5

Mid-Mourning in David Dabydeen’s “Turner” and Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts*

Just as Magona’s novel can be read as a critique of the TRC’s tendency—which it shares with trauma theory in its classical formulation—to map Western conceptions of trauma straightforwardly onto an apartheid-colonial situation, so the two literary works that I will look at next can be seen to challenge traditional understandings of trauma, mourning, and recovery that risk obscuring the continuing oppressive effects of racial trauma. David Dabydeen’s epic poem “Turner” (2002 [1995]) and Fred D’Aguiar’s novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998 [1997]) both memorialize the Middle Passage, a history that has come to epitomize the experience of people of African descent throughout the Atlantic world. Both texts 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. Rather than affirming a clear distinction between the past and the present, they insist that racist attitudes and practices persist throughout the ages. 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. Taking my cue from Jacques Derrida’s reflections on spectrality and mourning, I argue that “Turner” and *Feeding the Ghosts* 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.
Hauntology and mid-mourning

In *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1994), 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 “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 signalled the end of the progression of human history. Fukuyama envisaged the end of history as the universal incarnation of liberal democracy