A very modern ghost: postcolonialism and the politics of enchantment

Cheryl McEwan

Department of Geography

University of Durham

Science Site

South Road

Durham, UK

DH1 3LE

Fax: 01661 3341801

cheryl.mcewan@durham.ac.uk

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Abstract

Ghosts, spectres and spirits and the stories told about them have long been a source of intellectual inquiry; they appear to be everywhere in scholarly discourse yet are largely absent from many recent debates about enchantment and modernity. This paper speculates on what happens to cultural politics when enchanted modernities are seen to encompass ghosts and ghost stories and considers the political possibilities of specifically modern enchantments that have the power to enchant and disenchant simultaneously. The paper first examines the ways in which understandings of both enchantment and modernity have changed over time and, in particular, the impact of postcolonial theory on reconceptualising the relationship between the two. It then uses a ghost story encountered in fieldwork in South Africa to illustrate how the figures of ghosts and spirits can cast light on the lived experiences of postcolonial modernities. The paper contends that while ghost stories do not necessarily fit with more optimistic politics of enchantment, in the South African context they can represent active political engagement and produce positive political effect, rather than simply disenchanting those modernities that produce them. The paper concludes that an alternative approach is required to navigate between an overly cynical politics that works to disenchant the world and more optimistic accounts that focus on the ethical possibilities of enchantment. This necessitates a close reading of how modernities are enchanted in particular places and to what political effect.

Introduction

Ghosts, spectres and spirits and the stories told about them have long been a source of intellectual inquiry[1]. As Gordon (1997) argues, ghosts are one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there, makes itself known or apparent. While ghost stories are inventions, often about things that never happened, or metaphors for otherwise inexplicable presences, feelings or events, their meaning, power and the passion with which they are told or withheld are significant (White, 1993; see also Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999). Moreover, ghosts and ghost stories are deeply embedded in the cultural politics of postcolonial modernities. From attempts to re-conceptualise freedom and postcolonial nationality through the figure of the spectre (Cheah, 2004), to explorations of the role of sorcery in democracy in Indonesia (Bubandt, 2006), accounts of industrial ghosts in factual and fictional accounts of Malaysian components factories (Ong, 1987; Chua, 1998), invocations of spectres in studies of overseas Filipino migration (Rafael, 1997) and stories of ghosts and spirit possessions from Papua New Guinea to India (for example, Wardlow, 2002; Uchiyamada, 1999) ghosts, it seems, are everywhere in scholarly discourse. It is striking, therefore, that spectres, spirits and the stories told about them appear largely absent from many recent debates about enchantment and modernity (*cf.* Pile, 2005).

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[1] The list is endless, but for examples in anthropology see Klenk, 2004; Taussig, 1980; Weller, 1994; West, 2001; in sociology/psychology: Gordon, 1997; in feminism: Daly, 1978; Thomas 1991; in cultural history: Marcus, 1999; in geography: Pile, 2005.

The scholarly apparatus of metropolitan cultural politics has increasingly turned towards the question of enchantment. Poststructuralism and postcolonialism, in particular, have brought dominant, western understandings of modernity into question and, in turn, have reinvigorated interest in the idea of enchantment. Enchantment is both ambiguous and ambivalent and rarely is it defined with any great precision, one reason being that it is a complex and inherently vague term, the meaning and discursive use of which has changed over time. Despite this, 're-enchantment' has recently become a political end in itself, not simply within celebrations of non-rationalism, but in terms of a more profound dialogue between Western social theory and "Other" knowledges (Zaidi, 2006), in fostering an ethical engagement with the world (Bennett, 2001) and as a means of building a new politics of solidarity (Amin, 2006). Characterizing modernity as disenchanted is seen as both discouraging affective attachment to the world and restricting how the world is understood and imagined. As Chakrabarty (2000: 89) argues, "The moment we think of the world as disenchanted… we set limits to the ways the past [and present] can be narrated". Enchantment is thus perceived as a basis for an optimistic cultural politics.

This optimism tends to rely on the largely positive workings of enchantment, on charm, awe, wonder and a child-like excitement about life. However, enchantment encompasses a much wider range of emotions and affects; as Bennett herself argues, enchantment can also be a state of fear and the sense of wonder associated with it may arise from a "more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition" (2001: 5). Similarly, Schneider (1993: 2-3) suggests,

We become enchanted… when we are confronted by circumstances or

occurrences so peculiar and so beyond our present understanding as to leave us

convinced that, *were* they to be understood, our image of how the world operates

would be radically transformed.

To be enchanted, then, is not always to be delighted or charmed, but to be faced with

something both real and simultaneously weird, mysterious, awesome and perhaps even

dreadful. Enchantment can be a state in which ghosts, spirits and spectres exist within a

mélange of other marvels, including magic, myth, monsters, witchcraft, sorcery, voodoo,

vampires and zombies (Saler, 2006). Such marvels are no longer thought to have been

exorcised by the rational and secular processes of modernity; far from being extraneous

to modernity, they are intrinsic to what are increasingly recognised as thoroughly

enchanted modernities. Against this backdrop, this paper speculates on what happens to

cultural politics when enchanted modernities are seen to encompass these darker

marvels. Through a focus on ghosts and ghost stories, it considers the political

possibilities of specifically modern enchantments that have the power to enchant and

disenchant simultaneously – to inspire awe, fear or dread but not necessarily to delude.

The paper begins by examining the ways in which understandings of both

enchantment and modernity have changed over time and, in particular, the impact of

postcolonial theory on reconceptualising the relationship between the two. It suggests

that while postcolonialism has played a fundamental role in dismantling western-centric

notions of modernity as disenchanted and, in turn, has influenced the recent shift within

cultural politics towards enchantment, this shift remains problematically western-centric

in focus and ignores the particularities of enchanted modernities in non-metropolitan

contexts. In contrast, by drawing on fieldwork in South Africa, I illustrate how the figures of ghosts and spirits can cast light on the lived experiences of postcolonial modernities. The conditions of postcoloniality in South Africa, characterised by rapid social, political and cultural change alongside increasing 'modernisation', neo-liberalisation and globalisation, have produced very particular forms of enchantment (including ghosts and other spectral presences) that are also deeply politicised responses to change.[2] The paper contends that while ghost stories do not necessarily fit with more optimistic politics of enchantment, in the South African context they can represent active political engagement and produce positive political effect, rather than simply disenchanting those modernities that produce them.

This contention is illustrated by a ghost story encountered in Cape Town, the meanings of which I attempt to unravel by drawing on current debates in political theory and anthropology. Through this example, I suggest that the prevalence of ghosts and the stories told about them cannot be understood entirely through recourse to the

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[2] There is, of course, scope for exploring the presence of ghosts and other spirits in contexts where they are also prominent. However, in other postcolonial contexts ghosts are often a product of history and mythology (e.g. Arana, 2001 on Peru), or part of popular folklore and spirit belief (e.g. Skeat, 1902 and Chou, 2002 on Malaysia), or an inherent part of syncretic cultures with origins in traditional spiritualism (e.g. Haitian or Louisianan voodoo; see Pile, 2005). However, this paper is concerned with ghosts that have appeared recently in South Africa and that appear to be the product of very specific modernities.

disenchanted/disenchanting politics of modernity that scholars such as Bennett so fervently reject. Nor, however, do recent accounts of the political and ethical possibilities of re-enchantment account for the burgeoning rise in the occult within postcolonial modernities. Rather, an alternative approach is required, one that necessitates a close reading of how modernities are enchanted in particular places and to what political effect.

The politics of enchanted modernities

The meaning of enchantment is both fluid and ambiguous. It has been used since medieval times, for example, to signify both delight in wonders and the possibility of being deluded by them. From the Enlightenment enchantment was defined more narrowly by elites as a form of duplicity associated with religious dogma and monarchical rule (Saler, 2006). More recent accounts in political theory define enchantment primarily as aesthetic experience: "to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar...," "a state of wonder... a surprising encounter..." (Bennett, 2001: 4-5). Similarly, modernity is also a deeply ambiguous term but one characteristic that has been remarkably consistent since the eighteenth century is the idea of it being 'disenchanted'. Modernity and enchantment have been perceived to be dichotomous in much of western theory. Rationalization and bureaucratization were seen as intrinsic to modernity and inimical to magical attitudes toward human existence that had characterized medieval and early modern thought. The advent of modernity insinuates the disenchantment of the world: "the progressive control of nature through scientific procedures of technology, and the inexorable demystification of enchantments

through powerful techniques of reason" (Dube, 2002: 729).[3] Of course, enchantments did not disappear but were marginalised as subordinate and residual phenomena, associated with "'primitives', women, children and the lower classes" (Saler, 2006: paragraph 11).

In contrast to Weberian approaches that view processes of modernity as disenchanted, dialectical approaches depict these processes as creating their own enchantments in the negative sense; the telos of progress is itself seen as a monumental enchantment of modernity. Marx's recourse to metaphors and similes of enchantment (spectres, ghosts, fetishes) is the most obvious example (Derrida, 1994), as is Nietzsche's equation of western faith in reason and science with irrational belief that culminates in nihilism (Nietzsche, 1956). These enchantments extend from:

> the immaculately imagined origins and ends of modernity, to the dense magic of money and markets, to novel mythologies of nation and empire, to hierarchical oppositions between myth and history, ritual and rationality, East and West, and tradition and modernity (Dube, 2002: 729).

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[3] Weber (1992) most famously epitomised the griots of disenchantment, depicting history as having departed from an enchanted past en route to a disenchanted future. His gloomy image of the 'iron cage' of reason echoed the fears of earlier romantics and was repeated by cultural pessimists throughout the twentieth century.

In dialectical approaches, the rational and secular claims of western modernity are globalizing, oppressive and deluding enchantments.[4]

Whilst much of western theory has followed either Weberian notions of the disjuncture between enchantment and modernity or Marxian notions of their dialectical relationship, this "'either/or' logic" has increasingly been rejected, primarily because modernity is recognised as defined less by hierarchical binaries or dialectical transformation than it is by contradictions and oppositions (Saler, 2006: paragraph 18). Modernity is now understood as Janus-faced with enchantment always already intrinsic to it. Studies have demonstrated, for example, that enchantment and occultism were constitutive of elements of modern Victorian British culture, whilst the 'modern' was implicit in the gestures and presumptions of the occult. New forms of occult spirituality and expressions of enchantment were particular articulations of "the diverse and often ambiguous processes through which cultural modernity was constituted" (Owen, 2004: 16; see also Marcus, 2001; Saler, 2003). Technology, as a kind of creativity recognised as invention, is a form of enchantment with the power to cast spells over people (Gell, 1999: 163).[5] Moreover, technologies of enchantment create enchanted spaces through

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[4] Arguably the most influential articulation of the dialectical approach to modernity and enchantment was Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947; repr. 2000).

[5] As Harrison (2006) argues, Gell's discussion of captivation is influenced in part by Benjamin's writings on technology and distraction in *The Arcades Project*, his discussion of the intoxication felt by the flâneur walking the streets of nineteenth-century

the ascription of a special quality to the inventiveness of human agency (Strathern, 2001). Contemporary cities – archetypical sites of modernity – are simultaneously modern and magical. As Pile (2005: 59) argues, while magic implies a superstitious or primitive world-view, "magic itself consistently emerges from modern city life, as people seek ways to improve their conditions and influence their futures". Far from being eviscerated in spaces of modernity, enchantment circulates through them, through "the ways that magic condenses and displaces 'things'" and through "the networks of affect, meaning and power that radiate from magical practices" (*ibid.*). Enchantment brings with it a "sense of other-worldliness, of the hidden networks that constitute modernity… of occult relations of modern…life," which are powerful even as they are intangible (*ibid.* 60). Rather than "slipping away with the resolute march of modernity", enchantment is "everywhere on the rise" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1998: 295).

That the contemporary modern world cannot be experienced as enchanted is now thoroughly challenged and, in contrast to the alleged predominance of reason in the modern world there is "a greater acceptance of the imagination as a source of multiple yet finite meanings that enchant in their own way" (Saler, 2006: paragraph 50). Reconceptualising the relationship between modernity and enchantment has become significant not only in terms of cultural politics but also because it appears closer to the lived experience of their subjects. As Saler (*ibid.*: paragraph 21) contends:

Paris, and the enchantment of the collector who is simultaneously lost and renewed while gazing at the collected object. See also Pinney and Thomas (2001).

There are forms of enchantment compatible with, and even dependent upon, those tenets of modernity usually seen as disenchanting the world, such as rationality and self-reflexivity… [A] specifically modern enchantment might be defined as one that enchants and disenchants simultaneously: one that delights but does not delude.

These meanings are experienced with ironic detachment and this acceptance of "contingent meanings" and "provisional wonders" (*ibid.*: paragraph 50) increases the possible sources of enchantment, including fictions and mass culture. Bennett (2001) takes these arguments a step further, seeking the rehabilitation of enchantment for political purposes.

In a challenge to Leftist counterstories of modernity that Bennett argues disenchant the world, she weaves together accounts of "a contemporary world sprinkled with natural and cultural sites that have the power to 'enchant'" (*ibid.*: 3), telling stories of "the marvellous erupting amid the everyday" (*ibid.*: 8). She suggests that although revealing injustice, inequity and violence, counterstories too often erase the possibilities of a joyful attachment to the world and produce "an enervating cynicism" (2001: 13). In contrast, Bennett's primary concern is to tell a different counterstory that encourages an ethical engagement with the world. She thus shares with Gibson-Graham (1996) a concern with the ways in which cultural narratives that are deployed to describe the world in turn shape that world, but seeks to develop this in a much more optimistic light (see also Thrift, 2005). Thus, she celebrates the enchanted materialism of even mass-produced commodities as adding significance to human existence, in contrast to the fetishisation of commodities rendering labour invisible and negating meaning from

humanity. Bennett is sensitive to the dangers of aestheticisation in constructing an affective ethics (*ibid.*: 10) but perceives the greater danger in viewing commodities in such a way that erases their embodied, historical, somatic, sonorous, emotive and intellectual engagements. She attempts to create a counterstory that, while acknowledging a world of inequity, poverty and violence, draws attention to "magical sites" (*ibid.*: 8) that are also present in the world, offering small but essential elements in generating an affective force that might be used to propel a spirit of ethical generosity.

This rethinking of the relationship between modernity and enchantment has undoubtedly been influenced by postmodern and, in particular, postcolonial scholarship. Depictions of modernity as disenchanted have been viewed within postcolonial perspectives as ideological, "a useful conceptual tool for Western colonial purposes that obscured the tensions and contradictions within the modern world" (Saler 2006, paragraph 18). As Chakrabarty (2002: 36) argues:

> The Buddhist imagination once saw the possibility of the joyful, renunciate *bhikshu* (monk) in the miserable deprived image of the *bhikshuk* (beggar). We have not yet learned to see the spectral doubles in our Marxism-inspired images of the subaltern.

For Chakrabarty (2000: 243), modernity is a "problem of entangled times" where past, present and future are drawn together in profoundly complex relations. The universal distinctions at the heart of the modernity/enchantment dichotomy (in particular, between modernity and tradition, secularism and superstition) are based on linear notions of time and progress and, therefore, often have little relevance when viewed from outside

western cultures where processes of modernity are negotiated in complex ways.[6] It is in the spaces of entangled times, of transformation and uncertainty, that ghosts and spectres appear, producing quite different but no less political enchantments to those envisaged by Bennett. Ghosts and hauntings are present in the interstices of social forces and lived experience; ghost stories, both oral and written, proliferate at times of social upheaval, where ghosts symbolise the fracturing of time and a disquieting present.

It is perhaps for these reasons that ghost stories and other unsettling enchantment narratives are ubiquitous. From millennial anxieties and fascination with cyborgs, to fears of cloning, genetic mutation and invasion by aliens, the world is replete with stories of "not-quite-human transactions in the corporeal" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1998: 281). Ghosts also flourish in rapidly modernising societies, in fiction and in popular imaginations, and often as critiques of modernity.[7] In such contexts, ghosts are not simply relics of a past being rapidly eroded but are themselves products of modernity;

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[6] The literature in postcolonial studies on this topic is expansive but see, for example, Chakrabarty, 2000, Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993, Coronil, 1997, Dube, 2002, Ferguson, 1999, Geschiere, 1999, Joshi, 2001, Moore and Sanders, 2001, Ramaswamy, 2004.

[7] Juan Ruflo's (1994) *Pedro Páramo*, for example, revealed the disquieting presence of a dying but not quite dead traditional Mexico in the 1950s, where ghosts symbolised a lingering reality no longer present but not yet past. Similarly, Marcus (1999) demonstrates how ghost stories represented the ambivalence of middle-class Londoners towards urbanisation in the 1850s, particularly fears concerning overcrowding.

they are not simply symbolic of a haunting loss, but products of complex engagements with rapidly changing circumstances. None of this is particularly novel, of course, but what is often missing from current debates is an understanding that the cultural politics of enchantment differ over time and space. On the one hand, postcolonialism has posed significant challenges to western-centric understandings of modernity, yet on the other hand, the fact that non-metropolitan modernities might be enchanted in quite different ways is in danger of being overlooked, at least within some aspects of current metropolitan theorising. The politics of enchantment as they are currently articulated do not necessarily reflect the lived experiences of enchanted modernities in non-metropolitan, postcolonial contexts. As the example recounted below illustrates, ghost stories articulate different kinds of enchantment, but ones that might make visible economic and social injustices, reveal postcolonial power relations and have the potential to invert them. Their political possibilities may or may not be transformative (Pile, 2005) but they are revealing of the multiple ways in which modernities are enchanted and enchanting and might offer a different kind of ethical engagement with the world.

The haunting of Rashida:[8]ghostly presences in apartment 603

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[8] Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of those involved. These events took place between January and April 2001. The conversations were in English and were recorded in writing immediately afterwards; extracts are reproduced from fieldnotes. When Rashida (and later Thuli) began to tell me these stories, I asked their permission to

I met Rashida while conducting research in Cape Town, South Africa. For six months in 2001, I rented an apartment in a 6-storey hotel block in Sea Point, to the west of the city centre. When I first lived there, the landlady employed a young woman in her early thirties to clean the apartment. Rashida travelled to work from the Mitchell's Plain area of the Cape Flats, a daily round journey of around forty miles, which involves negotiating various forms of public transport including a bus-ride into Cape Town and a mini-bus taxi to Sea Point. On occasion I would be home when Rashida called and we developed an amicable relationship. I helped with her various chores so that she could spare time for a drink, in which time we also exchanged stories about our respective lives or events in Cape Town.

18th January

I ask Rashida if she enjoys her job. She says it is okay, but it does not make her happy because she has to work long hours. Susan [the landlady] allegedly says that she does not clean things properly, especially if Rashida finishes too early. Rashida says she has too many apartments to clean. I ask her if she thinks Susan is unreasonable. Rashida says yes and "she is rude". Susan makes her clean other apartments in Sea Point without prior notice; she does not receive additional payment for this. Rashida says she is always late getting home. I ask if she has a long way to go. She says yes, to Mitchell's Plain. The buses are slow and the

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make notes about our conversations with the possibility that these might be reproduced in publications. Both women gave consent and were indifferent about anonymity, but this is protected nonetheless.

mini-bus taxis are dangerous. Rashida says she has been robbed; the taxis are run by gangs. I ask her if there is any way she can work closer to home, but she answers that there are no jobs. Work is hard to find. She cannot afford to leave this job. Besides, she works such long hours and has to take care of her two children [she is a single mother], so she does not have any time to look.

23rd February

Rashida asks me if I have heard about the white girl who was stabbed in the street outside. I tell her that I have; I heard it was drugs-related and he was after money, but it is not common round here from what I hear. Rashida pauses and then says, "There is evil in this place." I say, "What, in Sea Point?" Rashida shakes her head, points at the floor and, reverting to Afrikaans, whispers insistently, "Gees. Hier. [Ghost. Here.]" I laugh: "Yeah, they keep me awake some nights". Rashida does not respond and changes the subject.

5th April

I ask Rashida if she can stay for a cup of coffee. She says no, she should carry on next door. Then she says, "Things are getting bad." I ask her what she means: "with work?" Rashida responds, "Dangerous". I ask in what way. She says, "If I tell you" and pauses; "it's a secret. But she has been bewitching me." I am confused and ask "Who?" Rashida answers "Susan. She doesn't like me. She is making ghosts follow me so that I will become sick if I don't work hard enough. Things happen; bad things."

At this point, I was unsure how to react. I had encountered spirit beliefs amongst Xhosa-speaking peoples in the Western Cape, but had never heard such stories from

people who self-identified as 'Coloured', as Rashida did. I struggled to make sense of what Rashida was saying but she refused to elaborate, insisting again in whispers that her employer had bewitched her and that there were ghosts in the apartments that spied on her.

Two days later, I found an enormous cockroach – a common pest in the Cape – perched on the bathroom wall. I was in rush to leave for work and left it, believing that Rashida would deal with it. Rashida apparently did arrive as usual while I was out, but I never saw her again. Susan told me that Rashida had seen the cockroach and claimed it as proof that she was bewitched and being "spied on by ghosts". That the apartment block was periodically infested mattered nothing. Rashida was adamant that she was being haunted, and left without finishing her shift. Susan dismissed this as "silly, crazy, black superstition" and "just an excuse to leave without working notice". Rashida's replacement was Thuli, who had worked for Susan for over two years.

11th April

I ask Thuli if she knows why Rashida left. Thuli says no. I ask her if she knows that Rashida said there were ghosts here and that she was haunted. Thuli answers matter-of-factly, "Oh, there are ghosts. It's true. Some people are cruel." I ask what she means. Thuli shrugs and says, "I heard that some people keep maids by magic. It keeps us working. And it is dangerous to complain or leave then." I ask who does this. Thuli says, "Rich people. They use *muthi* [medicine] too." "And ghosts?" I ask. Thuli nods and says, "All bad things." I ask why Rashida was haunted. Thuli says she does not know; "The ghosts are frightening to make people stay and the *muthi* makes you sick. I shouldn't talk about this. It is a bad

thing." I ask if she knows where Rashida is now; she says she thinks she is in Muizenberg [much closer to Rashida's home in Mitchell's Plain]. I ask if she has a new job. Thuli says she thinks so. I ask if Rashida is still haunted. Thuli smiles and says "Probably not".

Placing Rashida's ghosts

In order to be fully appreciated, Rashida's ghosts need to be located in the wider explanatory context of South African modernity and, in particular, the dramatic increase in similar occult phenomena from the 1990s that has coincided with enormous political and economic changes. Many postcolonial and post-liberation societies appear to have witnessed a dramatic rise in occult economies and the deployment of magical means for material ends (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1998). In South Africa, these include a wide range of phenomena: a proliferation of ghosts, hauntings and spirit possession, 'ritual murder', the sale of body parts, the emergence of living ghosts or zombies, pyramid schemes and other financial scams. According to Comaroff and Comaroff, at the heart of this is a narrative in which rich and powerful people use monstrous means to further their own interests by appropriating resources, labour or even the lives of less powerful people (*ibid.*: 279).

South Africa is experiencing rapid social transformation; anthropologists and social historians have demonstrated that at such times people often seek recourse to the occult, both as a mode of explanation for their rapidly changing lives and sometimes as a means of resistance (*cf.* West, 2001). Thus, new forms of enchantment coincide with modernity precisely because its conditions "yield an ambiguous mix of possibility and

powerlessness, of desire and despair, of mass joblessness and hunger amidst the accumulation, by some, of great amounts of new wealth" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1998: 283). This provides the context for a dramatic increase in occult-related violence, particularly in relation to witchcraft and spirit possession in the period of post-apartheid transition in the 1990s and, more recently, the alleged proliferation of zombies and ghosts. Much of this violence was concentrated in the most impoverished provinces, Limpopo and Eastern Cape, where the death toll has been in the thousands (Kohnert, 2003).[9] A variety of ghosts have emerged as a response to rapid, inequitable and disturbing economic change particularly amongst those who feel increasingly powerless and whose autonomy and selfhood are increasingly being eroded. However, although the occult continues to wax behind the apparently civil surfaces of postcolonial South African modernities, this is not the only context for the ghosts in apartment 603.

One of the unanswered questions about Rashida's ghosts is their origin; while stories of ghosts and other occult phenomena have increased in recent years in South Africa, they are more often associated with impoverished rural communities than with urban Afrikaans-speaking areas. One can only speculate on why Rashida told these stories and what significance particular events had, since I never met her again. However, it transpired in previous conversations that Rashida's origins are in the 'Cape

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[9] The problem was so acute that in 1995 a commission of inquiry was established into witchcraft violence and ritual murders and a national conference held to discuss the issue (Ralushai, 1996; CGE, 1999).

Malay' community[10] (first formed by the arrival of slaves brought by the Dutch East Indies Company from its territories in what is now Indonesia). Perhaps because of the fractures wrought by slavery, dislocation and colonialism, the Muslim religion is often more salient today than a sense of 'Malay' ancestry and many non-Muslims self-identify as 'Coloured' (using the old apartheid terminology) or as 'black' for political reasons. However, despite this fracturing, aspects of 'Malay' culture have survived, particularly in Cape cuisine and the presence of Malay words in the Afrikaans language. Aspects of 'Malay' spiritual beliefs also continue to resonate, with evidence of acceptance of various syncretic elements in daily Islamic belief systems and social and religious customs.[11] There are striking similarities between the nature of Rashida's ghosts and how they haunted her and prevailing spirit beliefs in Malaysia and Indonesia. The cockroach, for example, resembles the *pelesit*, a vampiric Malaysian spirit that is believed to take on the form of a house cricket and is 'sent' by a malevolent to facilitate

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[10] Ethnicity is obviously politically loaded and deeply contentious in South Africa. The 'Cape Malay' identity is perhaps better thought of as the product of a set of histories and communities rather than an ethnic group per se (see Adhikari, 2005; Erasmus, 2003).

[11] Paulsen (2005) suggests that birth, grave worshipping and other 'Malay' ceremonies syncretise pre-Islamic local tribal customs and aspects of Hinduism that have been diffused since slavery; 'Malay' South Africans visit *dukums* (spiritual doctors) and retain superstitions that Safar (the second Islamic month) is filled with fear, ill-fortune and bad luck. Some Cape Town residents I spoke to about this remember occasional incidences of witchcraft amongst Coloured neighbours (Shari Daya, pers.comm.).

attacks by another kind of spirit known as a *polong* (Skeat, 1902; Chen, 1970).[12] The *pelesit* functions much like a 'spy', echoing Rashida's claims about her ghosts, but it can also cause harm (madness, illness, death) to the person it is intended for. Rashida apparently claimed that the cockroach was evidence of Susan's malevolence; whether she believed it to be a *pelesit* or not, the fact that she invoked this as a manifestation of ghostly presences is itself of significance.

While Rashida's invocation of ghosts and hauntings might be considered unusual, when set against the broader context of contemporary South Africa and the specific postcolonial cultural context of Cape Town it perhaps begins to make sense. As Gelder and Jacobs (1998: 42) argue:

> Ghosts simply could not function in a climate of sameness, in a country which fantasises about itself as 'one nation' or which imagines a utopian future of 'reconciliation' in which… all the ghosts have been laid to rest. But neither can they function in a climate of nothing but difference, where the one can never resemble the other, as in a 'divided' nation.

In South Africa sameness and difference collide in complex ways, creating a structure in which "sameness and difference embrace and refuse each other simultaneously" (*ibid*). Ghosts continue to flourish in this structure and in the range of practices that intervene between imagination and politics:

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[12] This similarity transpired in conversation with my colleague Hamzah Muzaini, to whom I am grateful for sharing insights into Malaysian spiritual beliefs.

[T]he spirits change to reflect the new situation rather than the precolonial spirit

world. They are as dynamic and as everchanging as the network of social

relations that encompasses the believers, and their meaning mediates those

changes…. (Taussig, 1980: 230)

The ghosts that haunt Rashida are thus a product of the complexities of very specific

postcolonial modernities.

Ghosts, postcoloniality and work

Stories of ghosts in places of work are not uncommon, especially in the postcolonial

world.[13] The prevalence of the occult has been explained as a particular feature of

contemporary postcolonial economies:

On the one hand is a perception, authenticated by glimpses of the vast wealth that

passes through most postcolonial societies and into the hands of a few of their

citizens: that the mysterious mechanisms of the market hold the key to hitherto

unimaginable riches; to capital amassed by the ever more rapid, often immaterial

flow of value across time and space, and into the intersecting sites where the

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[13] Malaysia, in particular, is well documented in this regard, especially the ghosts

associated with components factories in the Free Trade Zone against the context of dire

working conditions and the intense social scrutiny placed on women workers in the

1980s (Buang, 1993; Ong, 1987; Spivak, 1988; *cf.* Lim, 1997). The ambiguous and

ambivalent positions of women workers and the anxiety they both generated and felt

emanated in *hantu* (spirits and ghosts) and associated outbreaks of mass hysteria.

local meets the global. On the other hand is the dawning sense of chill

desperation attendant on being left out of the promise of prosperity, of the telos

of liberation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1998: 284).

This argument echoes dialectical accounts of the enchantments of modernity found in

other anthropological studies (see, for example, Coronil, 1997; Moore and Sanders,

2001; Ong, 1987; Taussig, 1980). In South Africa, rapid political and social

transformation has not been matched by a transformation in economic circumstances for

the vast majority of people. This is an important context for Rashida's story. While she

is not employed as a black servant in a white household (the notorious 'maid-madam'

dynamic of oppression under apartheid (Cock 1989) that persists in contemporary South

Africa[14]) she is employed by an individual to clean privately owned properties. She has

no union protection and has little control over her conditions of work; she told me she

earns R8 per hour (at the time little over 50 pence or $1). Her claims about her employer

and the powers that she is able to wield thus allude to the dynamics outlined by

Comaroff and Comaroff, but I also want to suggest that there is something possibly more

playful and strategic about Rashida's ghosts. As White (1993, 28) argues, we "must

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[14] A Human Right Committee of South Africa report (HRC, 2000) outlines the state of

domestic workers, suggesting that the informal status of domestic work perpetuates

extreme exploitation and allows non-implementation of rights-based legislation. South

Africa's Basic Conditions of Employment Act, Chapter Four: Particulars of Employment

and Remuneration (1998) excluded domestic workers

(http://www.workinfo.com/free/Sub_for_legres/data/bcea1998.htm#CHAPTER4).

ask… what things that never happened meant to the people for whom they were real –
people who… claimed these things happened to them".

Rashida's claims of haunting appropriate narratives of spirit-belief and
witchcraft, wherein the malevolent is a white woman and she is a disempowered worker
whose labour is controlled by someone else. This kind of story resonates in
contemporary South Africa. The apparent fear of ghosts and their interweavings with
white economic power coincide with a broader discourse about local entrepreneurs
turning their workers into zombies – living ghosts who are never seen but who
perpetually haunt vulnerable workers who seem to have no choice but to sell their labour
cheaply. Zombie workers are part of an increasingly popular discourse that represents the
toil of living ghosts as pure surplus value, "all the charms of something created out of
nothing" (Marx, 1976: 325). In both Rashida and Thuli's conversation, there are subtle
references to not only ghosts but broader fears: "Things happen; bad things;" "some
people keep maids by magic. It keeps us working." The precise nature of these fears is
not fully articulated but they seem to reflect their anxieties of being disempowered,
relatively vulnerable workers, which are also central to zombie discourses.

The fear of ghost workers in South Africa exists alongside another spectre: "a
growing mass, a shadowy alien-nation, of immigrant black workers from elsewhere on
the continent" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999: 21). It is perhaps unsurprising that older
people of apparent affluence are seen as malevolents and ghosts and zombies are thought
to multiply as waged work becomes scarce among the young and the unskilled and
immigrant labour has significantly increased:

Not only does the rise of a phantom proletariat consume the life force of others, it also destroys the labour market, conventional patterns of social reproduction, and the legitimate prospects of 'the community' at large (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1998: 294).

Zombies and ghosts capture a postcolonial moment creating "a seismic mutation in the ontological *experience* of work, self-hood, gender, community and place" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002: 798). While not discourses about modernity, Rashida's (and Thuli's) allusions to ghosts and hauntings can be understood within the frame of contemporary socio-economic and political concerns; like broader popular discourses of other occult-related phenomena such as witchcraft, they also contain elements of a critique of white domination.[15] In addition, it is perhaps not coincidental that a great deal of female in-migration is absorbed into domestic service (Schultz and Mwabu, 1998); Rashida's expressed fear of ghosts could be thought of as an articulation of a collective dread that relates specifically to her vulnerable position as a cleaner. However, the fact that I was Rashida's primary audience also needs to be considered when trying to decipher this story and what it might mean.

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[15] Niehaus (2001: 184-5), for example, demonstrates how the symbolic meanings of *tokolotši* (ape-like witch-familiars), *mamlambo* (snake-like witch-familiars) and zombies are intimately related to people's dependence on money, migration and wage-labour and are interwoven with stories of white witches, the dangerous technologies of *makgoweng* (places of the whites) and of witches with the attributes of whites.

To interpret Rashida's story as only a metaphor of perceived oppression and exploitation would be to oversimplify since, like other orally transmitted information, it was told at a specific time to a specific person for specific reasons (White 1993, 29). Rashida and I were almost strangers and had not had a long period of time in which to develop cordiality into friendship. The terms of our relationship were profoundly unequal: I was a resident and she was responsible for cleaning the apartment I was renting. However, the terms of disclosure were determined by Rashida. The ghosts in apartment 603 are "a secret" according to her; similarly, Thuli felt unable to discuss them and abruptly ended our discussion. Again, one can only speculate on the nature of and the reasons for this partial disclosure, and on why Rashida chose to tell me these 'secret' stories. However, Rashida was obviously keen to impress upon me her account of conditions of work, perhaps to play on the rather obvious discomfiture I felt at the fact that she was employed to clean my apartment.

There may have been a material motive in this, since part of my dealing with this discomfiture was to give Rashida a generous tip. Of course, Rashida may have been having fun at my expense, perhaps in collusion with co-workers like Thuli, playing on the fact that there are experiences and stories of experiences in South Africa that I can neither know nor understand – those aspects of life there to which access, as Spivak argues, is denied me by my relative privilege (see Landry and MacLean 1996, 4-5). However, it was clear from my conversations with both Thuli and Susan that Rashida had also shared this story with them and Susan had certainly heard it on more than one occasion. Whether or not she believed in them, it seems that the ghosts that haunted Rashida provided a tactic for articulating her feelings about her conditions of work. Her

story enchants and disenchants simultaneously, delighting through its potential mischief but not deluding, and revealing much about Rashida's experiences of working in Cape Town. Moreover, one might read such ghost stories as symbolic reworking of resistance or as a tactic of trangression.

Enchantment tales as tacit resistance or tactics of transgression

South African domestic workers like Rashida appear to have little choice but to sell their labour cheaply,[16] but they still have some agency that also carries political potency. For Rashida, the lack of availability of conventional means of resisting poor working conditions is countered by representing her working life in language and imagery that explains what she perceives to be unjust and iniquitous. Rashida's ghosts symbolize her relative lack of power and control over her working conditions but she invokes them as a means to leave her job and find employment that better suits her daily life. She is able to quit without giving notice for work much closer to home, negating the need to commute and ensuring more time with her children. Thuli's knowing smile at the end of our conversation suggests that she too may have interpreted Rashida's action as a form of "quiet cultural subversion" (Weller, 1994: 3). As Spivak (2000: 42) argues:

> (Women's) resistance of this sort is … the name of the move by which the
>
> collectivity of the chorus in Attic comedy moves up, again and again, to interrupt

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[16] Post-apartheid South African labour legislation is extremely progressive, but domestic service is often less formalised and not covered (Schultz and Mwabu, 1998), characterised by low returns and little security (Casale and Posel, 2002).

the seemingly coherent dramatic *praxis*… to inform the public of a structurally

different interpretation of the 'same' action.

The question remains, however, as to how effective this resistance might be. Rashida's actions are a form of tacit rather than explicit resistance, "embedded in everyday life instead of strongly institutionalized as a new state" (Weller, 1994: 4). Indeed, one could argue that it is a "kind of play with the system" (*ibid.*) rather than resistance. While some, such as Taussig (1980), have proclaimed the significance of such tacit resistance, others claim just as strongly that powerful hegemonic structures undercut it, rendering it superficial or illusory.

Rashida's ghost story belongs to the kinds of resistance that Scott (1985, 29; see also Alinksy, 1971; Scott, 1990) refers to as "ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups", performing similar functions to "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage…" This is implicit resistance where active class struggle is largely absent. Rashida's subversions are, perhaps, safe resistances because they are partly unspoken, relying on the unknowable and working through metaphor and irony rather than resisting directly. Some would argue that this kind of counter-hegemony and subversion is futile, changing nothing and leaving social hierarchies and economic conditions unchanged.[17] However, despite wariness towards

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[17] See the debate between Bakhtin (1984) and Eco (1984), for example. In a business context, Hirschman (1970) argues that 'exit' (like Rashida's decision to leave her job) often undercuts voice while being unable to resist, while loyalty is seen as retarding exit and permitting voice to play its proper role in generating change from within.

what Abu-Lughod (1990) terms the "romance of resistance", it is important to analyse acts of resistance in their own terms, rather than trying to identify singular meaning. This enables the replacement of abstract theories of power and hegemony with subjectivities that are capable of contingent and flexible modes of resistance (Pile and Keith, 1997), allowing questioning about the relations of power at play in different contexts. As Pile (1997: 2) argues, "geographies of resistance do not necessarily (or even ever) mirror geographies of domination". Rashida's story illustrates that resistance is a means through which the effects of different power relations are revealed and then countered, lived through or changed. Resistant political subjectivities are constituted through positions taken up not only in relation to authority but also through experiences not easily labelled 'power', "such as desire and anger, capacity and ability, happiness and fear, dreaming and forgetting" (*ibid.*, 3).

It may be that Rashida's ghost story and her subsequent actions have more meaning than they know or intend (Bourdieu, 1977: 79). However, in the contexts in which they are invoked, her ghosts clearly have some political effect in that they are transgressive, if only at an individual level. Moreover, they constitute what Scott (1990: 19) refers to as "infrapolitics", which are low-profile forms of resistance by subordinate groups, including rumour, gossip, and folk-tales. Infrapolitics is a form of political expression and cultural struggle adopted by those who have reason to fear expressing their unguarded opinion. The meaning of Rashida's story is not straightforward and, like other 'infrapolitical' texts may well be meant to communicate one thing to those in the know and another to outsiders and authorities (*ibid.*: 184). It is a strategic form of resistance that makes no public claims and is designed to obscure Rashida's intentions. It

thus differs from open political action but is still "real politics" (*ibid.*: 200); Rashida's ghostly tales of oblique aggression eventually led to a more direct form of action and is thus an example of how infrapolitics presses and probes the boundaries of the permissible to bring about resistance and minor change.

Rashida's story is not a straightforward disenchanting story of exploitation, in which the symbolic systems that secure the conditions of domestic service in South Africa – the language of capital – are represented by the ferocious imagery of ghosts, "the imagistic field on which the worker's physical and psychological conflicts play out" (Medley and Carroll, 2004: 161). Rashida may well be haunted by the ghost of exploitation that feeds off her labour. She may see and believe in this exploitation. However, by telling ghost stories she is also struggling to assert her presence as a subject, as other than an object of capital labouring under conditions over which she has little control and for profits to which she has no access. There is both mischief and assertion of agency in her story and its effects and, ultimately, an outcome that her early conversations with me reveal to be favourable in terms of improving her conditions of work. Her tale represents a symbolic reworking of the space of apartment 603 (Bunnell *et al.*, 2006). The means to interpret Rashida's ghosts are thus available not only in familiar western language and disenchanting stories of exploitation but also in the symbolic systems of cultures that have emerged from colonial into postcolonial and post-apartheid organization (Medley and Carroll 2004). Rashida instigates exorcism by struggling to assert her subjectship as a means of resisting and even transgressing relationships of power that might work to transform it into subjection. The symbolism of spirits and ghosts speaks not of an ideology of class struggle in the classic sense of

resistance but of a demand to be treated as a human being (Ong 1987: 220). Rashida's

ghosts, then, have some modest, but for her no doubt significant, transformative effects.

Social and economic inequalities borne out of colonialism and apartheid continue to

haunt South African modernities and to some extent are manifested in the ghosts that

Rashida invokes. These ghosts are social figures that speak of the inequities that Rashida

experiences but is perhaps unable to articulate (Gordon, 1997). Her story thus performs

double work: it is "simultaneously [a] personal and social drama" (Pile, 2005: 163). It is

perhaps ironic that the liberties of post-independence have allowed ghost stories and

other popular preoccupations with the occult to proliferate. One reading of this is a

straightforward dialectical account of the enchantments of modernity and their

manifestations in South Africa - as the desire to access the secret of invisible means of

accumulating wealth and a concern to stem the spread of a "macabre, visceral economy

founded on the violence of extraction and abstraction" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1998:

293). That the majority of people are poor is not new, but in post-apartheid and

postcolonial contexts they are kept poor by what might appear to be the mystical

machinations of the few. As in the past when workers have been exploited, ghosts and

spirits continue to symbolize exploitation. In South Africa, exploitation is blamed on the

macabre powers of white people and, while employment has dwindled before, it is now

blamed on the creation of a virtual (migrant) labour force from ghosts and zombies.

However, Rashida's story can also be read as not only revealing lived experiences of

postcoloniality, but as a counterstory offering up forms of resistance to inequitable

economic and social relations. It might well be a form of tacit resistance, a means of

articulating disquiet about poor working conditions, or as a means to an end in terms of being part of Rashida's exit strategy from her current job. However we read it, it provides valuable insights into the relationship between modernity and enchantment in the South African context.

Conclusions

Ghost stories raise questions about the broader politics of enchantment, specifically about what appear to be missing elements from recent, optimistic cultural politics in which enchantment delights but does not delude. First, if we accept fear and dread, as well as pleasure and wonderment, as fundamental aspects of enchanted modernities, we might also consider how enchantment is often articulated around fear and born of unfulfilled wishes and unresolved anxieties. This is a less optimistic view than Bennett's, for example, but no less politically charged. It relates to attempts to "make wishes come true (or anxieties go away) by using its understanding of the occult world to intervene in the world" (Pile, 2005: 168). Rashida's ghost story is more about anxiety and fear than charm and joy and represents a quite different counterstory of enchantment. Second, (re-)enchantment as a political and ethical project perhaps has a different purchase in advanced economic contexts than in postcolonial contexts where modernity and enchantment are interwoven in profoundly different ways. It would be difficult to translate Bennett's notion of enchantment as joyful attachment into a context where ghosts, zombies and other manifestations of the occult are more prevalent articulations of enchantment. However, Bennett's concern that critical politics should not be disenchanting is also of significance in South Africa, where abandonment of hope and

optimism would pose serious threats to post-apartheid transformation. There are clear political reasons for more optimistic notions of enchantment in a world where, as Devetak (2005) argues, current leaders evoke gothic scenes of ghosts and monsters in tenebrous atmospheres designed to generate fear and anxiety, where terrorists and rogue states are dark, perverse, ineffable and potently violent and cruel forces that haunt and terrorise the civilised world. However, as Rashida's ghost story illustrates, the darker marvels of enchanted modernities cannot be discounted, not least because they are of significance to people's daily lives and offer opportunities for agency and transgression.

This paper is an account of a single ghost story encountered in the course of fieldwork, readings of which are always partial and contingent. However, it demonstrates that ghost stories as counterstories also play a role in one of the key projects of postcolonialism, that of 'recovery'. As Gandhi (1998: 8) notes:

> If [postcolonial theory's] scholarly task inheres in the carefully researched retrieval of historical detail, it has an equally compelling political obligation to assist the subjects of postcoloniality to live with the gaps and fissures of their condition, and thereby to learn to proceed with self-understanding.

Not only does the symbolism of ghosts have the potential to reveal the inhumanity of working conditions but it is also a means for those who tell ghost stories to (re)assert their subjectship. In Rashida's case, this forms the basis for (albeit tacit) forms of

resistance and allows her to take action to improve her daily life.[18] Ghost stories can be thus inherently political and potentially transformative.

Finally, the paper illustrates ways in which enchantment returns continuously to unsettle the secular, skeptical, modern world (Gelder, 2000) and is suggestive of how an alternative perspective might be to be traced between an overly cynical politics that works to disenchant the world and more optimistic accounts of the ethical possibilities of enchantment. It suggests that the critical and politicised tales we tell need not be disenchanted; it is possible to reveal injustices in the world while simultaneously revealing that world as thoroughly enchanted and enchanting, haunted and haunting. Ghost stories thrive, in particular, in times of upheaval and transformation, reflecting both the profound anxieties that accompany socio-economic, cultural and/or political change and ways of coping or resisting some of the effects of these changes. They are products of very specific conditions and experiences, of individual and collective imaginations that are framed within and constituted by broader socio-cultural and economic contexts. They interject the missing, the spectres that are otherwise obscured in dominant discourses of modernity (Medley and Carroll, 2004). In encompassing emotional, psychological and cultural aspect of people's lives, they open up the possibility of more ambivalent yet critical readings of modernity.

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[18] See also, for example, Ong's (1987) discussion of Malaysian women workers' strategy in the 1980s of claiming their factories were haunted in order to take otherwise prohibited industrial action.

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