Joanne Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory, and Identity*. Hanover NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2018. xii + 247 pp. (Paper US\$ 45.00)

Ghosts of the African Diaspora is an innovative, erudite, well-researched examination of certain influential works by contemporary African American writers. The female voices all originated in the 1980s, though Chassot argues that Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998) can be included as having been heavily influenced by the seminal novels written by Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall: "what these various groups voiced was a radical critique of the ideological and epistemological underpinnings of the narrative that marginalized them" (p. 14). Starting from a flexible understanding of the "ghost" as unifying trope for examining the fictional memory of the Middle Passage and ostensibly its role in the formation of identity in peoples of African descent, Chassot frames her book with thoughts on the relevance of Morrison's *Beloved* and argues that "the ghost compels us to question what we see and feel, and, thereby, the way we approach the world and the categories and definitions that underpin our approach" (pp. 16–17). Taken as an instrument for creating a counternarrative to challenge the master-full history inherited by Western civilization, the ghost becomes a useful hermeneutical tool.

Yet the concept of ghosting morphs from chapter to chapter, threatening to become a rather indefinable critical tool and diluting the specificity of the trope. D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* clearly specifies what the ghosts need: "The story of themselves." More methodologically innovative is Chassot's weaving of other cultural products into her intertextual analysis. She examines D'Aguiar's novel in the context of both Turner's dramatic 1840 painting and Stephanie Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (2007), whose metaphor of "the living dead" usefully informs the critic's analysis.

In her comments on Naylor's *Mama Day*, Chassot argues that Sapphira is an absent presence whose story hovers over the text and Willow Springs, though I am not persuaded that George himself is a "ghost," unless we broaden the definition of "ghost" to include sites of memory. Again the importance of storytelling is instrumental: The final word of the introduction and the first words of the "coda" precisely concern "story," effectively framing this tale of cultural memory. Indeed, Mikhail Bakhtin argued that "cultural memory" resides in the language we use ... and, I would add, the stories we tell. I found the inclusion of the historical struggle over Sally Hemings as a counterpoint to a reading of *Mama Day* to be particularly rewarding. The discussion of power as instrumental in the selection of what will comprise official history and how this is

played out in the novel is very perceptive. Taking Michel-Rolph Trouillot's four moments at which "silences enter the process of historical production" (*Silencing the Past*, p. 26), Chassot convincingly illustrates these aspects with different moments from the novel.

In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* this cultural remembrance is reaffirmed through repetition of ritual. Ghosts become more a haunting of the past through the re-collection of stories of Avey's great-aunt Cuney. The discussion of this novel is fruitful on many levels, drawing on the diasporic memory of African religion, spirit possession, ancestor worship, and more.

Chassot herself notes, however, that Michelle Cliff's work is not an easy fit in this mix as her "inclusion in the African Diaspora has not been self-evident" (p. 31). In the (otherwise very worthy) analysis of the presence of queerness in Cliff's oeuvre, the critic writes: "Queer is, in fact, the ghost in these texts, the absent presence that makes itself known but never speaks its name" (p. 155). Though the ghost trope allegedly "signifies the abjected, invisibilized [...] queer subject in heteronormative discourse and society" (p. 178), its pertinence to the recreation of African Diasporic identity is tenuous. While Chassot's in-depth analyses tend to gloss over these differences in approach, sometimes the ghost trope is stretched just a little too thin. Cliff's work becomes a bit of an anomaly within the parameters of this critical work. On the one hand, Chapter 4 covers the author's novels, short stories, and poems (rather than focusing on one particular text), and on the other, this body of work is not presented "in conversation" with another cultural text, except, of course, for critical literary approaches to queerness.

I mean in no way to disparage the critique of Cliff's work here. On the contrary, it will certainly serve to make her writing more visible to a larger audience of both critics and readers. It is just that having taken the ghost trope as a dominant feature of African Diasporic writing, Chassot's critical approach might have benefited by choosing from other contemporary novels in which the presence of the ghost is "real" and a clear manifestation of African heritage, stories that are indeed feeding the ghosts.

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