

**EUROPE FACING INTER-ASIAN
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**TOWARD AN AMERICAN HAUNTOLOGY:
INTERMEDIAL GHOSTS IN MAXINE HONG
KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*
AND LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS***

Manlio Della Marca

We suffer not only from the living, but also from the dead
—Karl Marx, "Preface" to the first edition of *Capital*, 1867

1 Where Have All the Specters Gone?

Where have all the specters gone? Apparently, specters – especially those of communism – are no longer haunting Europe, but there is no doubt that specters are still haunting America and Chinese American writers. Well, in some sense, America has always been a land of ghosts, a nation obsessed with the spectral. Thus Cotton Mather, in 1692:

It was on the Second of May in the year 1687, that [...] Mr. Joseph Beacon, by Name, about Five a Clock in the Morning, [...] had a View of his Brother then at London, altho he was now himself at Our Boston [...]. This his Brother apper'd unto him, in the Morning about Five a Clock at Boston, having on him a Bengal Gown, which he usually wore, with a Napkin tyed about his Head; his Countenance was very Pale, Gastly, Deadly, and he had a bloody Wound on one side his Fore-head.¹

¹ C. Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (Kessinger, Whitefish, MT, 2006) pp. 53-54.

As the “pale” apparition in this passage from *The Wonders of the Invisible World* shows, ghosts have been a very common feature in American literature since its origins. Jumping to the nineteenth century, we have numerous ghost stories by iconic American authors such as Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and at the end of the century Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. In the early twentieth century, Ambrose Bierce, Edith Wharton and H.P. Lovecraft also centered some of their writings on ghosts. However, beginning in the 1970s there has been an unprecedented proliferation of specters both in literature and in literary theory, to the extent that – from a comparative perspective – I think it is fair to say that in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first century American literature haunted narratives have played a much more central role than in any other national literature of the Euro-American literary system.² Take, for example, France, England, Italy or even Germany: in these countries, it is very unlikely to find contemporary high-brow authors who have included ghosts in their writings. But what about the United States? Here, not only such low-brow writers as Stephen King have written about specters, but you have a number of established, critically acclaimed authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and T.C. Boyle, to quote only some of them, who have written haunted narratives. Moreover, since the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* in 1976, spectrality has become a privileged trope in contemporary American

² It goes without saying that we would get a completely different picture if we extended our analysis to other geo-cultural spaces. In fact, there is no doubt that in several Asian and Latin American literatures spectrality has played an important role in the last forty years. See L.P. Zamora, “Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction” in L.P. Zamora and W.B. Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1995) pp. 497-550; and A. Hock Soon Ng (ed.), *Asian Gothic: Essays in Literature, Film and Anime* (McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 2008).

ethnic literature.³ In fact, specters have appeared not only in the works of Chinese American authors (for instance, in Amy Tan's 1995 *The Hundred Secret Senses* and in Shawna Yang Ryan's 2007 *Locke 1928*) but also in the novels by African American writers (Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved*, Tina McElroy Ansa's 1989 *Baby of the Family*) and in those by Native American novelists (Leslie Marmon Silko's 1991 *Almanac of the Dead*, Louise Erdrich's 1998 *Tracks*).

As for the "spectral turn" of contemporary literary criticism, a discussion of the reasons why, as Jeffrey Weinstock puts it, "one may refer to contemporary academic discourse as, in some respects, 'haunted'"⁴ would require a separate study; here, let me just mention some recent publications focused on haunting which, especially in the United States, have oriented the academic discussion: Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jean-Michel Rabaté's *The Ghosts of Modernity* (1996), Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), Kathleen Brogan's *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (1998), Peter Buse and Andrew Stotts's *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (1999), Peter Schwenger's *Fantasm and Fiction: On Textual Envisioning* (1999), Renée Bergland's *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (2000), Jeffrey Weinstock's *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (2004), and Colleen E. Boyd and Coll Thrush's, *Phantom Past, Indigenous Presence: Native Ghosts in North American Culture and History* (2011). I have included this list only to give you a taste of the variety of approaches that have emerged in the last few years. Now, much as I admire most of the studies mentioned above, it seems to me that they fail to produce a "unified" theory of spectrality which may be used to

³ I am well aware that the expression "ethnic literature" is, to say the least, problematic. However, it seems to me that literary criticism has yet to come up with a satisfactory replacement for this (potentially) discriminatory term.

⁴ J. Weinstock (ed.), *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2004) p. 5.

catalogue (step 1) and explain (step 2) the wide range of cultural and political work performed by ghosts in recent American literature. It is exactly to speak to this gap that I am currently working on a study tentatively entitled *An American Hauntology, 1976-2001: Ghosts and the Literary Imaginary*.⁵

In what follows, I propose a condensed version of what in my study I call “the spectral triangle”, an interpretive grid on which I suggest to ground a “unified” theory of spectrality. Then, as a counterpoint to this theoretical moment, I test the heuristic potential of one facet of my theory – the one regarding the notion of the “intermedial ghost” and the nexus of orality, writing and spectrality – against two texts: “No Name Woman” (the first section from Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*) and the opening chapter of Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*.

2 The Spectral Triangle

As Franco Moretti reminds us, “if we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it’s precisely this ‘poverty’ that makes possible to handle them, and therefore to know”.⁶ I suggest that in their fictional representation American ghosts tend to function on three main levels: the level of time, the political level, and the intermedial level (with the important corollary that not all three levels are always present in every haunted narrative). This interpretive matrix may be schematically represented as follows:

⁵ For the notion of “hauntology”, I am indebted to the work of Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx Specters of Marx: The Sate of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Routledge, New York, 1994) pp. 10, 51. That said, the notion of “hauntology” I try to develop in my study differs in many ways from the one theorized by Derrida.

⁶ F. Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature” in *New Left Review*, n. 1 (2000) pp. 57-58.

