats the fascinated male gaze of colonial culture mentioned by Fanon, which seeks behind the veil, in the woman's would-be sexuality, the essence and eruption of resistance (Fanon 61). While it is difficult to imagine what is homoerotic in a scene of "abject fear, misery, and terror" defined by colonial struggle, it is clear that Young turns to the anxiety within the struggles of rape and seduction that permeate colonial space through reference to the affective dimensions of both homosexual and heterosexual psychic life. Conflated with political struggle and intervention, these colonial sites become an ideological space, according to Young, from which the ideals of postcolonial resistance might be derived. However, ultimately the haunting memorabilia from the colonial era draw in the critical gaze and divert attention from its intended objectives. In many ways, the affective domain related to a haunting aura is always implicated in such endeavors, particularly because of the complex colonial legacy still circulating in and between former imperialist centers and their peripheries. There is, on one hand, the imperative of an awareness of histories that have never been recorded, a desire to relate to that which is, and was made, other. Yet, there is also a widespread tendency in such endeavors to create monuments of the colonial, to transform it into a mythical and unproblematic domain, unproblematic precisely because it is always assumed to be so problematic, so utterly disruptive to the way we think of it.¹³ The hauntings of the colonial examined above include both of these tendencies. They do so because the obsessive desire to relate to the Other, to establish a "relational" form of memory through the image and memory of the colonial Other, often collapses into a type of thought that is ultimately not at all relational or plural and, moreover, hardly seems disruptive (Hallward 329). In this respect, Peter Hallward's examination of these postcolonial tendencies is most useful to my discussion. Although he does not discuss the hauntings of the colonial, Hallward's contention that

the postcolonial is by and large characterized by a “singular,” rather than relational, or plural, orientation is directly relevant to cultural memory and its hauntings by the colonial. According to Hallward, the postcolonial proceeds through a process of self-generation, becoming “its own absolute and exclusive point of reference” (23). This is so not because it doesn’t gesture toward a relation with the Other, but because in doing so it ultimately creates singular definitions of the Other and of difference, categories that are always inherently hybrid and plural anyway.¹⁴ Hallward’s observations are important to my discussion of the hauntings of the colonial because they illustrate how the impulse of returning to colonial memory sites as a means of establishing a relational theory is often a singular project, one that establishes its own privileged, oft situated, and frequently mythical version of the Other that excludes those conditions in which others find themselves today. The relational intent of a haunting memory thus frequently excludes those encounters that really affect our relationships with others. Often, such hauntings of cultural memory by the colonial experience suggest an appropriation of the experience of occluded history rather than a relation to its Other.¹⁵ The hauntings of colonial history align, in this respect, with Jean Baudrillard’s notion of a pervasive turn to simulacra, in this case of situated Manichean conflicts, in the uncertain history of the present. According to Baudrillard, the retreat of the tangible and readily situated, which characterizes many new transnational realities, creates simulacra of the real, the tendency toward “an esthetic hallucination of reality” (142). Such a retreat to an aesthetic and simulated dimension of conflict in the creation of colonial memory sites, and ultimately demonstrate how such simulacra haunt contemporary endeavors to be interventionist. How, then, might postcolonial criticism draw upon memory to resist oppression when that very oppression is complex, multiple, and frequently emanates from diverse locations and nations? Moreover, these examples suggest that it is only in dispelling the haunting aura of the experience of the colonial that cultural memory might be mobilized toward intervention within the present.¹⁶

NOTES

¹ This critique of the turn to a situated realm of ethnic and cultural conflict somewhat rejoins Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s argument in their popular book *Empire*. While there are contradictions and inherent problems in their notion of the end of imperialism, Hardt and Negri do seem attentive here to the ways that the global can give the impression of allowing local sovereignty while actually controlling that domain. Moreover, for the purposes of this discussion, they call attention to the ways that resistance, defined through the local and situated encounter, can frequently overlook the larger power dynamics of the global.

² Gayatri Spivak is arguably the most adamant concerning the vicissitudes of resurrecting unproblematically the occulted colonial subject of history and advises the historian against viewing the subaltern as “object” of study. Spivak echoes Robert Young, who signals “the hidden ways in which nominally radical, or oppositional historians often unknowingly, or even knowingly, perpetuate the structures and presuppositions of the very systems which they oppose” (*Colonial Desire* 161-162). The haunting temporality of colonialism, however, frequently returns to trouble even those endeavors with the best intentions.

³ Contrary to my assertions regarding its reliance on place, Bhabha’s postcolonial hauntology has sustained the critique, most notably by Aijaz Ahmad, of completely dispensing with “a sense of place, of belonging, of some stable commitment to one’s class or gender or nation that may be useful for defining one’s politics” (*In Theory* 14). Bhabha’s reliance on haunting nonetheless turns upon the idea of a placeless place, combining poststructuralist displacement with a politics of location or placement.

⁶ Most critics of Bhabha's concept of hybridity point to its reliance upon poststructuralist theory and a resultant textualization of politics that never specifies precise moments of intervention. See, for instance, Ahmad (1992); Parry (1994); Moore-Gilbert (1997). See also Peter Hallward's critique of Bhabha's theory of hybridity as an ultimately "singular" project "because it refers back, immediately, to that one logic, [difference], that positions every possibility" (26). Hallward's opposition of the singular and specific in the postcolonial provides a framework for my discussion of haunting below as an essentially non-relational logic based on synchronic notions of national temporality and identity.

⁷ This is in no way meant to suggest that all forms of neo-imperialist oppression are invisible or intangible. However, it is imperative to question how such globalized forms of oppression might be effectively approached through a spectral return of the colonial past.

⁸ On this, see Bart Moore-Gilbert (121). It suggests that this belated, nationalist sentiment—a holdover from the colonial era—is very much lurking within concepts of postcolonial haunting.

¹³ In his analysis of Holocaust memorials, James Young argues that "[o]nce we assign a monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember" (5). My argument concerning the static, non-relational quality of colonial sites of memory suggests a similar dynamic of cultural memory.

¹⁴ Hallward shows that even those attempts to promote cultural specificity or the specificity of the Other, frequently end in the "singularization of the specific," a non-relational form of engagement with the Other (17). While Hallward does not delve into the workings of memory as a relational category, I would argue that they remain central to a relational framework, particularly in the postcolonial context. Hallward argues that the relational takes place somewhere between the purely singular and specific, taking account of both poles. I would argue that any form of relational postcolonial memory must also take account of the singular and the specific of individual, national, and ethnic differences and memories in order to negotiate both subjective and collective claims to heritage, cultural memory, and citizenship within postcolonial contexts.

¹⁵ In a discussion of the competing realms of postcolonial histories in the multicultural context, Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted the intransigent character of European History: "There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe' (1). Chakrabarty's discussion of the ways that other histories within the postcolonial are appropriated by the narrative of 'the history of Europe' is relevant to my identification of how the haunting of the colonial Other does not constitute a relational form of cultural memory.

¹⁶ See Alain Finkielkraut who argues that we must put aside the notion of the "devoir de mémoire," "the duty of memory," and consider instead precisely how memory and the dead body of history might be best oriented toward the present and future: "La mémoire est nécessaire, mais il faudrait ajouter aussitôt: 'en vue de faire quoi'...Nous ne devons pas nous soustraire aux tâches du présent, nous ne devons pas oublier non plus que les morts ont besoin de nous pour eux," "Memory is necessary, but it is also necessary to add: 'to what end'...We must not extract ourselves from the tasks of the present, we cannot forget either that the dead rely on us themselves" (13...35).

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Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son" from *Collected Poems*. Copyright © 1994 by The Estate of Langston Hughes.

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