

## Notes from the Editor: Postcolonial Hauntings

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In his story “Seawall Sightings” the Chinese-Canadian writer Paul Yee recounts ghostly sightings on Vancouver’s seawall walkway: on a rainy evening a bicyclist inadvertently splashes a young Chinese couple, but when he wheels around to apologize, the couple has vanished; a retired businessman stops at a park bench where he watches an elegantly dressed Chinese couple walking arm in arm—she in an evening gown, he in a dark suit. As he gets up to continue his stroll, he realizes the couple has disappeared. What are the stories behind these strange apparitions? Why does the couple haunt the liminal space where land meets water?

Like those in many contemporary cities, Vancouver’s waterfront has in the past few decades been extensively redeveloped. The former industrial areas bordering on Burrard Inlet and Coal Harbour have been extensively transformed and now the waterfront is lined with expensive housing, elegant shops and pedestrian walkways. This remaking of the urban landscape is also a remaking of history, an effacing and burying of older habitations and streets, together with the memories of those who traversed them and the stories they hold. Yee retrieves these displaced histories in the story of two East Asian immigrants to Vancouver at the beginning of the twentieth century. Choi Jee-yun is the daughter of a wealthy Hong Kong businessman; her father is progressive enough to allow his daughter to be educated, but traditional enough to object to the poor young man, Yen Wah-lung, with whom she falls in love. The two young people decide to flee to Canada to begin a new life together. Wah-lung moves to Vancouver first, hoping to become established in Vancouver before Jee-yun joins him, but their dreams are frustrated by the Canadian government’s ban on Chinese immigration in 1923. Devastated by their enforced separation, Jee-yun attempts to enter Canada illegally; she is caught and imprisoned in the notorious “Pig Pen,” an immigration holding building whose barred windows and forbidding walls occupied the same space that is now redeveloped and

gentrified. When both Jee-yun and Wah-lung are deported, the ship carrying them is caught in a storm and sinks. The ghostly couple who appear on the Seawall, therefore, are fleeting signs of lives destroyed by racist immigration laws, haunting figures of the blockage of hopes for new beginnings.

Why is the couple seen dressed in elegant eveningwear, clothing they never wore in Vancouver? Yee situates this image in a comment Wah-lung makes to his beloved. He writes to her that he will find an apartment filled with sunlight, and when they are together again, “I will put on a new suit and you will slip into a long elegant gown and we will attend a symphony concert together” (53). The image of handsome clothing and attendance at an evening event is not so much a lost memory as an unfulfilled desire that existed only as a utopian glimpse of what their new lives might be. In this sense, Yee’s fiction constructs more than lost histories: it gestures towards the longings—many of which would never be actualized—that brought East Asian immigrants to the Canadian west coast.

“Hauntings” and “hauntology” have become familiar terms to literary and cultural theorizing since the publication of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* in 1994. In that influential book Derrida explores the inheritance of Marx and Marxism, especially for the historical moment following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the apparent triumph of western democracies and market economies. He mobilizes “the specter haunting Europe” [the specter of revolution] from the first sentence of Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* alongside one of the most well-known literary apparitions, the ghost of old King Hamlet on the ramparts of Elsinore castle in the opening scene of Shakespeare’s play, in order to represent the hauntings of history, the ways in which the past continues to interrogate the present. Just as King Hamlet provokes his son into seeing his death differently, as murder and usurpation, so an awareness of the spectres of history challenges the present to rethink its relationship with the past, to enter into a dialogue with what has been suppressed, discarded, marginalized or forgotten. The intellectual of the future who “loves justice” (*Specters* 176), Derrida suggests, must be open to dialogue with the ghosts of the past.

This issue of *ARIEL* explores a number of diverse postcolonial hauntings: situated readings that swirl around Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*; systemic racisms, so different from individuals' points of view, that are narrated in a Conrad novella; the resistances of a nineteenth-century Brahmin woman whose conversion to Christianity is reconstructed by others; traces of lost geographies that circulate in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*; persistent questions of women's inheritance and property rights in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Like Paul Yee's Vancouver story, these articles raise important questions for the discussion of colonial and postcolonial hauntings.

### **Works Cited**

- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Yee, Paul. *Dead Man's Gold and Other Stories*. Illus. Harvey Chan. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 2002.