

# INTRODUCTION

This reader stems from the accumulation of four years of research, beginning as a critical theoretical project, which then morphed into an exhibition, and now sits somewhere between (and yet is in excess of) the two. Whether realised in its written or gallery-bound formats, *Living with Ghosts* explores the ways the unresolved traumas of Africa's colonial past and its incomplete project of decolonisation continue to haunt the global present. Critical to this overarching project is its interrogation of the primal, yet strangely excised, position of Africa and its diasporas in the matrix of modernity, with particular consideration given to the spatial, temporal, psychological, and spiritual a/effects of such historical and ongoing processes of spectralisation on both postcolonial Africa and the wider world. Largely informed by the groundbreaking work of thinkers working in postcolonial and decolonial intellectual traditions, from Achille Mbembe and Sylvia Wynter to Walter D. Mignolo and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Living with Ghosts* takes seriously the claim that the world-historical ruptures kickstarted by modernity in the 15th century cannot be thought apart from the consonant violences of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and the transhistorically adaptive logics of Euro-centred power these violences birthed, known as "coloniality."<sup>1</sup> And equally, that coloniality cannot be thought apart from a subjugated, though resilient, field of otherwise possibility that has *always* refused and resisted coloniality's impositions, known as "decoloniality."<sup>2</sup>

What this reader aims to foreground is precisely how this modernity-coloniality-decoloniality paradigm, when refracted through the historical experiences and contemporary realities of the African postcolony – the central staging ground of modernity's *unending* drama – engenders a thoroughly disjunctive space-time that in turn reveals a spectral constellation of multiple, interpenetrating, absent-present spatialities and temporalities. This is to say that in purposely centring the geographically dispersed, geologically expropriated, and epistemologically phantomised entity that is Africa, one arrives at the non-presentness of an (accumulated) present and the non-hereness of an (entangled) here, in other words, a stubborn, uncanny, extra-ontological condition of ghostly (non-)being that Jacques Derrida aptly terms a "hauntology."<sup>3</sup>

*Living with Ghosts* critically attends to these ghosts, spirits, and phantoms that abound in the modern calamities of Africa's historical becoming from the 15th century to the present day, what some have referred to as modernity's colonial *longue durée*. As Derrida argues, ghosts, or what he calls *specters*, are both dead and alive, visible and invisible, material and immaterial, past and present, future and past. By virtue of their disorienting, "non-sensuous sensuous" manifestations, specters refuse and exceed the fixities and certainties imposed by post-Enlightenment orders of knowledge and thus inhabit an unassimilable realm of unknowability that transgresses the historically determined boundaries of Western ontology and epistemology. Most importantly, Derrida proposes that without this acknowledgement of

1 • Such logics, also known as the "colonial matrices of power," work on varying levels of abstraction, from the conceptual planes of ontology, epistemology, and aesthetics – the presumed legitimacy and neutrality of Eurocentric conceptions of space, time, beauty, spirituality, and the human – to the more concrete registers of political economy – the hegemony of capitalistic modes of production, the nation-state model, and Western-style "democracy." See Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, and Praxis*, 2018, and Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling The Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards The Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation - An Argument," *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2003, 257-337.

2 • Ibid.

3 • Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge), 1994, 10.



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the specter's radical foreignness, without a negation of our habituated desires to disavow, bury, or exorcise the haunting visions the specter conveys, we cannot arrive at the possibility of global justice.

It then follows that spectral encounters bear a transformative capacity to produce hitherto unforeseen ethical and political possibilities. This is because to be haunted by the specter is to be urgently reminded of repressed individual and collective traumas, and of one's *relation* to that trauma; it is to be impregnated with a desire to excavate dormant freedom dreams that lay buried in the wreckages of history; it is to be made uncannily aware of the disorienting entanglement of past, present, and future, and of the mutual entwinement of *here* and *there*. In other words, via the irreducibly affective encounter that is a haunting, specters *move* us to act; by instantiating an alternative politics of memory, they prevent us from falling into the blinded comforts of historical amnesia while also urging us to attend to the unfulfilled emancipatory tasks left behind by those who came before us.

Yet, modifying and extending Derrida's arguments, along with many other thinkers of the "spectral turn," – an amorphous body of thought that emerged in the 1990s with its primary locus of enunciation in Europe and the United States\*4 – this reader (re)centers African history, politics, and critical thought. An epistemological reorientation of this sort is long overdue and entirely necessary for it does not merely "supplement" hauntology discourses with an Africanist or Third Worldist flavour but exposes the inherent conceptual gaps and oversights, the racialised and colonial occlusions and exclusions, that is, *the ghosts*, that haunt these Euro-centred critical theoretical discourses. Via the trenchant critiques offered throughout this reader, one ought to come to the realisation that the aforementioned demand for "global" justice impelled by the specter is by definition meaningless or less it expresses an explicit alignment with what most concerns us here, the demand for *decolonial justice*.

#### NOTES ON CURATORIAL METHODOLOGY

As the contents of this reader elegantly demonstrate, the conceptual explorations set out in this introduction evidence a decolonial orientation to history, aesthetics, and the production of knowledge, and so cannot rely on conventional models of curatorial practice which, conditioned by post-Enlightenment logics of disciplinarity and its epistemological corollaries, problematically attempt to separate aesthetics from politics, the sensuous from the discursive, the artwork from the lecture, and the visual artist from the writer or speaker.

This second iteration of *Living with Ghosts* at Pace Gallery, London, as with the first iteration at the Wallach Art Gallery, New York, refuses such categorical delimitations by expanding "the exhibition" beyond the confines of the gallery space.\*5 The curatorial framework instead views text-based materials (such as this reader) and presentational or performative lectures as *equally constitutive* segments of the exhibition that exist *alongside* the selected artworks. In blurring the distinctions and/or creating more horizontal relationships between artwork and text/lecture, artist and writer/lecturer, lecture and performance, this

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project (of which the reader is one segment) views exhibitions, not merely as abstracted sites for aesthetic "appreciation" but as politically situated venues ripe for the production, transmission, and reception of socially transformative knowledges. Evidenced from its convening of a thinking multitude, *Living with Ghosts* emphasises the grander, ongoing project of decoloniality and the pragmatic necessity of horizontal, interdisciplinary collaboration between writers, curators, artists, poets, academics, activists, designers, scientists, policy-makers, and so on, in bringing about a more just, decolonial future.

Hence, this reader is not "about" the artworks on display in the galleries – even though many of the artworks are illustrated in the following pages – but is intended to function as an independent pedagogical resource for scholars and an interested public curious about the publication's explorations through the conceptual junctures of African post/de-coloniality and hauntology. This reader constitutes one among two other overlapping "acts" within the fragmented spatio-temporal unfolding of *Living with Ghosts* – these other acts include the gallery-bound display of artworks and the lecture series. Because the reader will outlast the other timebound acts, it is to be considered as the residual *afterlife* of *Living with Ghosts*. Further, just as the specter notably evades a metaphysics of the singular, this exhibition, and the reader especially, attempts a textual *performance* of the specter's disjunctive modalities of (dis)appearance through a collaging of excerpts, texts, and conversations by contributors who are dead and alive, who hail from various regions of the world, and who express differing though complimentary theoretical and political commitments and sensibilities.

4 • See María Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (eds.), *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, (London and New York: Bloomsbury), 2013.

5 • The first iteration of *Living with Ghosts* took place at the Wallach Art Gallery, New York, March 26 - April 10, 2022.

Comprising three overlapping acts, including an intimate gallery display, an art-film screening programme, and a live virtual lecture series, the exhibition gathered several artists and thinkers, including John Akomfrah, Kader Attia, Zarina Bhimji, Filipa César, T.J. Demos, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Onyeka Igwe, Bouchra Khalili, Serubiri Moses, Abraham Oghobase, and Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa.

## CONTENT OVERVIEW

The reader begins with a conceptual diptych: textual excerpts from both Achille Mbembe and Jacques Derrida. Both philosophers' meditations on time, space, history, memory, and justice, have deeply influenced the tone and direction of *Living with Ghosts*. Between Mbembe's pioneering theorisations on the African postcolony as inhabiting a unique "time of entanglement," a non-linear temporality in which "different forms of absence become mixed together" to Derrida's strikingly resonant proposition that intergenerational justice – especially if we are to consider those that have been, are, and will continue to be subjugated by the colonial matrices of power – necessarily hinges on a disjunctive relation to time, on the "non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present," we arrive at a seemingly self-evident collision between the paradigms of the postcolonial and the hauntological.

From this thematic juncture, we move on to a series of visual and textual sources that forthrightly address the ghosts of mid-20th century African decolonisation movements. Included here is the epilogue from C.L.R. James' much lauded work, *A History of Pan-African Revolt*, 1969, where James provides a detailed historical account of the ongoing struggles for liberation in various parts of the African continent and in its American and Caribbean diasporas, between 1939 and 1969. Taking note of the dashed hopes of this revolutionary epoch, crystallised by the swift collapse of several newly independent African states into military dictatorships, James, like many others gathered in this reader, argues that "The states which the African nationalist leaders inherited were not in any sense African" and further that "the newly independent African state was little more than the old imperialist state only now administered and controlled by black nationalists."

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni launches a similar critique in his essay, arguing, with analytic precision, that newly independent African states only managed to achieve a juridical form of freedom, which ought to be distinguished from the more radical, liberatory implications of decolonisation. Decolonisation, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni and various other decolonial thinkers understand it, connotes a thorough delinking from the epistemological architectonics of colonial modernity, which includes the nation-state model as well as capitalistic modes of production. The shortcomings of these mid-century anti-colonial movements, that is, their failure to deliver on the insurrectionist promise of a new world order, leads Ndlovu-Gatsheni to adopt rather hauntological language. He describes decolonisation as an incomplete project, as a "terrain of illusions of liberation and myths of freedom." Paired with James' historical writings, which situate Africans' struggles for liberation in an extended time frame that predates the mid-20th century, beginning with the Haitian Revolution in the 18th century (not to mention the numerous slave revolts that occurred on the continent and in the Americas two centuries further back), it becomes clear that the ghostly terrain of loss, disillusionment, delayed arrival, and arrested possibility that Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes is *immanent* to the condition of modernity and is what inflects the African postcolonial condition with an irreducibly hauntological character.

My essay on John Akomfrah and Black Audio Film Collective as well as my conversation with Bouchra Khalili centres on the indisputably

vital role of aesthetics in articulating and mediating the ghostly historical space-time of the postcolonial realm. Both Akomfrah's and Khalili's art practices often trace, with poetic and formalist verve, the seemingly bygone revolutionary histories outlined above, of African anti-colonial nationalist movements and Third World internationalist networks that lasted from the 1950s to the 1970s. Here, I theorise how both artists' works produce a poetics of the spectral, what Derrida terms a "spectropoetics." These texts make a case for the unique capacity of lens-based media, specifically moving images, to conjure specters and therefore haunt viewers. In both pieces, I pay considerable attention to the formal methods deployed by these artists' works, taking note of the political, historical, and philosophical implications of their formal innovations, whether that be in the use of montage, colour filtration, sound scores, archival fragments, or written/vocalised texts. What must be clarified here (and this also applies to the selection of artworks in the gallery-bound act) is that Akomfrah and Khalili's artworks do not illustrate or merely reflect upon the conceptual structures elucidated by this reader but in fact materialise, modify, and complicate these very structures. It also goes without saying that I would not have come to many of the theoretical junctures elaborated earlier had it not been for the affective power of some of these aesthetically intelligent artworks, which, once more, work *alongside* and *not for* the adjacent critical texts.

Oscillating between the autobiographical and the historical, Emmanuel Iduma's anecdotal passages continue with a reflection on spectral aesthetics by way of responding, in an unmistakably literary register, to some of the images used in Abraham Oghobase's *Constructed Realities*, 2022. Oghobase's photo-conceptual work overlays translucent colonial archival images depicting British colonial officials and colonised Nigerian subjects with one-page text excerpts from *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical West Africa*, penned in 1922 by Lord Frederick Lugard, Nigeria's first governor-general. Lugard's colonial rhetoric starkly reveals the anxiety-ridden ideologies and discourses that were required for the establishment of British-administered colonial states in Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Covering numerous branches of the colonial state apparatus, from hut taxation to education to, rather ironically, "the evils and extenuations of slavery," viewers of these archival texts are left haunted by the bureaucratic aesthetics of colonial governance, by the colonial state's exploitative and expropriative practices of labour and natural resource extraction, by its unaccountable and illegitimate modes of necropolitical rule, and by its dubious creation of racial and civilizational difference – all logics that, as James and Ndlovu-Gatsheni lucidly demonstrate, were inherited by the supposedly "postcolonial" African state at the dawn of independence, and which in turn perpetuate the African postcolony's neo-colonial servitude in a 21st century context of rapacious global financial capitalism.

Walter D. Mignolo's essay on the work of Sylvia Wynter (and in turn, Wynter's theorising on the "Jamesian poiesis," after the work of C.L.R. James) forcefully grapples with the aforementioned colonial logics. Both Mignolo and Wynter are primarily concerned with the nearly imperceptible structures of power – what Mignolo calls the "colonial matrices of power" and what Wynter calls the "coloniality of

being” – which not only determine the hierarchical ordering of global economies and nation-states in favour of Euro-American interests, but on a deeper symbolic and psychological level, dictate what even counts as “knowledge” and who gets to be human. Following Wynter, who meticulously argues that the most damaging legacy of colonial modernity has been the invention of “Man,” – a white, straight, male, property-owning onto-epistemological category that “overrepresents” itself as if it were the only way to be human – it appears that we can only arrive at a decolonial future through, as Frantz Fanon similarly posed, the creation of a new human, one whose ontological sustenance and self-coherence does not depend on the ontological abjection of racialised/colonised Others and the more-than-human world.<sup>6</sup>

If indeed, coloniality, at its basis, comprises a transhistorical matrix of intersecting hierarchies and heterarchies of power that operate on the abstract, quasi-immaterial plane of ontology and epistemology, but which, in turn, produce uncannily concrete material *a/effects* in the world, then we can conceive of coloniality as a ghost, as a spectral entity that belongs to the “past” but continually lingers in and haunts the present. In the excerpted sections from a recent interview with Avery F. Gordon, she theorises ghosts and hauntings along similar lines, taking heed of hauntology’s more psychic registers. In the interview, Gordon describes haunting as “a way we’re notified that what’s been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, interfering with us and with the systems of repression that produce concealment and blockage.” Thinking back to Derrida, who relates the spectral encounter with the potential realisation of justice, Gordon similarly proposes that confronting ghosts impels an active sense of “something to be done.” Interestingly, Gordon’s framing of hauntings, as catalytic yet melancholic events, complicates conventional psychoanalytic understandings of trauma by making us view trauma not as a pathological state of paralysis or compulsive repetition but as an originary hauntological site that spurs perpetual action and therefore engenders a potential (decolonial) futurity.

Returning to Mignolo and Wynter, they both argue that in order to think beyond the neo-colonial present and bring a transformed decolonial world into being, one must, on the one hand, engage in a rigorous deconstructive process that aims to identify and disaggregate coloniality’s logics, and on the other hand, partake in a reconstructive project that critically re-centres and re-animates alternative modes of knowing and being that have been discredited, erased, and subjugated by colonial modernity’s homogenising scientific rationalism. As Adjoa Armah’s contribution makes evident, these alternative onto-epistemologies, many of which include African indigenous systems of thought, exist *in the present* as resilient non/counter-modern zones, which we ought to take seriously. Regarding “hauntology,” which as pointed out earlier is largely derived from Euro-American intellectual genealogies (which are littered with all kinds of colonial phantasms), Armah offers a decolonial understanding of the concept via her meditations on the charged photographic negatives she collects on the coasts of Ghana. Armah expands on the “-graphy” of photography, using the suffix as a “descriptive science” that allows her to contend with historiography and cartography simultaneously.

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By methodologically mobilising West African animistic thought, which views physical reality as a material realm wherein immaterial forces can and do interfere, Armah’s writing on these ghostly photographic negatives frames such indigenous systems of thought as *always already* hauntological. Thinking back to Derrida, one then wonders if the specter, which confounds Western ontology and epistemology, is precisely the trace, the seething non-present presence of various indigenous thought systems, whose internal logics *exceed* colonial reason, and whose exorcism from the sphere of modernity secure yet *haunt* the very definition of “the modern.”

As Mbembe reminds us, “African social formations are not necessarily converging toward a single point, trend, or cycle. They harbor the possibility of a variety of trajectories neither convergent nor divergent but interlocked, paradoxical.” Joshua Segun-Lean would agree, thinking through the aftermaths of various mass uprisings on the continent over the last half-decade, from the #ENDSARS protests in Nigeria and the #FixTheCountry protests in Ghana to the Sudanese Revolution and the #RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa, all of which have challenged the legitimacy of the African postcolonial nation-state and its reliance upon tyrannical modes of militarised governance, mass-poverty-inducing neoliberal economic policies, patriarchal and queerphobic oppression, and environmentally destructive processes of corporate enrichment, among many other colonial instruments of domination. Segun-Lean thinks with and through the fugitive choreography of these betrayed citizens as they gather around and reclaim urban public space. We are made palpably aware that the entropic charge that drives and guides these movements evidences an anarchic surplus, an “aggressive vitality,” that exceeds the “living present” via an aggregation of multiple pasts, stretching back years, decades, centuries. And simultaneously, that these fierce refusals of the securitised state’s “call to order” bring the possibility of a different world into view – an alternative future – if only for a brief duration.

Inflecting Armah’s reflections through Segun-Lean’s, I am led to consider whether that animating spectral call that is both future and past, that both implicates those who are no longer and those who are not yet born, that depends on the fundamental inseparability of life and death, belongs to an *otherwise*, “circular” conception of time and the cosmos, one that modernity’s discontents know all too well – of “living dead” ancestors in the spirit realm who guide us, who interfere on our behalf, who have borne witness to what has happened and what might happen, and who we remain in *continuous* conversation with.<sup>7</sup> When we forget to “feed” these ancestral spirits, they become hungry and wreak all manners of havoc in the physical world, giving rise to an all-too-familiar haunted, disjunctive present.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, if these indigenous knowledges teach us anything at all, it is that we must boldly detach ourselves from coloniality’s rituals of memorial disavowal, which attempt to bury, silence, or exorcise the ghosts that speak from our old and new colonial wounds. Instead, by actively feeding and communing with these ghosts, in other words, by *living with them*, we develop an expanded and layered historical consciousness of the catastrophic global present while also nurturing our desire for, and anticipation of, a more just future.

7 • Notions of “circular” time and the “living dead” are borrowed from Kas Saghafi via his theorising on Derrida’s writings on survivance and phantasms. Saghafi briefly distinguishes the “circular” from the “cyclical” – whereas the latter connotes a revolving, non-linear *succession* of life and death, the former does away with the presupposition of the separability of life and death, rather asserting their spatial and temporal co-presence. This is not unlike various African indigenous cosmological schemes in which the physical world of the living is ontologically sutured to the spirit world of the dead. See Kas Saghafi, “Dying Alive,” *Mosaic*, Vol. 43, No. 3, September 2015, 25.  
8 • See Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Of Water and The Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*, (London: Penguin Compass), 1994, 9-10.

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6 • Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched Of The Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press), 1963, 239.