

“One that Returns”: Home, Hantu, and Spectre in Simone Lazaroo’s *The Australian Fiancé* (2000)

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Summary

The Eurasian writer, Simone Lazaroo, has lived most of her life in Australia. Her fiction seeks to reconnect with a cultural heritage to re-establish a sense of home and belonging, a move that is both a *return* – in that Lazaroo situates her narratives in the Asian contexts of her birth in Singapore and her paternal connection with Malaysia – and an *origin* because it “begins” by “coming back” (Derrida 1994: 10). In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida writes that just “as Marx had his ghosts, we [too] have ours, but memories no longer recognise such borders; by definition, they pass through walls, these *revenants*, day and night, they trick consciousness and skip generations” (1994: 36). I explore this site of penetrable boundaries, between the “ghost” that haunts in the West – accountable in philosophical and psychoanalytical terms – and the seemingly unaccountable “hantu” in the Singaporean context. Instead, I work with Derrida’s idea of the “absent presence” or the “visible invisible” to raise questions about the female body, both spectral and Eurasian. I also explore spectrality in the motif of the photograph.

Opsomming

Die Eurasiese skrywer Simone Lazaroo het vir die grootste deel van haar lewe in Australië gewoon. Haar fiksie is bedoel om weer ’n kulturele erfenis op te roep, om opnuut ’n gevoel van tuis wees en behoort te bewerkstellig, ’n handeling wat enersyds ’n *terugkering* is – in dié sin dat Lazaroo haar vertellings in die Asiatiese kontekste van haar geboorte in Singapoer en haar vadersverbintenis met Maleisië plaas, en ’n *oorsprong* omdat dit “begin” deur “terug te kom” (Derrida 1994: 10). In *Spectres of Marx* skryf Derrida dat net “soos Marx sy spoke gehad het, ons [ook] ons s’n het, maar herinneringe herken nie meer sodanige grense nie; uiteraard kan hulle deur mure beweeg, hierdie *spoke wat uit die dode teruggekeer het*, dag en nag mislei hulle ons bewussyn en hulle slaan generasies oor” [vry vertaal] (1994: 36). Ek verken hierdie terrein van deurdringbare grense, tussen die “spook” wat in die Weste rondwaal – toerekenbaar in filosofiese en psigoanalitiese terme – en die oënskynlik ontoerekenbare “hantu” in die Singapoer-konteks. Ek werk met Derrida se idee van die “afwesige teenwoordigheid” of die “onsigbare sigbare” – om vrae te opper oor die vroulike liggaam, spektraal sowel as Eurasies. Ek ondersoek ook spektraliteit in die motief van die foto.

I *Hantu*

And this being-with *spectres* would also be [...] a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations [...] in the name of justice”.

(Derrida 1994: xviii)

The American ethnologist Michael M.J. Fischer writes that the “social theory, philosophy, and anthropology generated in and about Singapore lie *elsewhere* than in the ordinary facts of survey research, statistical data, and social plans ...” (my emphasis, Fischer 2005: 207). According to Fischer, real knowledge of that culture relies ‘instead’ on, “interpretation, social cultural genres, webs of meaning and affect, reminders – in iconic terms such as *hantu* – (Malay hauntings, ghosts and spectres; ...) of various pasts, including World War Two” (207).

For Fischer, mechanisms of Western social science remain “important” as “starting points”, but knowing Singapore relies on investigating the multiple “pasts” and the contemporary “modernities” that are “imbricated by ghosts and revenants, uncanny doublings [...] and mutation” (2005: 209). My analysis of Simone Lazaroo’s second novel, *The Australian Fiancé* (2000), is also concerned with how “webs of meaning and affect” function in relation to the past and present, particularly in relation to World War Two and the *hantu* spirit. I draw on Derrida’s discussion of the “spectre” (Fischer 2005: 208). At the same time, I avoid reinstating or reversing any West/East binary oppositions that situate postcolonial Asian knowledges as the outcome of phantasmagorical effects outside the scope of Western reasoning. I consider how understanding may lie “elsewhere” but does not necessarily preclude Western frames of analysis. Indeed, the description of Singapore as “imbricated by ghosts and revenants, uncanny doublings” would also apply to any Western “Gothic” novel.

Lazaroo is a Eurasian writer, born in Singapore, but living in Australia for most of her life. She builds her fictional worlds in and between Asia, Australia, and the United Kingdom, producing what might be considered a hybrid Australian/Asian literature “rich” in stories that are about, as Andrew Hock Soon Ng has described similarly, “haunting, the uncanny, and the monstrous” (2008: 12). Here Ng theorises an “Asian” Gothic in order to foreground aspects of Asian culture otherwise “obfuscated and peripheralised” (2008: 3). This issue also troubles Lazaroo in her focus on Singapore as a lost home. Her doctoral exegesis openly articulates her desire to recuperate her cultural heritage, or a blocked sense of home and belonging (2004), which I read in this essay as a manifestation of Derrida’s *revenant*, or the spectre that returns. Much of Lazaroo’s fiction reflects this point, exemplifying a desire to do the work of postmemory, specifically remembering the memories of traumatised generations who came before her in Singapore, seeking to

interpret and reanimate the past without appropriating it, creating what Marianne Hirsch has called “a living connection” (2012: 1). I argue that this move is both *a return* – in that Lazaroo situates her narratives in the Asian contexts of her birth in Singapore and her paternal connection with Malaysia – and an origin because it “begins” by “coming back” (Derrida 1994: 10).

I concentrate on *The Australian Fiancé*, Simone’s second novel set in Asia and Broome after World War Two. From its very first pages, home in Singapore is already a haunted space. The narrator, an unnamed Eurasian woman, understands that she had been born in a place, “surrounded by the beating wings of the old hantu spirits and their relatives, the bats and birds taking flight from the hard edges of the Empire’s machinery, its grids, its plans” (Lazaroo 2000: 5).

These hantu spirits “stun” themselves against the surfaces of Empire, the “new glass”, the “fresh render” of the colonial architecture, mistaking the “armpits” of “new statues” of the founder of Singapore, Sir Stamford Raffles, for “tree hollows” (2000: 5). These “barely audible” but unseen spirits are omnipresent; indeed, the Eurasian girl internalises hantu spirits to the point of mistaking their flutter for her own pulse (2000: 5). These passages resonate with the “spectral logic” Derrida articulates in *Spectres of Marx*. He writes that just “as Marx had his ghosts”, we too “have ours, but memories no longer recognize such borders; by definition, they pass through walls, these *revenants*, day and night, they trick consciousness and skip generations” (1994: 36). In this article I explore this site of penetrable boundaries, between, on the one hand, the “ghost” that haunts in the West – accountable in philosophical and psychoanalytical terms – and, on the other hand, the “hantu” reified by Western philosophy in the Singaporean context. I work with Derrida’s idea of the “absent presence” or the “visible invisible”, raising questions about the female body, both spectral and Eurasian.

II *Pontianak*

[...] everything begins by the apparition of a spectre. More precisely, by the *waiting* for the apparition

(Derrida 1994: 2)

The specific *hantu* or spirit that haunts the Eurasian woman in *The Australian Fiancé* is the *Pontianak*. To explore how it suggests both the return and origin of Derrida’s *revenant*, I focus on the body. As Mona Hatoum asks, “The body is the axis of our perception, so how can art afford not to take that as a starting point?” (Hatoum 2016). Indeed, the Eurasian female body is at the heart of Lazaroo’s work, both as a thing-in-itself and a commodity, a distinction I make via Derrida.

The novel opens just before World War Two with stories of the Pontianak. The mother, who has been waiting for the Pontianak to appear, warns her daughter to fear these spirits, usually in the form of birds seeking “new homes” in the bodies of adolescent girls, where they remain, “sheltering”. She says she has “seen these bad spirits” in young girls’ bodies: “Walking around like any pretty young girl in the day. Dragging their intestines through the sky at night, desperate for blood. Screaming when their entrails get caught on sharp things. Crying for their lost babies” (Lazaroo 2000: 8).

In this “merciless Fall” to the Pontianak (2000: 8), her mother cautions, a girl will not only lose her own body and but also become a “foreigner to [her] own people” (2000: 9). The single remedy is to “driv[e] something sharp into the back of her neck, through the hole where the old skin slipped away” (2000: 9). From this point onwards, the Eurasian woman no longer feels “at home” in her own body; consequently, she no longer experiences the awakening of desire as pleasurable. Indeed, she lies awake while the Pontianak “crept under the roofing iron and [her] skin and made it crawl” (2000: 9). When her mother lines their doors and windows with nails and pineapples to “snare” the Pontianak who might be waiting “outside our house to enter [her] tender foolish body”, it is already too late (2000: 12). The “pain” will make “her remember”, her mother advises, will make “her human again”, but the girl remains “at a loss”, “not at home” in her own body even decades later, when at the point of writing she asks, “What should I have done?” (2000: 9).

The mother also keeps “a candle at the feet of the Blessed Virgin on the tea chest in their sleeping quarters at night” (2000: 9), integrating both Asian and European belief systems in her effort to protect her daughter. Such strategies to fend off the Pontianak suggest Homi Bhabha’s version of hybridity including her expectations for the future. If she is successful, her daughter will marry well and provide a modernised “home with taps and a porcelain toilet bowl” and “a proper altar in its own alcove [...]” (Lazaroo 2000: 10). In short, although the home the Eurasian girl inhabits before the War is a hopeful one, it is also already haunted and hybrid. The mother clearly waits for the hantu to appear, as she herself had already succumbed, having given birth from an encounter with an English man, and remained, consequently, an outsider herself in her home. Thus, for these women, home is the site of the struggle to survive for a host of reasons that are historically marked. In short, they may inhabit, but do not experience a sense of being “at home” in architectural or corporeal terms.

The Pontianak signifies more than female sexual awakening, more than the moment in puberty when emerging desire opens a chasm between mother and daughter. The Pontianak is also the spirit of women who die in childbirth (“crying for their lost babies”), signifying the loss of both mothers’ and babies’ bodies. After the War, after the Eurasian woman has endured physical and emotional trauma from the sexual invasion of her body by occupying Japanese soldiers who force her to work as a “Comfort Woman”, Lazaroo

returns to the trope of the Pontianak. *Spectres of Marx* resonates here, when Derrida asks, “Can the extremity of the extreme ever be comprehended?” (1994: 10). Of these three years, harnessed to incessant, unspeakable acts of violence, the narrator in *The Australian Fiancé* reveals, “I drop, drop like a stunned bird into the dark hollow lack” (2000: 14). It is “another invasion. For I am already desolate, stripped of words in all my languages, unable to speak of what happened to me during the war” (2000: 15). Nevertheless, we read, hers was a body “full of the sighing and susurration of spirits [still] searching for a home among the wreckage” (2000: 16). At this point, the Pontianak seems to her less a “bad” spirit than a comforting reminder of that earlier time, linking her body to the context of wider loss, but also signifying the persistence of desire, the persistence of the “*body of hunger*”, yearning to be “*delivered*” like the unborn child of the Pontianak (2000: 17). Thus, at least one spectre that haunts her is that of the body she lost to the trauma of enforced prostitution. One reviewer has concluded that the novel “teeters on the brink of sentimentality” (Allen 2003: 30) but for me, the Eurasian woman’s determination to recover a lost “home” in her body as well as her persistent determination to recover a sense of desire after the “extremity of the extreme”, removes the novel from such a charge. Thus, in the terms by which Derrida explicates Marx, the woman’s experience during the war transforms her body from its use value for herself to one of exchange, a commodity among other bodies, changing her life, “haunting” her forever. In the following section I argue that these categories between use and commodity value do not hold.

III *Spectre*

The spirit, the spectre are not the same thing, and we will have to sharpen the difference.

(Derrida 1994: 5)

In order to interrogate the “mystical character of the commodity”, Derrida invites us to “situate ourselves” in “that place” in Marx’s text “where the values of *value* (between use-value and exchange value) *secret, mystique, enigma, fetish*, and the *ideological* form a chain”, what he calls “spectral movement”, or the “ghost effect” (1994: 186). This movement, he argues, “is staged” precisely at the point where we recognise there is a question about “what the stage withdraws from our blind eyes the moment we open them” (1994: 186). It is a condition, he argues, that necessarily confounds our understanding of presence/absence, or the ontology of “to be or not to be” (1994: 186). Derrida coins the term “hauntology” for this condition; it accounts for the transition from phenomenality, from pure use value to exchange value, creating a series of paradoxes that line up with a “present absence”, such as the idea of the bodiless body as a form of visible invisibility.

What intrigues me is his conclusion that what we do not see is precisely this invisibility; he cautions us to “open one’s eyes wide there where one does not see what one sees” (1994: 187). I think it is possible to understand the Eurasian woman’s perception of her body after trauma as a form of the bodiless body, since her perception of herself rests almost entirely on her sense of the body she lost through her experiences as a Comfort Woman, a loss that is not strictly ontological, but will haunt her in the form of spectres.

For Marx, the thing-in-itself correlates with its use value while the commodity correlates with its subsequent market value. With these terms, I emphasise Derrida’s argument with Marx who had maintained that the “mystical character” of the commodity “owes nothing to a use-value” (1994: 186). Derrida counters that the reverse is also true, that use value owes everything to commodity value. To demonstrate this point, he cites Marx’s example of the table, a piece of pure wood with a phenomenality that is “quite simple” (1994: 187). However, when the table as a thing-in-itself is converted into a commodity, when it “enters” the market stage, its value relates not to what it is “in-itself”, but what it may be exchanged with (1994: 187). At this point, we “no longer know [...] what it is good for or what it is worth” (1994: 187). It is no longer, to use Marx’s own phrase, an “ordinary sensuous thing” (as cited in Derrida 1994: 188). When “the curtain goes up on the market, the thing is transmuted into a supernatural thing”, (1994: 188) or to use the terms cited above: “*secret, mystique, enigma*” (1994: 186). The table is no longer a “simple sensuous thing”, but “sensuous non-sensuous” (1994: 189), like a body without a body, or a visible invisibility. In doing so, Derrida explains, it resembles a “prosthesis of itself” (1994: 192). Before taking up Derrida’s rebuttal, I underline that no longer knowing what one’s own body is “good for or what it is worth” poignantly reflects the Eurasian woman’s perceptions; indeed, that she might experience her body as a “prosthesis of itself”, or what it once was, resonates in my ongoing discussion of *The Australian Fiancé*.

As indicated above, Derrida diverges from Marx’s contention that the thing-in-itself may “haunt” the subsequent commodity but not the reverse. In contrast, Derrida argues that the haunting between the thing-in-itself and the commodity is actually circular: the commodity *also* haunts the thing-in-itself. This is because, as Derrida takes pains to prove, we cannot separate use-value from exchange value since there is nothing essentially “pure” about “intrinsic” use-value in the first place. To comprehend Derrida, we have to do as he instructs and “sharpen” our distinctions not only between spirit and spectre but also between the thing-in-itself and the commodity as well. My objective is to think through how the “value” of the Eurasian woman’s body was never purely a thing-in-itself, never at some point uncontaminated by its function as a commodity, whether we understand this point through the hantu or the spectre.

To refute Marx, Derrida aligns the “pure” thing-in-itself with the spirit and the contaminated commodity with the spectre. The spirit “is difficult to

define”, as Jonathan Joseph has noted, because “by its nature it escapes identification or description”; it “can only be seen when it takes on a visible form – that of the spectre” (1994: 98). The spectre, then, is the corporal form the spirit takes on, or as Derrida write, it is: “... flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the revenant or the return of the specter” (1994: 5). For Derrida, this momentary nexus marks “not only the carnal apparition of the spirit, its phenomenal body, its fallen and guilty body”, he argues later, but “also the impatient and nostalgic waiting for the redemption, namely, once again, for a spirit ...” (pp. 170-171). In short, the spectre is the externalisation of the spirit paradoxically waiting for the spirit’s return in the future, much as the Eurasian woman conjures almost “nostalgically” the Pontianak as kinder than the soldiers’ treatment, evocative of a future still to come. This “orientation” towards the future, Derrida calls the *messianic*, adding to our series of antinomial pairs by confounding past/future as well. For the Eurasian woman, such orientation may be as simple as being open to any “untimely” but “infinite surprise” (1994: 46), a return that is also an “opening to what is coming” (1994: 82). Derrida accounts for this opening as a capacity for “emancipatory” effects or for “affirmation” (1994: 111), a point I extend in the next section.

To return to Derrida’s argument with Marx, if in its “purity” the thing-in-itself is never a “haunted” object, if there is no “apparition” in this stage, it follows that Marx would be correct to argue that this haunting moves in one direction only. However, Derrida points out that we could not even conceive the concept “use-value” without a notion of the market or exchange value. Even the idea of “use-value” implies the “use” it has for others (1994: 202). In short, Derrida helps us see that the spirit/thing-in-itself and the spectre/commodity *haunt each other*. This ghost, this invisibility, the potential *as* commodity is already there, already haunting the thing-in-itself, even before its first appearance (1994: 203). There is no point of origin any more than there is a single point of transfiguration where the spirit/thing-in-itself *becomes* the spectre/commodity. In other words, as Nick Peim notes, there is no point where the bodiless body of the spectre does not make itself felt as a “restless presence, both haunting and haunted” (2005: 76).

In *The Australian Fiancé*, the haunting relates to the Eurasian female body conceived as a thing-in-itself, but given commodity significance from a number of avenues, including the Pontianak and her experience as a Comfort Woman. It is, of course, also produced for most of the novel by the male gaze of the unnamed Australian tourist who becomes her fiancé. This conclusion is not very startling in itself and one might rightfully observe that it does not need Derrida to make this point. But the notion that haunting is circular may be illuminating. The spectre, the Pontianak, may not appear until the girl’s body begins to show signs of puberty, the point when the Eurasian girl’s body comes to mean more than a thing-in-itself. However, as “pure” thing-in-itself,

her body is already haunted by its looming commodity potential, not the least because it is the direct result of a similar moment in her own mother's life with an unnamed English man visiting Singapore.

I have three points to make here. It would seem that Western philosophy is not inimical to a reading of the hantu – in this case – the Pontianak. Indeed, Derrida describes the spirit/spectre in nearly identical terms to those of Michael Fischer when he writes that hantu “no longer” belong “to knowledge”, and that they come “to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy” (2005: 5). Both Derrida's spectre and the Pontianak operate as a kind of prosthesis and a kind of warning. As the evocation of women who died in childbirth, the Pontianak signifies a loss that cannot be recuperated: the mother's and the child's bodies. Thus, how the body/spectre operates is in one sense oriented to the past, to what is lost as the body transmogrifies into a commodity among other commodities (Derrida talks about competition or a war between commodities). We should remember that the subtitle of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* is “The Work of Mourning”. Loss looms in the form of the spectre haunting the spirit, the commodity haunting the thing-in-itself, and the Pontianak haunting the young girl. To twist Derrida's words slightly, the young Eurasian girl's body-in-itself, its spirit, is already “hallowed out” by the apparition, without it even appearing. Thus, without ever taking on phenomenal form, a conflation of history, race, and her own mother's loss and grief circle in and haunt her.

My second point is that both the use value and market value of the young woman's body are (pre)determined “elsewhere”, to use Fischer's word cited in my introduction. Paradoxically, however, the “use-value” of her body is cancelled out by the actual use the world makes of it. Just as it comes to her, the body of desire is usurped. The future, what her mother, indeed, would protect her from, turns out to be far more extreme than either of them could imagine. Thus, past and future intermingle since what that future might be is already waiting to determine her market value, already a force intervening in the transmutation to commodity. However, this does not mean that the spirit/spectre cannot be made to work for us, even in the extremities of the extreme. As Derrida reminds us, “haunting” marks our “very existence”, and therefore, “whether it transforms or transforms itself, poses or decomposes itself: the spirit, the ‘spirit of the spirit’ is *work*” (my emphasis 1994: 3, 9); the revenant *works*. It is not necessary to reduce the Malay spirit or ghost to a Western reading or vice versa. Ontology is not the point. Whether they are real, or not, is not as important as what they do. It is not the effect of the hantu (Pontianak) or the revenant (as the consequence of the reciprocal haunting of spirit and spectre), nor their phenomenality that is imperative. This leads to my third point: in this novel where photography is a central trope, the photograph also operates as a form of “messianic” revenant, both illuminating and haunting what it might mean to be “at home”, to dwell in one's body.

IV Photograph

There is then *some spirit*. Spirits. And *one must* reckon with them.

(Derrida 1994, p. xx)

The photograph, as a trace of what is not present, operates according to the logic of spectrality. That is, like the spectre, it makes a “presence felt”, but as Peim notes, this “presence does not occupy ontological space” (2005: 72). As a domain of the spectral, the photograph belongs to the revenant, to what returns, to what haunts, to something in the past as yet unfulfilled, which is also future-oriented. That is, the *photograph-as-spectre* also follows the logic of desire with its inevitable deferral of satisfaction. It conjures a present absence much like the “visible invisibility” we have so far explored. Predicated on the absence of the very thing it presents, the referent, the photograph is haunted inevitably by the interplay of absence/presence and visible/invisible. Its past, present, and future are situated in a “restless, unsettled incomplete modality” (Peim 2005: 76). Furthermore, *as* a disturbing “present absence”, it ‘haunts our epistemological assumptions and certitudes’ (Peim 2005: 77). At the same time, photography’s capacity to produce “certitudes”, to reproduce and protect dominant ideologies, has been thoroughly analysed. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag explored how the photograph represents a direct act of correlating a visual regime of knowledge with the prevailing hegemony. More recently, Judith Butler analyses how the photograph is linked with the norms “that determine questions of humanization or de-humanization”, in other words, the link between photography and what counts as “being human” (2007: 951). In Lazaroo’s novel, the Australian son of a pearling magnate from Broome arrives in post war Singapore bringing both his family’s laundry and a photographic agenda. Indeed, the ruse he uses to engage with the Eurasian woman in the first place is his desire for a guide to ensure he “takes” photographs of “authentic natives”. Certainly, his photographic practice suggests an underlying anxiety, the fear of “diminished potency of whiteness”, as Robyn Morris puts it (2001: 88). His meticulous photographic documentation of the “authentic native” reflects his attempts to create a visual record that would control the meaning of people he continues to regard as colonised subjects of the Empire. At the same time, however, his photographs reflect the dread that an unfinished colonial project of the past will come undone, implying an insecure future. After all, his family’s wealth depends upon the cheap labour provided by the divers they hire from Asia. Thus, like the spectre, his photographs are both past – and future – orientated. However, I take Isabel Carrera Suarez’s point that in *The Australian Fiancé*, photography functions as a “metaphor for the distinct attitudes and knowledges” of *both* “the two main characters”, representing “their divergent reading of the world” (2015: 859). Crucially,

when the Eurasian woman turns to photography, she will seek to “see” what can’t be seen, as I will demonstrate.

The photograph that interests me is one of two that the Australian man sends back by post to the Eurasian woman decades after their relationship finishes. This image frames her body on the ship departing from Broome; it is apparently marred, as the Australian notes himself on the reverse, by “stray light and movement” (Lazaroo 2001: 211). Robyn Morris argues that for the Australian, the camera operates as a “prosthetic eye”, enabling him to construct the Eurasian woman “as he thinks she should be” (2010: 122); furthermore, Morris contends that the two photographs represent his final attempt to “reaffirm the centrality of his vision” (2001: 93). Certainly, with his photographic *practice*, the Australian fiancé seeks to certify his ongoing “centrality”; the process of taking images, captioning, and cataloguing, and storing them in leather albums back in Australia operates as a twentieth century version of the Victorian curio cabinet. This returned portrait does operate, at least in part, as a *reminder* of his attempts to dominate. In *Ghost Image*, Hervé Guibert explores how we attempt to fix meaning in our use of photography. He notes that travel photographs (such as the fiancé’s in Singapore) reflect a “drive, a form of hysteria that quickly dissipates” once the photographer returns “home” (2014: 77). In this light, we might consider that the Australian’s photographs operate as his own spectres, labelled and packed away, but silently signifying his attempt to suppress any reminder of an unfinished colonial project, including his short-lived engagement with the Eurasian woman. Peim’s observation that the photograph is “both the product and the occasion of unease” is particularly resonant here because this image documents the attempt to contain and control as well as the impossibility: something eludes, something nevertheless remains “unfixed”. Guibert also writes movingly about photography as “an act of love” that is closely associated with family and home (2014: 8). The family “archive”, he notes, must be “abundantly coherent without gaps. It must leave nothing to chance” (2014: 37). Clearly the Australian fiancé uses photographs similarly, “fixing” the record, pinning down the meaning of both family and its “other”. Even the photograph he returns is evidence of a near miss in his patrilineage: that is the “contamination” the Eurasian would have brought to his own “white” lineage. Nevertheless, I am unconvinced by Morris’s claim that the return of the photographs represents the much older Australian’s effort to “reassert” his dominion over the Eurasian woman (200: 94), or more precisely, this is not all it is, as we shall see.

The Eurasian woman’s family “history” is uncertain, full of Guibert’s “gaps” as the result of colonial invasion, miscegenation characterised by absent European fathers. War has decimated both home and the body, and dwelling with any ease is impossible. Yet, when she comes to photography as the agent rather than the object, she will use her images more to acknowledge what is lost or unseen than to retrieve or possess it. Rather than control

meaning, she attempts to document, if only partially, what eludes, namely the blur, the ghost, the hantu that haunts, or the visible invisibility of love and desire. After all, as Guibert has also written, “How can you speak of photography without speaking of desire?” (2014: 96). Thus, she takes to the streets of her home neighbourhood in Singapore to photograph people, as she says, whom “I live among”, not the least because “most of them have never been photographed” (Lazaroo 2000: 204). When the images are developed, she looks “at their faces for hours”, realising that “no two of [her] subjects are the same” (2000: 204). However, rather than keep them, she “give[s] the images back to their owners”. Rather than tell them who they are, she says ““You are really something’[...]unable to say exactly what” (2000: 204). What she recognises as the “real” is the absence, the indefinable, that which eludes. She may never know love with any certainty, but “these days” she admits, “my photographs are as close as I come to talking about love” (2000: 209). Indeed, I would argue that the Eurasian woman’s photographic practice operates as a form of caring, or of dwelling attempted similarly to Heidegger’s notion of “dwelling as caring-for”, undertaken to overcome a radical alienation in the world. For Heidegger, “dwelling” is the distinguishing feature of the human being. For him, the “real plight of dwelling” in this world lies not in “the world wars with their destruction”, but in knowing that any sense of home results from the fact that we must “*ever learn to dwell*” (2008: 339). Through her practice of caring for her neighbours, specifically by seeking out the visible invisible, the Eurasian woman comes to understand “home” in precisely these terms.

Perhaps the Australian fiancé’s “failed” photograph marks a point when the two characters are most connected, but that is not all it signifies to the Eurasian woman. Like a revenant, the return of this image evokes her determination to regard her body of desire as *both* subject and object. In other words, the fiancé’s gesture takes on implications other than pure dominance. We already know it has not technologically “captured” her image (that “stray light”), yet he writes on the reverse, “but I have kept this” (Lazaroo 2000: 211). In the image, taken at the moment of leaving her “fiancé”, we read that:

Her face is blurred by her movement away, making her eyes look large, astonished; the outline of her body is diffused by a scattering of light, so that her shoulders and arms look as if they are spreading. She is Eurasian, young. I remember her all over again Forgetting is no longer possible for her.

(2000: 201)

The passage refers to “her” seven times; the final instance (after the shift to first person) may simply be a return to an external narrator; but it may also refer to the body of the “young” Eurasian, the woman who has known what it is to be a ghost, a present absence, a Pontianak. She does not die in childbirth; instead she survives the death of her child of rape from the war; she also survives whatever it was that happened to her with the Australian fiancé. The

novel makes clear that this moment with this photograph is crucial: “There I am. I am brought back to myself” (2000: 211). The woman no longer speaks in third person.

We can interpret this photograph as a form of assault, the result of obsessive scrutiny, appropriation and control by the wealthy white Australian. At the same time, in the last moment of the story, perhaps the fiancé exposes his lack of control as a gesture of his own vulnerability. I do not wish to redeem him or imply his “gift” is some form of expiation. Rather, it suggests what the Eurasian woman has always known: that the “stray light and movement” is not a mistake, but evidence of the spectre, the “visible invisible”. For this reason, the Eurasian woman exemplifies more than an attempt to “dwell” as Heidegger articulates, but also what Derrida has called *sur-vie*, not just the effort to survive, but the future-oriented desire to “live on” (1994: xx). Two months before his death, the final interview with Derrida began when his interlocutor brought his attention to the opening of *Spectres of Marx*, “Someone, you or me, comes forward and says, ‘I’d finally like to know how to live’” (2003-2004). In response Derrida “acknowledged that all the ideas” which helped him in his work, “notably those regarding the trace or the spectral, were related to the idea of survival as a basic dimension” (2003-2004). He concludes that survival is “not simply what remains, it is the most intense life possible” (2003-2004). Thus, whether we understand this moment of return for the Eurasian woman in terms of the hantu or the revenant, we should recognise that it is not only the “susurrations of spirits” who search for a “home among the wreckage” (2000: 16), but also the Eurasian woman herself in her efforts, despite appalling odds, to do the “work” of “intense living”.

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