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Ghosts here and there : spectral resistance and the ethics of ghosts in postcolonial literature

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Chapter III

Mediums at Work: Toward a Dialogic World

[E]very period has its ghosts, its own experience, its own medium, and its proper hauntological media. (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 193).

Many experts in the fields of literary and cultural studies have discussed how the concept of ghost, phantom, or specter is used as a designation for the invisible, unspeakable, or fearful other as well as for the denied and unknown history of traumatized subjects or oppressed ethnic groups. These ghostly others are usually repressed within the dominant discourse, but occasionally haunt and disturb the dominant to demand attention. As figures beyond rationality, they are regarded as un-representable as well as inassimilable. They are “real and terrible,” always reminding us “of the dead ... and of our own dead, to assert a terrible continuity between the omnipresent past and the already vanishing present” (Punter 64).

In previous chapters, I brought different notions of the ghost together and used them in my study of postcolonial and minority literature to reach a deeper and broader understanding of the subversive potential of the spectral in spatial and cultural dimensions. A problem arises when one further reflects on the question of how to approach ghosts or the spectral in time and space when they usually appear in an irrational and obscure way. Since so far, it is not clear how the living relate to or communicate with those inassimilable ghosts, I will explore in this chapter how the dialogue is brought about and shaped. In many religious and cultural beliefs, mediums are able to receive messages from the dead, and travel between the living and spiritual worlds. As such, I will use the concept of medium figuratively as a mode of negotiation by which one is able to approach the spectral—including one’s internal and external alterity, and to

establish a mutual understanding with it.

Since a ghost has a variety of names and forms, appears in specific moments and locations, and produces divergent acts and effects, a medium performs his or her work in a variety of ways. I will demonstrate that the main protagonists in two South African novels—J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*—represent two different kinds of medium: a passive medium and an active one. Set in different transitional phases of South Africa, these two novels employ several gothic devices to depict the uncanny and uncertain reality of “anti-dialogic societies” in which different figurative ghosts linger and haunt the living.²⁴ I will first elaborate the connection between the Gothic and South African literature, and analyze how these two books use a Gothic mode to reflect a sense of unease during the encounter with the inaccessible other or the repressed past. In the second part of the chapter, I will further examine the literary representations of two kinds of mediums, who show two specific and situated ways in which one is able to identify with ghostly beings or phenomena, and to problematize modes of thought premised on boundaries and opposition.

South African Gothic and Postcolonial Ghosts

The Gothic has been defined as “a cultural form of thanatophilia, the love of death and the opposite of eros and biophilia, the irrational urge to cripple and/or extinguish life,” which “typically manifests as the return of the repressed, the manifestation of repressed anxieties” (Gaylard 3). Such thanatophilia in the Gothic is usually represented as the living dead, ghosts, the monstrous, the spectral, and the uncanny so as to allow readers to experience death or mortality in a virtual form. Throughout history, the Gothic usually erupts forcefully in periods of dramatic social change. Since the world ceases to

²⁴ According to Paulo Freire's Marxist analysis, the concept of an anti-dialogic or dehumanizing society refers to a society which is sectarian or in which distinguishing behavioural characteristics are oppressed under conquest, divide and rule, manipulation and cultural invasion. See Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, New York: Continuum, 1974.

be interpretable via traditional conceptual frameworks in periods of dramatic rupture or social upheaval, the resulting fears find their way into the fictions of the Gothic, where these fears are represented by horrible figures or irrational scenarios. During the first century of its lifespan (since its genesis in late 18th century Britain on the eve of industrial revolution: the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764), the genre, as many critics pointed out, was fundamentally informed by the fears or unease caused by the fundamental changes in British society. It is a period when industrialization and imperial expansion led to the crumbling of social hierarchy and ceaseless struggles between the white and nonwhite races, dominant Christian and non-Christian belief systems in England.²⁵ Since then, the Gothic has become a long-lasting literary form across modern history by expanding the widest range into prose, fiction, films, plays, TV series, video games, and even academic study. The reason for the persistence of the Gothic over 250 years is the way it helps us address forbidden desires or sources of anxiety and deal with different cultural and psychological contradictions. Thus, the Gothic, as Steven Bruhm puts it, "has always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history" (Bruhm 288).

Many South African literary scholars, such as Gerald Gaylard, Jack Shear, and Cheryl Stobie have elaborated the connection between the Gothic and South African literature from the period of apartheid to the present day. This is the period of transition during which South Africa's social and national reality continues to shift and change. The slow dismantling of the apartheid state from the early 1980s, the celebration of official liberation in the 1994 democratic election, the post-apartheid anxieties about how to reconstruct a new national identity, and the country's encounter with global capitalism in the present day, all breed fears and uncertainties in South African society. Those fears become a condition that drives the production of gothic aesthetics in South African literature. For example, elements—such as the horrifying and uncanny figures, the deserted landscapes, alienated individuals, physical and/or

²⁵ See Jerrold E. Hogle's "Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge UP, 2002. 1-20.

psychic suffering, and violent events—are prevalent in the texts written during the last three decades by André Brink, Derek Walcott, William Plomer, Doris Lessing, J. M. Coetzee, Mike Nicol, Karel Schoeman, Dambudzo Marechera, Etienne van Heerden, Reza de Wet, Zakes Mda, Eben Venter, Lily Herne, and so on. Such disturbing gothic aesthetics not only functions as a means to register the repressed other or alterity, and to “expose that which social engineering attempted to sweep under its carpet” (Gaylard 16), but also allows the writers to engage with the fearful uncertainty during the period in which the world keeps unmaking itself. Thus, I suggest in line with Gaylard that the gothic is much suited to Southern Africa, “for what other genre could better convey the eldritch horrors of imperialism and apartheid and their aftermath” (Gaylard 2).

Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Mda’s *Heart of Redness* are two examples of South African Gothic that deploy gothic devices to speak to the fears and uncertainty generated during the South African interregnum—the final years of apartheid—and during its post-apartheid era. *Waiting for the Barbarians* was written in 1980, the early phase of the interregnum.²⁶ Nadine Gordimer describes some of the essential characteristics of the period in the epigraph to her novel *July’s People*, “The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.” She also mentioned in her article entitled “Living in the Interregnum” that South Africa during the last years of the colonial era was “a society whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change” (Gordimer, “Living in the Interregnum” 262). This is the period during which apartheid faltered amidst equal measures of hope and destruction, and the future of the country

²⁶ In his essay “Writing the Interregnum,” Stephen Clingman summarizes a list of important events happening during the era of interregnum. He says, “This was the era of the rise of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and sustained grass-roots resistance through the country; of major strikes and insistent labour activism; of people’s culture, worker poets and union plays; of successive State of Emergency; of secret and unsecret wars in Namibia and Angola; of no education without liberation; of state terrorism, assassinations, dirty tricks and third forces; of people’s courts, mass funerals, the *toyi-toyi*, of necklacing; of the myriad horrific acts of brutality and inhumanity that characterized apartheid in its last throes” (Clingman 634). Nelson Mandela was released in 1990 and elected president in 1994.

appeared unpredictable and inaccessible. No one could tell whether the dismantling of an institutionalized racism would lead up to peaceful liberation or unprecedented chaos. The future was, in Elleke Boehmer's words, "a space of which it was impossible to imagine the shape" (Boehmer 45).

When this uncertainty characterizes life in South Africa of the interregnum, the reality itself, as Stephen Clingman argues, became "loosed from its moorings" and "intrinsically problematic—in some sense invisible, presented only as the shadowed and uncanny" (Clingman 632). It is also with this fearful uncertainty that many South African writers engaged in the production of gothic narrative. A number of the country's major texts, such as Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), and Reze de Wet's "African Gothic" (2005) all utilized gothic aesthetics—most notably motifs of the monstrous, the spectral, the problematic self, dislodged version of time and space, and apocalyptic presentiments—to create uneasy fictional worlds that reflect a perplexed anxiety of the cultural moment.

Waiting for the Barbarians also captures haunting evocations of the interregnum via gothic elements. For instance, as the novel set in an undefined time on the frontier of an unknown empire, time and space in it "are dislodged from anything like the 'real'" (Clingman 637). Though many allegorical readings have interpreted the story as the history of racial and political crisis in the apartheid South Africa, the indeterminate setting seems to suggest, "its relation to South African world is at most one of the uncanny—shadowed, looming, yet also evasive" (637). Besides, the presence of the barbarians haunts the novel from the beginning. The barbarians and their history appear to be a spectral and mysterious existence to the Magistrate, who is the servant of the Empire, in an undefined time full of strife and unrest. Afterward, the unspeakable violence upon the barbarians turns the Empire into a closed environment "which allows no escape at all" and in which the Magistrate "can see no way forward, no redemption, no differentiation from its undifferentiated space" (638). In its gothic framework, *Waiting for the Barbarians* conveys the sense of endless "suspension," which characterizes the reality of apartheid

South Africa (Boehmer 48). Perceived as mysterious and threatening manifestations of enemies or outcasts that need to be suppressed, the barbarians and their history can be perceived as a figure of an inaccessible ghost—a metaphor of irreducible otherness, haunting the Empire, the Magistrate, and the text itself.

Mda's *Heart of Redness* is another South African text that engages powerfully with gothic aesthetics. By being redolent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in its title, the fiction was written in 2000, the transitional time following from the 1994 election to the new millennium of globalization. It is a period during which the nation was animated not only by the spirit of liberation, but also slowly integrated into the fast, fluid, increasingly interconnected network of global economy. According to Barnard, in contrast to the writing of the interregnum that reflects South Africa's anxiety about the future, most of the post-apartheid texts are preoccupied with the complex interaction between the past and the present (Barnard 660). To this, Samuelson adds that novels in this era can be considered "a process of scripting connections," an emergent body of works in which bonds are "mapped both within the nation and beyond it" (Samuelson 113-14). It is interesting that Mda's book juxtaposes the past and the present of the Eastern Cape, including the period of imperialism and the time of contemporary post-apartheid life of the Xhosas.²⁷ The novel is set against the backdrops of realist and magic-realist events involving the ceaseless struggles between the Believers and the Unbelievers. These struggles span several generations, from the frontier wars between the British and the Xhosas, the tragic historical event of cattle-killing in the late nineteenth century, to the present-day struggles over the development of the seaside resort at

²⁷ The Xhosa people are a Bantu ethnic group mainly found in the Eastern Cape and South Africa. They were well established in the mid-17th century and first encountered white settlers in the early 18th century. From the late 18th century to 1812, there were many conflicts and frontier wars between the Xhosa and British colonial forces. Due to the famines and political divisions that followed the cattle-killing movement of 1856-1858, the Xhosa people lost the battle and territory to colonial expansion. Presently, there are approximately eight million Xhosa people across the country. They are divided into several tribes. Many of them live in Cape Town, East London, and Port Elizabeth. See "Xhosa people" on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xhosa_people. Accessed 11 Oct 2016.

Qolorha-by-Sea. Similar to the symbolic meaning of Conrad's darkness, which marks "the Dark Continent, the African wilderness, a place which still awaits the civilizing mission of the West," Mda's idea of redness refers to the "backwardness" of Xhosa traditions (Sewlall 331). Because these traditions are associated with nature, ancestral spirituality, and the prophecies of Nongqawuse, they can be perceived as figurative ghosts that are in conflict with the Western view of Enlightenment and progress.²⁸ By using such Gothic elements, Mda's novel speaks to the nation's post-apartheid integration into the global economy, and to a sense of unease, which arises within the context of this encounter.

Through different gothic techniques—including repetition, transgression, haunting of the irrational and mysterious others, interaction between the present and the past, the two novels create uneasy fictional worlds in which there are ceaseless struggles between the natives and the colonizers, the traditions and contemporary ways of life. Since ghosts always roam when conflicts emerge, the figure of a medium becomes important. Looking for the figure or function of a medium in my analysis of these two novels, I will investigate two different ways in which the protagonists negotiate binary entities, such as the living and the dead, self and other, tradition and modernity, nature and culture. I will show how they settle down present crisis and initiate "the process of change" that will symbolically or literally "bring into being a dialogic society" (Bell 95).

The Magistrate as a Passive Medium in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

The Magistrate represents the figure of a passive medium between the Empire and the barbarians by experiencing emotional and social ambivalence in his

²⁸ In Xhosa tradition, the ancestors act as intermediaries between the living and God. There are diviners known as amagqirha and prophets izanuse who work to communicate with the ancestors for the community. These jobs are mostly taken by women. In the novel, Nongqawuse is the fifteen-year-old Xhosa prophet who instructed the Xhosa people to slaughter all their cattle in the 1850s and claimed that in return the ancestors would replenish Xhosa livestock and grain. Her prophecies caused the tragic historical event of cattle-killing and the ceaseless struggle between the Believers and the Unbelievers.

encounters with his inner otherness as well as with barbarian others. I define the term “passive medium” as a person who originally belongs to the class of authorities, but is haunted by and becomes identified with ghostly otherness in an involuntary way. At the beginning of the novel, the Magistrate appears in the role of a careless official at the borders. He has no intention of learning about the barbarians who live and do business there. After Colonel Joll comes, he faces a crisis caused by the nation’s new policy toward the barbarians. By bearing witness to Joll’s torturing of the barbarians, the Magistrate is weighed down by a sense of guilt, shame, and sympathy, though he first tries to deny what is happening in the torture chamber by closing off his ears. However, the screams of the tortured barbarians intrude upon his consciousness and provoke a sense of guilt in his mind. In order to compensate for his sense of guilt, he undertakes different acts of mercy, such as taking care of the barbarian girl, feeding her, healing her, and washing her body. Later, this sympathy is transformed into the Magistrate’s desire for the barbarian girl. He especially feels obsessed by her “twisted feet” and “half-blinded eyes” and is compelled to uncover what happened to her in the chamber (Coetzee, *Waiting* 70). Her broken body is “a rune for him, like the enigmatic scripts he discovers in the desert” (Masse 169). He says, “It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 33).

However, as the Magistrate is epistemologically and ethically constricted within an imperial cognitive frame, his efforts to gain access to the barbarians always fail. For instance, he always loses consciousness in the ritual of washing the barbarian girl’s feet, a ritual that shows his efforts to find answers to the questions about the scars on her body. He says, “I lose awareness of the girl herself. There is a space of time which is blank to me: perhaps I am not even present” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 30). As time goes on, he realizes that he is unable to solve the mysteries of the marks on the body, as well as to integrate them into his discursive understanding of the world: “The body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping in my bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension” (45). By acknowledging his impotence as well

as the absence of his own subjectivity during the ritual, the Magistrate experiences a “spatial-temporal dislocation” in his self (Craps 64). He feels that “time has broken, something has fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 47). This moment of contradiction causes the ground to shift beneath his feet and impels him to re-position himself in relation to both the barbarians and the Empire. Thus, he is turned into a passive medium.

I contend that *the condition of trance* serves as an important phase when the Magistrate mediates his inner otherness and the alterity of the barbarians. *Oxford Dictionaries Online* defines trance as “a half-conscious state characterized by an absence of response to external stimuli, typically as induced by hypnosis or entered by a medium.” Regarded as an important strategy that a medium employs to communicate with the spirits from the other world, trance also refers to the condition of letting the spectral other take over one’s body as well as entering a foreign space outside the realm of rational knowledge. Trance not only challenges Enlightenment models of knowledge production, but also allows the entranced subject to navigate extra-linguistic experience. It raises questions concerning conceptions of subjecthood, as well as the limits of knowledge and conscious experience. Here I will use the notion of trance more figuratively as a means for a passive medium to identify with ghostliness, as a condition of unwillingly and simultaneously entering a foreign domain and becoming the other.

In some respects, the state of trance is similar to Kristeva’s idea of “abjection,” which refers to the experience of being thrown out of oneself, a “descent into the foundation of the symbolic construct,” a re-experiencing of the moment of our separation, in order to arrive at a place where self and other are “inseparable” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 18). Samuel Durrant, a postcolonial researcher from Leeds University, elaborates upon the concept further and claims: “Abjection is the reduction of the self to the body in which the body becomes radically defamiliarized ... The abject body is auto-referential: no longer operating as a sign of the human, it accrues its own weight or pathos and becomes an image of its own pain” (Durrant 36).

According to these statements, I will suggest that the state of trance is a mode of irrational or unfamiliar experience—an altered consciousness—that is usually associated with ugly feelings, illness, a marginal state or degradation. In such a state, a medium is unwillingly forced to identify with the other and becomes receptive to his otherness within the self. Therefore, the threshold can be irrevocably crossed. However, a medium here is not active because he “can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things” and is unable to return to his own community anymore (Deleuze and Guattari 264). He is usually transformed from a majoritarian into a complete exile or a minoritarian forever.

Missing appropriate and sufficient knowledge of the barbarians, the Magistrate is unable to fulfill his attempts to interpret the stories of the barbarians. The fatal consequence is that he is continuously haunted by the enigmas and gaps embodied by the bodies of the barbarians and feels confused by the autonomy of his own identity. Therefore, he simultaneously undergoes different forms of trance, including 1) literally entering the zone of alienation in the journey to return the barbarian girl to her people, 2) experiencing himself as other in torture and imprisonment, and 3) falling into hallucination and dreams. I will elaborate how these three kinds of trance impel the Magistrate to leave his familiar community or to fall into degradation, so that he can involuntarily identify with the barbarians and negotiate between self and other.

The first kind of trance in the novel is the Magistrate’s entry into foreignness by delivering the barbarian girl to her people. The confrontation with the unfamiliar environment during his journey provokes in him a sense of alienation from his people and from “the tranquil familiarity of his interpretive community” (Saunders 225). It makes him rethink the Empire’s definitions of nation and history and gain awareness of their dubiousness and illegitimacy. He says:

We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire—our outpost, our settlement, our market centre. But these people, these barbarians don’t think of it like that at all. We have been

here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients. (Coetzee, *Waiting* 55)

By illustrating how transient the Empire is for the barbarians, he redefines the hierarchy between the barbarian perspective of cyclical time and the Empire's notion of linear and progressive time. He questions the Empire's concept of "the time of history" and its pursuit of immortality:

Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it sends its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation. (Coetzee, *Waiting* 146)

He learns that the essence of history is nothing but violence. Entering the zone of foreignness undoubtedly provokes in the Magistrate a moral sense of time. It urges him to challenge the credibility of the Empire's definition of history and to revise the relationship between self and other.

The Magistrate undergoes the second kind of trance under torture. Hania Nashef claims that the Magistrate's entering the foreign land "propels him into a process of deterritorialization resulting in a change in his state" (Nashef 25). The journey does change his position in his community. After he returns from the journey, he is arrested by his men, accused of treason, and forced to experience himself the life of barbarians by living through the events of imprisonment, torture, and humiliation. He is forced by his people to wear a

women's calico smock, degraded into a dirty, stinking clown, and exploited severely in the public square. In his suffering, he begins to identify with the barbarians and gains critical awareness of the brutal quality of the Empire.

For example, his experience of imprisonment makes him acknowledge the otherness and barbarity within himself. He claims:

Nevertheless, I am not taking easily to the humiliations of imprisonment. Sometimes, sitting on my mat staring at three specks on the wall and feeling myself drift for the thousandth time towards the questions, ... or finding as I pace the room that I am counting *one-two-three-four-five-six-one-two-three* ... or brushing my hand mindlessly over my face, I realize how tiny I have allowed them to make my world, how I daily become more like a beast or a simple machine ... Then I respond with movements of vertiginous terror in which I rush around the cell jerking my arms about, pulling my beard, stamping my feet, doing anything to surprise myself, to remind myself of a world beyond that is various and rich. (Coetzee, *Waiting* 92-93)

This irrational experience in the prison forces him to learn that barbarianism is a part of humanity. He is not superior, saner, or more competent in coping with pain than the barbarians. It also challenges the dominant narratives of the Empire that construct the barbarians as non-human beings, such as beasts and machines.

Likewise, the experience of torture forces the Magistrate to confront his otherness and makes him develop an insight into humanity. When the rope tightens around his neck, the pains subjugate him into unconsciousness. Durrant argues that this is "a moment of ... 'negative transcendence,' a descent that ... brings the self into an abject, bodily relation with itself" (Durrant 48). The torture not only reduces him to basic and feral needs, but also completes his entry into foreignness. He is degraded from a thinking human being into a

gibbering and helpless body, “a pile of blood, bone, and meat” that, I will suggest, does not seem different from or superior to the tortured bodies of the barbarians (Coetzee, *Waiting* 93).

He learns that the Empire’s hysteria regarding the barbarian is a kind of psychological illness. By violently mythologizing and falsifying the distinction between barbarity and civilization, self and other, the Empire tries to establish its authority and enact the manipulation of the other. Thus, he argues that it is the Empire itself that is barbaric instead of the natives and he responds with the following to his interrogator: “We are at peace here,” “we have no enemies ... Unless I make a mistake ... Unless we are the enemy” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 85).

The Magistrate falls into the third form of trance by figuratively entering foreignness and communicating with the other in his dreams. Durrant argues that the dreams can be regarded as “a site of witnessing.” It is a place where “our own desire is suspended” and where “other voices make themselves heard in our lives” (Durrant 35). Accordingly, I will suggest that the dreams function as a liminal zone where the passive medium encounters the specter of the other. Since the spectral other is inaccessible for somebody who belongs to a majority in his or her waking life as it lives outside the realm of dominant knowledge, his or her dreams serve to “open up the possibility of an abject identification with the other” (36).

In addition, the specter that the passive medium confronts in his or her dreams also represents the otherness of the self. In one of Coetzee’s other novels, *Foe*, the protagonist Foe asks Susan about the function of dreaming: “would we be better or worse ... if we were no longer to descend nightly into ourselves and meet ... our darker selves, and other phantoms too” (Coetzee, *Foe* 137-38). Pursuing this thought a bit further, Durrant asserts that descending into our unconscious marks an encounter with “our own encrypted otherness” that enables us to “relate—ethically—to the otherness of those we encounter in our daily lives” (Durrant 35). In other words, by falling into an abnormal, dreamy and hypnotic state, a member of a majority group can temporarily withdraw from his or her rationality and gain insight into the traces of the repressed other/otherness within constructed knowledge. It

simultaneously prompts him or her to mediate between the self and the other and to re-imagine a vision of mutual understanding in his or her relationship to every form of otherness.

In the novel, the Magistrate's dreams function as a space outside of his realm of rational knowledge where he confronts the barbarian other and the otherness of the self. By falling into his dreams, he not only builds a connection with the barbarian girl, but also enacts remembrance of the indigestible pains of the body. For instance, "the hooded figure of the girl," which appears repeatedly in his dreams, can be regarded as a symbol of the barbarian girl (Coetzee, *Waiting* 57). Standing for a site of torture as well as the suffering of the barbarians, the body of this figure appears fragmented. The Magistrate narrates: "The feet lie before me in the dust, disembodied, monstrous, two stranded fish, two huge potatoes" (95). Though the Magistrate has no access to the body in his waking life, the body appears to him and prompts him to build a connection with it on a subconscious level. He dreams that he carries the girl, and assumes her body as "the only key I have to the labyrinth" (95).

The Magistrate symbolically receives a transmission and establishes a mutual understanding with her in his dreams. When he loses consciousness during the ritual of washing her feet, he dreams that the girl is constructing a fort out of snow. Durrant argues that "the construction of the fort is a mute indication of the place where her history went down, providing the Magistrate with a topographical map of her pain, one that will eventually allow him to navigate his own experience of torture" (Durrant 46). The dream not only provides the Magistrate a channel for understanding the pains of the barbarians, but also provokes his ethical action to identify with them. On one hand, compared to his earlier ignorance of the cries from the granary, he attunes his hearing "to that infinitely faint level at which the cries of all who suffered here must still beat from wall to wall" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 87). On the other hand, the reception of the voices of the barbarians in his dream urges him to replace the otherness from the barbarians with his self. He allows torture to take place in his life and experiences his identification with "the unbearable proximity of other lives" that is suppressed within the dominant discourse (Durrant 44).

The Magistrate also symbolically establishes a connection with the barbarian girl in his dream. In his last dream, the girl, who is dressed like a priestess, offers the Magistrate a loaf of bread. The girl also symbolizes the barbarian girl, but in this dream, she is building an oven rather than a snow fort. The disembodied feet in the earlier dream are transformed into a “shapeless lump”—the loaf of bread—which Durrant asserts as “the bread of remembrance, eaten in remembrance of another scene of torture and as a promise of salvation” (Durrant 48). Based on his argument, the bread marks the signs of communication and peace offerings that do not take place in the Magistrate’s waking life. Thus, his dream holds out hope for salvation and for the coming of a new collectivity, the coming of a new community established by the mutual recognition between self and other.

During these three different forms of trance he experiences in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, namely entering into the wilderness, living through indigestible pains, and falling into the realm outside of consciousness, the Magistrate tends to become enmeshed in uncertainties, doubts, and mysteries. As he is ostracized, he undergoes a transformation and enters “an apparently permanent exile” away from the confines of the empire (Saunders 226). This condition provokes his inconsistent oscillation between self and other, unity and fragmentation. When he keeps experiencing such “an oscillatory process of transposition,” he arrives at a momentarily ethical understanding of the barbarian others, and begins to perform the work of a medium (Peeren and Horstkotte 12).

It is when the Magistrate is in these altered states of consciousness that he develops the skills of negation and mistranslation to mediate external and internal otherness, and revise the hierarchy embodying the Empire and the barbarians. For instance, he openly shouts the word “No!” when he witnesses the Joll’s public display of torture of the barbarian prisoners. The Magistrate’s “No!” here marks a counter narrative to the Empire’s physical and linguistic exploitation of the barbarians that attempts “to coerce the natives into assuming the identity of ‘barbarians’ and ‘enemy’ ... in order to assert its existence” (Craps 62). His reading of the barbarian as “miracle of creation” or “Men” later

also questions the Empire's values of its absolute superiority in which he has been steeped (Coetzee, *Waiting* 117). Saunders claims: "the magistrate's word creates a hiatus, a disruptive and defamiliarizing lacuna, in the empire's performative reiteration. It transforms the empire's statement about itself into an uncertainty, into a question that can be answered affirmatively or negatively, into a proposition inhabited by truth or by error" (Saunders 230). Though the Magistrate's words only appeal to the crowd momentarily, they succeed in bringing uncertainties into the discourse of the Empire. His practices of negation and ambiguity unveil the problematic of imperial language and question the established relationship between his self and the barbarian other.

Mistranslation, or what Maria Boletsi's calls "infelicitous translation," is another strategy which the Magistrate employs to negotiate the binary relationship between the Empire and the barbarians (Boletsi 62). When Colonel Joll, who assumes that the Magistrate is communicating with the barbarians, asks him to translate the meaning of the wooden slips, which he excavated from the site of an ancient barbarian civilization, the Magistrate employs this strategy to invite a radical rethinking of the epistemological framework of the Empire. For instance, by misinterpreting a barbarian character as a word meaning *justice* as well as *vengeance* or *war*, he imbues the term of justice—this "favorite imperial category"—with an ambiguous meaning and makes it appear "foreign" to the dominant narratives (66). Boletsi suggests that his improvised translation of "the similarity" instead of "the difference" of the three terms not only challenges the fixed definitions of the words, but also exposes the brutality of the imperial language, which has constructed its own authenticity and the pre-constructed myth of a barbarian threat (67).

Besides, he invents numerous versions of barbarian characters on the slips and turns them into "signifiers of linguistic uncertainty and foreignness" (Boletsi 64):

'It is the same with the rest of these slips.' I plunge my good hand into the chest and stir. 'They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in

many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as history of the last years of the Empire – the old Empire, I mean.’ (Coetzee, *Waiting* 122)

His act of mistranslation not only preserves the foreignness and the plurality of “barbarian cunning,” but also reassesses the Empire’s fixed definitions of categories (Boletsi 64). He also relocates the relationship between self and other in the process of translation. When he interprets the characters on the slips as “a history of the last years of the Empire—the old Empire, I mean” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 122), he sarcastically analogizes the ancient barbarian’s empire with the current Empire, and in this manner, underscores the transience of both. His practice of mistranslation deconstructs the established division between the settler and the native, civilization and barbarity. It directs the readers’ attention toward how the Empire’s linguistic code is as “impaired” as the noises of a barbarian language, full of internal gaps and confusion.

The final strategy for the Magistrate to re-position his relationship with the Empire and the barbarians is to abandon the imperial practices of interpretation and narration. At the beginning of the novel, the Magistrate has lots of interest in deciphering the ancient history of the barbarians. He usually lingers among the ruins of the barbarian civilization, sitting there in the dark to wait “for spirits from the byways of history to speak to him” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 17). He is also writing a memorial to record his life among the barbarians. However, by falling into different trances, he gains the insight that he can never interpret the foreign bodies of the barbarians or understand the true stories of them when he is constricted to the imperial cognitive frame. That’s why he is unable to receive a complete transmission from the other, and see any sign and feel any “tremor of ghostly fear” among the ruins (17). He reflects, “I think: ‘There has been something staring at me in the face, and still I do not see it’” (170). Gaining awareness of his incompetence to solve the gaps in the dominant linguistic frame and access the barbarians, the Magistrate decides to give up his hope of achieving a deeper understanding of history as well as his

plan of writing the story. He assumes that what he has written is just like the barbarian slips, which contain “a message as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible” as what he claimed the slips contained (169). In order to preserve the foreignness of the other and to avoid the distortion of its meaning, he ultimately chooses to resist every form of interpretation or narration.

By conducting the practices of negation and mistranslation, the Magistrate escapes from “the identity mapped out for him by the Empire” and symbolically establishes a connection with the barbarian others (Craps 65). Though his rapprochement with the other and his departure from his previous “interpretative community” do not guarantee him a better life, they enable him to venture forward “into uncharted territory, an ethical space which opens up the possibility of a non-appropriative encounter with the other” (65). He begins to redefine the boundary between self and other and imagine a not-yet-realized ethical space where the self and the other might achieve some sort of mutual understanding.

The novel ends with a scene that conveys such a symbolic and momentary glimpse of hope. In the final scene, the Magistrate comes across some children who are building a snowman at the square. The strong presence of children here marks a “psychological closure” for the Magistrate in its “exorcism” of dreams and suffering. Durrant says: “While the dreams begin as a futile attempt to reconstruct, and to make reparations for the past, the children’s work, which makes the Magistrate feel ‘inexplicably joyful,’ is emphatically directed toward the future” (Durrant 49). Though the novel doesn’t provide us with any real redemption in life, the final scene is symbolically messianic. As a witness and as the narrator of the scene, the Magistrate contributes to re-imagining a dialogic society to come in the promising future.

Active Mediums in Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*

The magical settings and ceaseless struggles between the Believers and the Unbelievers in Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* are different from the setting and

the conflicts between the Empire and the barbarians in Coetzee's novel. The struggles between the Believers and the Unbelievers span the period from the 19th century to the end of the 20th century. The two story lines of the community's past and present are interwoven. One will find that the main concerns of the debates between the two oppositional groups are similar in each period. The Believers want to search for solutions to the crisis within a traditional framework. The Unbelievers reject the traditions and regard them as superstitions and a sign of backwardness. Therefore, in the 19th century, the conflicts took place because the Believers believed in the prophecies of Nongqawuse and slaughtered all their cattle, expecting that their ancestors would rise from the ocean and bring herd and crop to them; the Unbelievers refused to do that and blamed the Believers for causing famine and many deaths among the Xhosas. This cattle-killing event can be paralleled with the present struggles between the contemporary Believers and Unbelievers over Nongqawuse's prophecies and land appropriation. In the case of the present divisions, the Unbelievers, being critical of the traditional faith and culture, invest in the notion of progress and the promise of capitalism. They argue that establishing the casino at Qolorha-by-sea is the only way to enhance development of the area. On the contrary, the Believers attempt to preserve the traditions and protect the site of the prophecies in order to fulfill their sentiments toward the past.

Compared to the spectral barbarian others in Coetzee's novel, the ancestral spirits of the Xhosas in *The Heart of Redness* are fundamentally intertwined with the everyday life of the community. They are not otherworldly manifestations that need to be exorcised, but represent the traditions or ancestral wisdom that should be incorporated into the contemporary ways of living. In this context, a medium plays an important role in negotiating between the supernatural realm of the ancestors and the daily life of the living, between past and present, tradition and modernity. He or she is similar to "the diviner" (amagqirha) in Xhosa society that Dirk Klopper defines as "a special person, elected by the ancestors to perform the function of mediator between ... the human community with its established practices and customs and ... the

intermediate forces of nature” (Klopper 101). According to the historian Jeff Peires’ seminal study of Xhosa culture, the diviner is concerned with practicalities of “omens, medicines, witchcraft and the relationship between people and their ancestors” (Peires 1989: 30-31). He or she usually experiences symptoms such as withdrawal, troubling dreams, periods of unconsciousness, when he or she is called to the vocation by the ancestors (Prins and Lewis 140). It is when he or she is in these altered states of consciousness that he or she receives the messages from the ancestors. Besides, he or she is assumed to be able to communicate with animals because ancestral spirits usually appear in the shapes of wild animals. By interpreting the ambiguous signs conveyed by the ancestors to the living, the diviner “inhabits an in-between space, the space of interpretation, translating the signifiers of nature, which exceeds the symbolic of culture, into the sign systems of a given cultural community” (Klopper 102). According to these definitions of the diviner, I contend that the figure of a medium in the novel can be assumed to be an active medium. Being different from a passive medium, this kind of medium owns a key to the knowledge of different cultures and conflicting entities and is able to mediate in the real or symbolic battle between the oppositional groups or binary conceptualized domains.

The two protagonists, Camagu and Qukezwa, serve as good examples of active mediums in the novel. By employing the knowledge of the dead and the living, nature and culture, they settle the conflicts between the Believers and the Unbelievers and re-create a dialogic society in post-apartheid South Africa. Take Qukezwa as an instance. Embodying a sense of hybridity in spiritual, social, and ecological domains, she functions to mediate between the present and the past, ancestral wisdoms and modern knowledge, natural realm and human world. From a spiritual perspective, she is invested with a mythic aura as well as a trans-temporal identity. She crosses from the past to the present through her identification with an ancestor in the historical past, sometimes appearing as a Khoikhoi woman, the wife of the leader of the 19th century Believers Twin, and sometimes appearing as the modern daughter of the Believer Zim. As the novel progresses, the identities of the two Qukezwas

increasingly merge. In the last paragraph of the novel, one is not able to distinguish one character from the other. As Jacobs puts it, “The two stories blend into a seamless narrative of the past and the present, and the two voices combine into a single, split-tone song” (Jacobs 236). The reappearance of the character on different time levels endows Qukezwa with a mystic and prophetic power. It points out her trans-temporal and trans-historical role in preserving and passing on the traditional knowledge from the ancestors to the living. In addition, the merging of two characters in the end serves as a symbol of union of the present and the past. It draws our attention to an alternative way of life that highlights mutual communication instead of conflicts and struggles.

Qukezwa also embodies a sense of hybridity in the social domain. By combining different cultural and social traditions, Qukezwas live up to the significance of the term “qukezwa,” which means “the person elected to bring the community together, to facilitate social integration” (Klopper 101). Their multi-voicedness reveals that tradition is not unchanging and static, but embodies potential for social renewal. For example, the early Qukezwa brought the Khoikhoi religious and cultural traditions to the Xhosa society after marrying Twin, and used them well to save the people from the disaster of Cattle-killing. And although the contemporary Qukezwa first appears as a rebellious city-bound youth and a modern consumer, who wears “a black woolen cap which is emblazoned with the P symbol of Pierre Cardin in green and yellow,” she turns out to be the guardian of dying traditions (Mda 62, 56). She wears a traditional red blanket in court to defend her act of cutting the foreign trees. She employs the indigenous knowledge of nature to help the local people to develop a self-reliant industry of gathering shellfish. In addition, by showing Camagu the values of Nongqawuse’s prophecies as well as of Xhosa traditions, she propels Camagu to integrate traditions with western knowledge and come up with a promising idea to establish the site of Nongqawuse’s prophecies as a national heritage. In other words, by linking tradition with modernity, the two Qukezwas function as active mediums between the Believers and the Unbelievers, Xhosa and Khoikhoi. They encourage the oppositional groups to give up binary thinking in order to figure

out a solution for cultural and social conflicts.

From an ecological perspective, Qukezwa is negotiating between nature and culture. For both characters of Qukezwa, nature is not an object of understanding, but imbued with soul and the quality of subjectivity. Their relationship with nature is based more on “mutual recognition and reciprocity” (Klopper 99). Being a Khoi woman, one of the true aboriginal people of Southern Africa, the early Qukezwa retains a sense of African spirituality that is mostly imbued with the land and nature. She dreams that she “flies ... in the land of prophets” and “sings for soft pastel colours ... in many voices” (Mda 312). She has passed such ability on to her descendent, the daughter of Zim. The contemporary Qukezwa knows the wisdom of trees, the sky, and the sea. She also has a talent for the dying tradition of split-tone singing through which she can communicate with animals:

She bursts into a song and plays her umrhubhe musical instrument. She whistles and sings all at the same time. Many voices come out of her mouth. Deep sounds that echo like the night. Sounds that have the heaviness of a steamy summer night. Flaming sounds that crackle like a veld fire. Light sounds that float like flakes of snow on top of the Amathole Mountains. Hollow sounds like laughing mountains. Coming out all at once. As if a whole choir lives in her mouth. (Mda 175)

Transcending human language, the split-tone singing here not only marks Qukezwa’s ability to mediate between the natural and the human world, but also demonstrates her ecological awareness embodied in the ancestral wisdoms of the African landscape.

By bridging the gap between her knowledge inherited from the ancestors and the progressive views of modernity, modern Qukezwa finds a balance between nature and culture. Her opposition to the presence of foreign trees is an example. When she answers in court to defend her act of cutting

down foreign trees, she combines modern rationality with the ancestral knowledge of the land of the Xhosas. Although dressed in a traditional red blanket, she indeed states progressive ecological views:

“I cut the trees, and I shall cut them again ...”

“The trees that I destroyed are as harmful as the inkberry. They are the lantana and wattle trees ... The seed can lie there for ten years, but when fire comes it grows. And it uses all the water. Nothing can grow under the wattle tree. It is an enemy since we do not have enough water in this country.” (Mda 247-49)

The Austrian-born American physicist Fritjof Capra states in his well-known book about modern scientific and economic crises and their relationship with technology and ecological needs, *The Turning Point*: “Ecological awareness, then, will arise only when we combine our rational knowledge with an intuition for the nonlinear nature of our environment” (Capra 41). Qukezwa’s speech demonstrates this progressive “ecological awareness” by successfully combining profound indigenous knowledge about her ancestral land with modern rationality. It also raises questions about the binary divisions between backwardness (nature) and civilization (culture). Her seemingly reckless act of cutting down foreign trees is not uncivilized behavior. Instead, by conveying a strong ecological message, it is a protest against colonial and capitalist exploitation of the local environment.

As a figure with enigmatic aura and multi-voices, Qukezwa inspires another protagonist, Camagu, to find his new interstitial identity as an active medium. In the opening scene of the novel, Camagu appears as the civilized intellectual and a returned exile from the United States, who lives a disaffected life in Johannesburg. After he arrives in Qolorha, he meets both the female intellectual, Xoliswa, the daughter of the Unbeliever Banco, and Qukezwa, the daughter of the Believer Zim. In his relationship with Xoliswa, he gradually learns that he doesn’t share her disdain for the regressive practices of Xhosa

tradition and her approval of the seaside resort project, which for her is the symbol of progress and modernity. By contrast, he feels he is drawn to the enigmatic girl Qukezwa, who clings to the Xhosa traditions, knows the natural environment intimately, and owns an uncanny insight into his thoughts.

As he sees Qukezwa delightfully riding her father's beloved horse and strolling in the valley, he is fascinated and can't help joining her to experience the magic of the site of prophecies. In their moonlight bareback ride on Gxagxa, her split-tone singing imposes a spell on him. It invokes in his mind the vivid images of the earth, sky, and sea, and opens him up to a sensual enjoyment. After that, he experiences several symptoms that a novice diviner has gone through during being called to the profession of the spirits of ancestors, including withdrawal, dreams, and encountering an ancestral spirit in the form of a wild animal. For instance, he dreams that he becomes a river with water flowing through him. He is also visited by Majola, totem snake of his clan. Klopper argues that "these events—alienation from cosmopolitan life, disconcerting dreams involving the liminal space of the river, and a visitation by the ancestors in the form of a snake—point to the fact that Camagu has received a calling" (Klopper 99).²⁹ He begins to establish a connection with the spiritual world.

Thus, Camagu begins questioning his modernized identity based on the knowledge gained from Western education. As a guy with a doctorate in modern communication, he paradoxically finds that Qukezwa's split-tone singing functions as a more effective and supreme way of communication. Her singing not only transcends the human language, but also marks a connection between the human and natural world. By learning to appreciate her talent and her wordless song, Camagu develops a broader vision of life and the world. He

²⁹ According to Prins and Lewis (1992), rivers are a kind of intermediate area that link the forest (ihlati)—"a place of danger, where witches and their familiars gather, where sorcerers and diviners obtain medicinal plants, and where predators lurk," with the homestead (umzi)—"a place of safety, where the structures and customs of social life prevail, where crops are cultivated and cattle are reared, and where the ancestors (izinyanya) are propitiated through appropriate rituals" (Klopper 97). They function like the Grassland (ithafa), which is not quite homestead, but may become domesticated. Being a liminal space, rivers act as a bridge between different binary entities, including the spirits and the living, the wild and the tame, nature and culture.

learns to appreciate the magic inherited in the site of Nongqawuse's prophecies. Instead of regarding it as the symbol of "redness" or "backwardness," he gains insight into its beauties and historical significance. He says to Xoliswa when she questions his relationship with Qukezwa: "Where you see darkness, witchcraft, heathens and barbarians, she sees song and dance and laughter and beauty" (Mda 219). Ina Gräbe assumes that "the transition becomes complete once he (Camagu) comes to understand and accept an aspect of African culture which celebrated the African landscape by means of songs and the ability to 'communicate' with animals" (Gräbe 172). By accepting the spiritual aspect of African traditions, Camagu becomes an active medium who negotiates between the living and the dead, modernity and tradition. He begins to live up the very word of his name—"Camagu"—that means "Amen and be Satisfied, O Great Ones" when a cow was slaughtered for worshipping the spirits of the ancestors in the Xhosa ritual (Peires 1987: 105). The meaning of this word implies that his modernized identity is deeply connected to the spirituality and traditional beliefs in Xhosa culture.

Mediating between different belief systems, Camagu develops an eco-critical, trans-cultural, and ethical vision of history and nature, and helps settle the local struggles over the tragic historical events and the development of the land. For example, by combining what he has learned about international business practices from his education in the United States with the indigenous knowledge of the local natural resources, which he learns from Qukezwa and the local women in the village, Camagu provides a self-sustained plan for the development of the valley. He claims that it is necessary to protect the local environment against unsustainable exploitation and proposes "the kind of tourism that will benefit the people, that will not destroy indigenous forests that will not bring hordes of people who will pollute the rivers and drives away the birds" (Mda 232). Thus, he establishes a cooperative society with the local women and helps declare Qolorgha-by-Sea a historical site of national heritage. Besides, he insists that the amaXhosa traditions should be displayed as living practices instead of museum installations. He says to Dalton: "Like all cultures their culture is dynamic ... I am talking of self-reliance where people do things

for themselves and will be run by a committee elected by them in the true manner of co-operative societies” (286). His revisionary plan unmistakably disarms the threat of a seaside resort which might bring social and environmental damage, and solves the community’s struggles over land appropriation.

Camagu also succeeds in settling the conflicts between the Believers and the Unbelievers over the traumatic history of Cattle-killing and the Nongqawuse’s prophecies. He proposes a new pragmatic approach to revise the meaning of historical events: “Her prophecies arose out of the spiritual and material anguish of the amaXhosa nation” (Mda 283). Abandoning a skeptical cosmopolitan attitude that dismisses the events as foolishness or as a crime, he regards them as proper responses to the colonial exploitation of Xhosa in the 19th century. In addition, he says: “Believers are sincere in their belief. In this whole matter of Nongqawuse I see the sincerity of belief ... It is the same sincerity of belief that has been seen throughout history and continues to be seen today where those who believe actually see miracles” (283). Here he assumes that the destructive past might contain a transcendent answer for the present crisis and that “the sincerity of belief” embodies hope for a better future. By integrating African spirituality into the modern framework of rational thinking, he goes beyond the norm of binary thinking and creates an ethical, compassionate, and open-ended interpretation of the traumatic memories. His act also impels the Xhosas to re-create a new kind of shared history. It is a history that doesn’t look for the recovery of the whole past, but attempts to re-invent a communal memory for the community.

Linking the historical past to the crisis of the present through the switching of time from present to past and vice versa, Mda creates Camagu and Qukezwa as active mediums in the transitional stages of Xhosa society. Both characters function to recuperate a culture-nature/life-death/tradition-modernity dialectic. They give binary entities an equal discursive space to interrogate each other. This not only prevents particular discourses from becoming totalizing, but also deconstructs the simplistic binary thinking that causes the trans-generational conflicts of the community. In addition, through their

engagement with bringing the ancestral wisdom into the modernized world by re-imagining the spiritual relationships in terms of contemporary needs, they provoke a dialogue between the Believers and the Unbelievers and engender a communal and open-ended resolution of the social crisis. In other words, they reveal that tradition offers a generative value to the fast-changing world of the present. As soon as one learns to reconcile with the past and with his or her ancestral spirits, s/he is able to re-create a new trans-historical or trans-cultural identity as well as a solution for ever-changing conflicts.

Conclusion

The established division between binary domains fills our world with social and emotional contradictions. A ceaseless dialogue or perpetual oscillation between the binary entities is significant when one confronts various forms of otherness and settles the conflicts and pains of life. The two kinds of mediums I distinguished in this chapter represent two kinds of negotiating. Constricted to the dominant cognitive and linguistic frame, a passive medium is a person who involuntarily identifies with the spectral others by falling into a condition of trance. In an altered state of consciousness, he or she gains critical awareness of the limits of self-knowledge and begins to re-position his or her relationship with the oppressed others. Thus, in literary studies, the figure of a passive medium not only functions to question the dominant notions of history and identity, but also prompts readers to look for the gaps concealed in the hegemonic discourse.

With sufficient knowledge of different cultures and belief systems, an active medium plays the role of the double-voiced agent in the social and cultural struggles. Negotiating between binary conceptual domains of the living and the dead, present and past, tradition and modernity, nature and culture, this kind of medium serves to deconstruct simplistic binary thinking and provoke a solution for social conflicts. Except for these two kinds of mediums, there is still room for different attitudes in the face of different figurative or non-figurative ghosts. The concept of a medium is always diverse and it is

useful in mediating internal and external otherness, and in re-imagining a more communal identity as well as a dialogic world to come.