



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Lee, C.

Citation

Lee, C. (2017, January 11). *Ghosts here and there : spectral resistance and the ethics of ghosts in postcolonial literature*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/45141>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/45141>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/45141> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Lee, C.

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

Issue Date: 2017-01-11

Conclusion

The Ethics of the Ghostly: A Ghost Medium in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*

[T]he absolute proximity of a stranger whose power is singular and anonymous (*es spukt*), an unnameable and neutral power, that is undecidable, neither active nor passive, an an-identity that, *without doing anything*, invisibly occupies places belonging finally neither to us nor to it. (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 172)

In the previous chapters, I analyzed how the subjects experience different forms of ghosts and ghostly aspects in certain people, objects, and places, and at historical moments. By close-reading the literary representation of the ghostly in relation to space, language, and inter-subjectivity in the selected postcolonial and minority novels, I elaborated the narrative potential of ghosts and their relationship to the construction of identity. In these cases, ghosts are not merely perceived as products of human imagination, or of social and cultural constructions. Rather, they play the role of an active agent that continuously haunts the subjects, connecting them to the repressed past or the hidden social reality. By delineating how ghosts participate in one's daily life and effect his or her formation of a sense of self, I revealed that ghosts are not objects but subjects.

In the concluding chapter, I will elaborate the ethic potential of ghosts by integrating the concept of "medium" into the discussion. Being considered in its entanglement with death, alterity, difference, and indeterminacy, the metaphor of ghosts plays the role of a medium in many postcolonial novels, including some works that feature literary ghosts as well as the ones that designate subjects as ghostly in a metaphorical sense. In order to achieve the

aim for a contribution to the discussion on ghosts as a way of conceptualizing new modes of ethical thinking, I will explore the specific ways the metaphor of ghost operates in J. M. Coetzee's writing of the late-apartheid period, *Life & Times of Michael K*: In what way is the protagonist, Michael K, associated with a ghost? What kind of agency or ethical impact does his ghostliness generate? How does his ghostliness relate him to a medium that produces an ethical subject to think beyond boundaries and take responsibility for the vulnerable but irreducible other? In other words, by exploring how Michael K, who is described as, or manifests himself as a ghost, plays the role of an active agent or a medium in the novel, I will assume that the ghostly has an ethical power—the power of revealing the inconceivable, triggering new modes of thinking and producing ethical subjects.

Written in 1981, *Life & Times of Michael K* has not only been read as a postmodern allegory, closely tied to a South African context during apartheid, but also has been perceived as an example of the postcolonial gothic in which the figure of the ghostly is used to articulate severe social and individual crises. Set in some indeterminate breakdown in which “the military machine controls all aspects of civic life” (Van Vuuren 96), the novel portrays the protagonist, Michael K, as a marginalized and ghostly figure in a war-torn country. Michael K was born colored, disfigured, fatherless, and poor. From birth, he is marked by a hare-lip: “The lip curled like a snail’s foot, the left nostril gape” (Coetzee, *MK* 3). His deformity leads to his speech impediment, slow wit, and social invisibility, and turns him into a victim of social mockery. Since he is unable to sufficiently communicate with others through words, he is usually objectified and dehumanized by the able-bodied people in his society. For instance, the medical officer expresses in his diary that Michael is an idiot (131), a stone (135), a stick insect (149), a clay man (161), and a wraith (154), which approached “as near to a state of life in death or death in life, whatever it was, as is humanly possible” (159). In these cases, the medical officer dehumanizes K. His use of the phrases such as “a wraith” and “a state of life in death or death in life” reveals Michael K’s status as a living ghost, who has been overlooked and suffers a degree of dispossession.

Michael K is perceived and perceives himself as ghostly for some other reasons, including his radical passivity in the cycles of the world, and his enigmatic and uncertain status between life and death. For instance, K is transformed into the ghostly other during his journey. Living in Cape Town during a civil war, K decides to take his sick mother in a wheelbarrow back to the farm where she grew up. Though his mother dies en route, K continues the journey and happens to settle on a deserted farm where he grows pumpkins and vegetables. Entering an unfamiliar and silent landscape from the violence of the civil war and living like a beast, K becomes identified with the ghostly. The narrator claims, "After the hardship of the mountains and the camp there was nothing but bone and muscle on his body. His clothes, tattered already, hung on him without shape ... His step was so light that he barely touched the earth. It seemed possible to fly; it seemed possible to be both body and spirit" (*MK* 101-2). The description conveys an image of a skeleton and reveals that the body of Michael K is spectralized. Later, he is caught and taken to an internment camp and soon escapes from the camp. He visits the farm again and lives like "a stranger or a ghost," in a burrow (120).

Michael K appears to the medical officer as a ghostly existence—a non-identifiable object, "the obscurest of the obscure" (*MK* 142) because of his uncertain status between life and death. The medical officer depicts one of his conversations with K and says: "He shook his head from side to side, then without warning opened the great dark pools of his eyes on me. There was something more I had wanted to say, but I could not speak. It seemed foolish to argue with someone who looked at you as if from beyond the grave" (149). The association of K with the dead or the ghostly figure appears repetitively through the medical officer's diary. For instance, the medical officer claims that Michael K has become "an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head. I walk bowed under the weight of you" (146). When K escapes the camp, the officer muses, "Michaels is gone ... The wire does not seem to have been cut; but Michaels is enough of a wraith to slip through anything" (154). In the final entry of his journal, the medical officer also relates K to "a gathering, a thickening of darkness" (165). These references to

the ghostly not only reflect K's ambivalent condition between life and death, presence and absence, the human and the non-human, but also reveal his haunting power to the medical officer.

In the book *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee*, which explores the ethic of hospitality—of how individuals respond responsibly to the stranger or the other in Coetzee's writing, Mike Marais claims that the medical officer's obsessive concern for K in his diary conveys a sense of responsibility that is not just a "yielding attitude to things," but "a substitution of oneself for the otherness" (Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible* 61-62). This kind of attitude "exacts a restructuring of subjectivity" and turns the self into "an ethical subject" that "acts not out of concerns for itself but for the other" (62). Based on Marais' argument, I will reflect on the question: In what ways does Michael K's peculiar ghostliness engage in impelling the subjects of both the medical officer and himself to act ethically? I will first examine how a condition of trance, which K experiences during his journey, endows him with irreducible ghostliness. And then I will further analyze how K acquires the ability to perform the work of a medium—the work of mobilizing the binary oppositions and inventing a new and ethical subject—through his ghostly alterity.

I contend that K is transformed into a ghost medium when he undergoes different processes of trance during the journey. I defined the notion of trance in my last chapter as a condition of unwillingly and simultaneously entering a foreign domain and becoming the other, as a mode of an irrational or extra-linguistic experience—an altered consciousness—that usually involves ugly feelings, illness, dreams, a marginal state, or degradation. When one undergoes such a condition, s/he usually becomes identified with the ghosts and is able to negotiate with his or her internal and external otherness.

When Michael K stays on the mountains, he falls into a condition of trance. His existence becomes sensory: sometimes he abandons himself to sickness, feeling himself "swooping through darkness" (MK 57); sometimes he spends a whole day in idleness, listening to "the great silence about him" (60). Besides, he stops making an adventure of eating and drinking and claims, "I

am becoming a different kind of man ... If I were cut ... the blood would no longer gush from me but seep, and after a little seeping dry and heal. I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day” (67). He also becomes identified with animals. He eats insects and roots, and lives in a cave, where he becomes “so much a creature of twilight and night that daylight hurts his eyes” (115). Like a nocturnal animal, he depends less on a sense of sight than of touch and smell. In addition, he loves idleness. Most of the time, he lives “beyond the reach of calendar and clock ... half awake, half asleep. Like a parasite dozing in the gut ... like a lizard under a stone” (116).

Undergoing the process of trance, K develops a mode of altered-consciousness—a condition of “yielding up of himself to time,” wanting nothing and looking forward to nothing, and such a state of radical passivity of K defines his peculiar ghostliness (*MK* 115). Marais has argued that a mode of altered-consciousness refers to “an anti-intentional mode of consciousness in which the self forgoes the control over the world of things” (Marais, “Negation” 110). He assumes that such a state is “akin to what Levinas refers to as the *il y a*, that is, the experience of consciousness without a subject, a totally impersonal, neutral situation in which Being is detached from beings which control it” (110).

It is worth noting that, in the same article, Marais suggests that the self constructs a subject by maintaining “the inscription of a dualism of inner self and external world which positions the subject as the centre around which other entities resolve as objects” (Marais, “Negation” 107). By comparing K’s first and second visits to the Karoo farm, he argues that K’s relationships with other entities “undergo a structural change: while they are initially portrayed as being informed by subject-centred consciousness, they are later shown to be the product of a consciousness that is divested of a controlling subjectivity” (107). He takes K’s occupation of the farmhouse during his first visit to the farm as “a complex symbol of settlement, ownership and mastery” and argues that K’s initial relationship with the land “is mediated, that he does not interact with the land in it-self, but rather construes it as a farm ... as controlled, commodified space” (109). In this case, K tries to maintain a dualism of inner

self and external world by producing the land as an object.

However, K's existence on the farm and mountains during his second visit is marked by the absence of subject-centred consciousness. For instance, he chooses not to stay in the farmhouse and takes up residence in a burrow at the dam where he "felt at home ... as he had never felt in the house" (*MK* 99). There K relates to the things around him sensuously:

His eyes remained unfocussed for hours on end like those of a blind person. He had learned to rely on smell too. He breathed into his lungs the clear sweet smell of water brought up from inside the earth. It intoxicated him, he could not have enough of it. Though he knew no names he could tell one bush from another by the smell of their leaves. He could smell rain-weather in the air. (*MK* 115)

In the above paragraph, K's sensory experience is not produced by mediating the things through his consciousness, but by identifying and interacting with them through the senses. Marais suggests that such an experience in the cave is marked by "the absence of language" that reveals K's inability to name and control the entities (Marais, "Negation" 111). Marais also cites Blanchot's analysis of Hegel's argument that "Adam's first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give animals names" (Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death" 323), and claims that the absence of naming reveals K's loss of control over things and his inability to construct a self-sufficient subject by maintaining the difference between his self and other entities. Thus, Michael K finds that he is unable to "be fully in possession of himself" (*MK* 119). He is unable to construct his subjectivity through language: "Always when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding bulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong" (*MK* 110). In other words, K's relocation from the farmhouse to the burrow not only spectralizes his body, but also transforms

him into a spectral medium whose lack of subject-centered consciousness “connotes an overcoming of the separation between human subject and nature object” (Marais, *Invisible* 39). By undermining this opposition, K is able to escape from the social world as it is constructed within the symbolic order and live outside history.

The narrator says, “He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the war and his passage to the farm slipped further and further into forgetfulness” (*MK* 60). In the silence of the farm and mountains, he tends to the earth, focusing only on the pleasure of gardening. Van Vuuren claims that “silence becomes his natural medium” (Van Vuuren 97). This medium allows him to live in the cycles of days and seasons, not being concerned about keeping a tally of days and recording the changes of the moon. It helps him escape from the war and history that take place in a constructed chronological time and within a linguistic frame. In this case, he gains a conceptual freedom: “He was not a prisoner or a castaway, his life by the dam was not a sentence that he had to serve out” (*MK* 115).

By identifying and interacting with the things through the medium of silence, Michael K questions the paternal laws constructed by language and further establishes a new and spiritual relationship with his dead mother. K had been constricted to the power of the father—the tyranny of language—since he was a child. He says:

[M]y father was Huis Norenius. My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was “There will be silence in dormitories at all times,” and the woodwork teacher with the missing fingers who twisted my ear when the line was not straight, and the Sunday mornings when we put on our khaki shirts and our khaki shorts and our black socks and our black shoes and marched two abreast to the church on Papegaai Street to be forgiven. They were my father, and my mother is buried and not yet risen. (*MK* 104)

Having been repressed by the rules of the father, Michael is constricted to the linguistic frame. Therefore, he is unable to establish a spiritual connection with his dead mother or with any otherworldly and extra-linguistic existence. For instance, upon his arrival at Prince Albert after his mother's death, K heard a mystical voice and tried to make out words. However, his efforts failed:

Is this the voice of Prince Albert? He wondered. I thought Prince Albert was dead. He tried to make out words, but though the voice pervaded the air like a mist or an aroma, the words, if there were words, if the voice were not simply lulling or chanting tones, were too faint or too smooth to hear. Then the voice ceased, giving way to a tiny faraway brass band. (49)

This voice comes back to him when he is ill. He is again unable to "make out a word ... of the monotone that after a while blended with the twitter of the birds in the trees and then gave way to music" (69). The examples of these mysterious moments show that K may only receive messages from the spiritual world when he is in an irrational condition in which he undergoes an anti-intentional mode of consciousness. However, as soon as he tries to decode the unfamiliar voice through language, he loses control over them.

By tending to the earth in silence, Michael K learns to reject his identification with the father—the list of rules that restrict his freedom:

He stood leaning against the frame of the pump, feeling the tremor that passed through it each time the piston reached the bottom of its stroke, hearing the great wheel above his head cut through the dark on its greased bearings. How fortunate that I have no children, he thought: how fortunate that I have no desire to father. I would not know what to do with a child out here in the heart of the country, who would need milk and clothes and friends and schooling. I would fail in my duties, I would be the worst of fathers ... That is why it is a good thing

that I, who have nothing to pass on, should be spending my time to pass on, should be spending my time here where I am out of the way. (MK 104-05)

In addition to his refusal to be a father, Michael K establishes a spiritual connection with his dead mother by growing pumpkins and mealies on the Karoo farm, where he buries his mother's ashes. Because of the fact that the ashes become part of the land and provide nourishment to the plants and vegetables, K's mother is associated with the maternal cord of the earth and the cycle of nature. Thus, as Michael K begins his life as "a cultivator" (59), he redefines his relationship with his mother and the realm of the dead:

He thought of his mother ... When my mother was dying in hospital, he thought, when she knew her end was coming, it was not me she looked to but someone who stood behind me: her mother or the ghost of her mother. To me she was a woman but to herself she was still as child calling to her mother to hold her hand and help her. And her own mother, in the secret life we do not see, was a child too. I come from a line of children without end. (116-17)

Considering himself coming from "a line of children without end," he establishes a closer relationship with mother earth, where life continues without end. He suggests: "[B]ecause enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once the cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children" (109). By re-identifying himself with "a gardener" (181), "an earthworm" or "a mole" (182), Michael K plays the role of medium, re-establishing a bond between the human and the earth. In sum, in the first part of the novel, which is centered on K's consciousness, Michael K undergoes different forms of trance to physically and mentally become a ghost

medium, who, through his association with the liminal state of a living ghost, can be perceived as a powerful point of excess mediating the worlds of the dead and the living, the realms of the spiritual and the empirical.

Later in the second part of the novel, by asserting his ghostliness after he is caught again and sent to the camp in Cape Town, Michael K exerts an effective force on the camp medical officer. Shifting from a third-person perspective focused on K's consciousness to the medical officer's first-person narration, this part of the novel comprises the medical officer's diary, which presents his obsessive concerns for K, especially for K's ghostliness that is expressed in his insubstantial existence and radical passivity.

I suggest that Michael K becomes an object of fascination to the medical officer due to his complex behaviors of self-spectralization, including his lack of interest in basic human needs, his lack of preoccupation with material possessions, his detachment from reality, his persistent silence, and his disappearance. For instance, he almost eats nothing as if, quoting the essay by a famous South African writer, translator and academic, Michiel Heyns, "his digestive system does reject certain kinds of food, but he can apparently survive without any food" (Heyns 30). In his analysis of an ethics of silence in the novel, Duncan McColl Chesney also assumes that Michael K's body is spectralized because it reveals "the indistinctiveness of the limit between human and nonhuman" (Chesney 311). In addition, when the authority interrogates Michael, he usually answers with a dense silence or "persistent *No*" (MK 164). He says to the police, who ask him where he is from, "I live nowhere" (120). When the medical officer tries to force him to tell his story and says, "Come on, Michael, we haven't got all day, there is a war on!" K at last replies to the medical officer: "I am not in the war" (138). As an agent of repressive authority, the medical officer attempts to know, name, and identify with K through language. He keeps asking K to talk, to give himself "some substance," but he is met by a dense silence and an intransigent non-communicativeness (140).

The significance of K's spectralized body and non-communicativeness lies in the representation of his inaccessible alterity to the authority or social

reality. According to David Attwell, Michael K is not “a historical being,” but serves as “an Archimedean point of reference outside of the dimensions of what is recognizably real” (Attwell 174). He functions like a Derridean trace that evades the interpretation of the authority, remaining “free of history’s referent” (Chapman 390). In addition, Marais argues that K, when described as “a gathering, a thickening of darkness,” is like the figure of Eurydice or the “darkest point” of the “other dark” that invokes a subject’s desire to bring it to the light—to render the invisible visible, but at the same time instills a restless dissatisfaction with his insufficiency of doing it (Marais, *Invisible* 54).³⁰ The more the medical officer desires to know his story, the more he exceeds the medical officer’s attempt at comprehension. Based on these arguments, I will conclude that Michael K is able to escape different forms of confinement and interpretation.

Another example of Michael K’s self-spectralization is his unexplained vanishing that turns him into “a wraith.” Peeren has argued that “literal disappearance” is “one of the most effective and horrifying modes of producing living ghosts in which the ‘living’ part is effectively crossed out” (Peeren, *Spectral Metaphors* 142-43). Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters* claims, “[a] disappearance is real only when it is apparitional because the ghost or the apparition is the principle form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there *make itself known or apparent* to us” (Gordon 63). Their elaboration of the connection between disappearance and the ghostly is productive when we apply it to the case of Michael K’s vanishing. When Michael K disappears from the camp, he, like a ghost, is caught in a liminal zone that is outside the progressive flow of temporality and off the map. His ghostliness is produced by his absent presence or his partaking of “Derrida’s visible in-visible”: “While they cannot be seen, they remain present” (Peeren,

³⁰ In his 1955 essay “Orpheus’ Gaze,” Maurice Blanchot reconstructs the Orpheus myth as an analogue of writing: Orpheus is an artist-figure, who desires Eurydice, the “darkest point” of the “other dark” (Blanchot, “Orpheus’ Gaze” 177). He also argues that “the work” of Orpheus is to encounter Eurydice in the “other dark” and brings him “to the light and, in the light, [gives] it form and reality” (177). For more details, see Blanchot’s essay entitled “Orpheus’ Gaze” (1955).

Spectral Metaphors 143). Since no one knows whether he is dead or alive, he can live on in a ghostly realm of indeterminacy and escapes the oppressive systems.

Embracing the status of the ghost through his non-identifiable presence, Michael K becomes an enigma that exerts a haunting force on the medical officer. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb “to haunt,” when pertaining to “imaginary or spiritual beings, ghosts etc.” as “to visit frequently and habitually with manifestations of their influence and presence, usually of a molesting kind.” In excess of Derrida’s emphasis on the ambivalent power of the *es spukt* or “it haunts,” Peeren further suggests that an effective form of haunting is found “within or through spectrality” because of “its blurring of the active-passive dichotomy”: “It promises an agency separate from acting out (*‘without doing anything’*) but still has a profound impact” (Peeren, *Spectral Metaphors* 20). Accordingly, Michael K’s status as a ghost that is produced by his passivity, his silence and lack of substance, can generate an effective form of agency. It can haunt and effectuate ethical actions of the medical officer.

For example, the medical officer’s failure to make sense of K’s alterity keeps concerning him. Thus, the medical officer indulges in his imagination and creates fanciful interpretations of the bare facts of K’s existence. In the camp, he sees K as “a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring its wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind that clownish mask” (*MK* 151). In this instance, Michael K provokes fascination through his inexplicable ghostliness.

After K escapes from the camp, the mystery of his disappearance forces the medical officer to experience an overwhelming sense of uncertainty. The medical officer can’t help questioning his concepts of war, time, and his subjectivity. He says: “[I]t came to me with great force that I was wasting my life, that I was wasting it by living from day to day in a state of waiting, that I have in effect given myself up as a prisoner to this war ... a castaway marooned in a pocket of time, the time of waiting, camp time, war-time” (*MK* 157-58). Furthermore, the medical officer allows himself to be possessed by K.

He imagines an encounter between himself and K in his diary. In this imaginary account, he becomes the disciple of K, hoping to follow K to the places that “belong to no camp” (162), and to “the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life,” that is “off every map, no road leads to it, and only you know the way” (166). He also pays respects to K and assigns him as “a great escape artist” and “an allegory ... of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (166). The medical officer is transformed from the representative of authority, who tries to confine Michael K to a single interpretation, into a subject who is involuntarily acted upon and possessed by K’s ghostly force. K’s unexplained disappearance undermines the medical officer’s apparent certainty about who is self and who is other and challenges his restricted and self-sufficient subject.

K’s ghostliness also impels the medical officer to develop a more caring and responsible attitude toward alterity. The medical officer not only takes care of Michael K, feeding him milk and caring for his physical conditions, but also develops an ethics of hospitality in which one responds to the stranger as a stranger or allows himself to be acted upon by the strangeness of the stranger. At the end of his diary, the medical officer self-reflexively speaks from within his consciousness of his loss of control over Michael K. He says:

[W]ould it be true that at this point you would begin to throw your most urgent energies into running, so that it would be clear to the meanest observer that you were running to escape the man shouting at your back, the man in blue who must seem to be persecutor, madman, bloodhound, policeman? Would it be surprising if the children ... after us ... were now to begin to take your part and harry me from all sides, darting at me, throwing sticks and stones, so that I would have to stop and beat them away while shouting my last words to you ... “Am I right?” I would shout. “Have I understood you? If I am right.

Hold up your right hand; if I am wrong, hold up your left!”
(MK 168)

The officer’s questions will never be answered. His imaginary account of the encounter not only signifies his failure in comprehending and dominating K through language, but can also be perceived as his unconditional hospitality toward K’s radical otherness. By reflecting on Durrant’s analysis of the work of mourning, Marais relates unconditional hospitality to the notion of infinite mourning, which is marked by an “encryptment” of the dead within the living, claiming that the medical officer’s diary “evinces precisely K’s encryptment in the medical officer’s consciousness” (Marais, *Invisible* 56).³¹ Based on Marais’ analysis, I suggest that the medical officer can be perceived as an ethical subject since he performs the work of infinite mourning upon Michael K through his writing of the diary. By depicting his failure in following K in his imaginary account of the encounter, he brings K’s absent-presence to light without confining K to any interpretation. His diary not only reveals his loss of control over K, but also confirms K’s absolute alterity, as “an absent entity; an entity without an address” (55). It is “a lament” for his loss of K, “the loss of what was never present,” as well as “a record of his care, of his sense of responsibility for him” (62).

Due to his status as a living ghost or as the irreducible presence of a vulnerable other, Michael K plays the role of medium, who possesses the abilities to endow new forms of subjectivity and conceptualize new modes of thinking beyond boundaries. In the final section of the novel, which is narrated from K’s perspective again, Michael K recreates his identity by developing an

³¹ Through his elaboration of Derrida’s notion of the work of mourning that has been distinguished as healthy mourning—“the assimilation or integration of loss into consciousness”—and unhealthy, inconsolable or infinite mourning, which “is marked by the failure to integrate loss into consciousness,” Durrant suggests infinite mourning goes together with an “encryptment” of the dead within the living: “the dead remain secretly entombed within—internal to be sealed off from—the consciousness of the living, and they also remain enigmatic, coded, untranslated” (31). For more discussion, see Samuel Durrant’s work *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison*.

awareness of the balance between oppositional realms. Occupying a space peripheral to the South Africa after his escape from the camp, he re-identifies his relation to the land and imagines “the farm” as a promised land: “He thought of the farm, the grey thornbushes, the rocky soil, the ring of hills, the mountains pink and purple in the distance, the great still blue empty sky, the earthy grey and brown beneath the sun save here and there, where if you looked carefully you suddenly saw a tip of vivid green, pumpkin leaf or carrot-bush” (*MK* 183). In his imagination, he creates a heaven in his soul and withdraws himself from the unrest of social reality. He becomes “a gardener” who knows how to live in harmony with the earth. Thus, he supposes that he might meet someone who disregards the curfew and comes to join him in the work of gardening. The narrator says:

And if the old man climbed out of the cart and stretched himself ... and looked at where the pump had been that the soldiers had blown up so that nothing should be left standing, and complained, saying, “What are we going to do about water?” he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (183-84)

By delineating a harmonious way in which Michael K mediates between the human and the earth, the last paragraph of the novel is allegorically promising. The images that had previously been ascribed to the self and the other, the center and the margin, the abled and the disabled, have been undermined. By embracing the status of ghost through his passivity and self-spectralization, Michael K is able to escape the oppressive society and recreate a hope for the future. In other words, his ability to act or impact like a medium is not

necessarily derived from his full material presence, but can be found in his ghostliness or in his association with the ghostly. By refusing to be defined within a linguistic frame, by being neither present nor absent, the ghostly metaphor effectuates a restructuring of subjectivity or invention of an ethical subject like the medical officer, who acts out of concern for the non-identifiable others instead of himself.

Conclusion

What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always, persecuted perhaps by the very chase we are leading? (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 10)

In the era of globalization, ghosts are haunting us. They not only talk to us, but also speak of us. We are faced more and more with the ethical question of how exactly to live with and as ghosts. By looking at the various representations of the ghostly in postcolonial and minority literary works, this thesis has contributed to the discussion on the ethical and narrative potential of the ghostly for finding new ways to re-position ourselves or re-create our identities in a world overwhelmed by ghosts.

Though ghosts are usually identified in terms of class, gender, age, religion, and ethnicity in a dispossessing sense, their undecidable nature keeps reshaping their meaning to activate more empowering associations of them. The representations examined in this dissertation do not just portray the way certain groups, places, or entities are made sense of through reference to the ghostly, but serve themselves to challenge or shift the way in which the metaphor of ghost operates discursively and socially. Due to its irreducible otherness and indeterminacy, the ghost persistently slips through definitions and imbues authoritative discourses with foreign and ambiguous elements. It is perceived as a mode of becoming as well as a concept of an ambivalent relationship between hybrid condition between death and life, absence and presence, the human and the non-human. In addition, many ghostly figures in

narratives function to effectuate the ethical response of the haunted subject. The subject that tries to construct or maintain the difference between self and other is forced to question his or her certainty of binary opposition, and imagine a new way of relating to different forms of otherness, under the influence or haunting of ghosts. In other words, ghosts have power to trigger new modes of knowing and produce ethical subjects. They are mediums themselves. Though the question of what kind of ethical impact a ghost medium can have in the social realm remains unclear, the process of engaging with the narrative potential of the ghostly in postcolonial literature might provide us more productive ways of specifying and coping with different oppressive norms and exploitation, and of establishing a new ethics of ghosts, which is reconsidered as the ethics of how to live with and survive as ghosts.

