Spectre and Speculation: Haunting and Uncanniness in *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* by Niq Mhlongo

Eugene de Klerk

University of Mpumalanga, Mbombela, South Africa.

eugenehenryjuly2023@gmail.com (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1680-7055)

ABSTRACT

Niq Mhlongo's collection of short stories, *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* (2018), does not perhaps immediately present itself as speculative fiction. The collection, however, gives the supernatural world of African indigenous knowledge as much weight in shaping characters' lives and experiences as it does contemporary socio-political realities. It troubles established genre distinctions in that it can be seen as a work simultaneously belonging to magical realism, social realism, and horror. This article contends that it is precisely owing to the work's use of supernatural and uncanny aspects that this collection can be viewed as a form of social or sociological realism, which aims at depicting the peculiar contemporary and subjective (sur)realities of many young black South Africans. It is faithful to the contradictory worlds of tradition and globalisation that many South Africans straddle, as well as to the spectres of colonialism and Apartheid, that impinge on the present in both material and immaterial forms. In many ways the collection stages the difficulty of decolonisation and the subjective spectres and *doppelgängers* that such a process unleashes. This paper will make use of the work of Sigmund Freud, Avery F. Gordon, Eve Tuck and C. Ree to explore instances of haunting and the uncanny in Mhlongo's collection.

Keywords: Niq Mhlongo, magic realism, uncanny, decolonial, post-colonial, sociological realism, haunting.

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Niq Mhlongo's collection of short stories entitled *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* (2018) is a puzzle when it comes to genre. At first glance these stories reflect contemporary social reality in South Africa. However, on closer inspection, the reader realises that this social reality consists of contradictory realities or worlds straddled (and inhabited) by Black South Africans today. These colliding realities are most obviously those of contemporary post-colonial existence and traditional pre-colonial beliefs. Yet there is also tension between an ostensibly decolonised present and persistent underlying socio-economic, epistemic, and structural forms of colonisation.

In the stories in the collection, contradictory realities are placed side by side. Traditional beliefs in the supernatural (along with supernatural events that appear to take place in the narratives) are presented as normal and everyday facets of life and are accepted as such from the perspectives of multiple characters. Yet, other characters are caught between this magical worldview and a concern that it represents the return of an undesirable form of primitivism: a primitivism that they wish to overcome. Most of these characters defensively resist evidence of the supernatural in order to embrace a Western-centric, but globalised, scientific idea of a modernity that has been sanitised of superstition. These latter characters — and, through them, the readers — witness instances of supernatural potency and coincidence, but experience these as uncanny. Often characters will disavow traditional beliefs and healers, but these ultimately prove decisive in their lives, thereby prompting the interrogation of any self-assured (but ultimately performative) scepticism.

The presence of fantastical elements, which are presented in a realistic way, is enough (Wilkins 2012:40) to suggest that Mhlongo's work in this collection may be considered speculative. The collection presents the natural and supernatural as unproblematically coextensive. Yet, at the same time, the supernatural (and belief therein) appears as an uncanny presence that haunts and unsettles (in an *unheimlich* way) key characters, narrators, and their subjectivities. These beliefs are at once intimate and close to home (also in the sense of being indigenous), but have been made strange or been defamiliarised owing to the imposition and proliferation of Western-dominated notions of global modernity.

While Wilkins (2012) and Oziewicz (2017), for example, agree that speculative fiction is commonly composed of three primary subgenres — fantasy fiction, science fiction and horror — they also both indicate that 'hybrids abound' (Wilkins 2012:39). Oziewicz (2017) posits that speculative fiction has become 'a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating the "consensus reality" of everyday experience'. He maintains that speculative fiction now not only includes subgenres

derived from fantasy, science fiction and horror (and hybrids of these), as well as other cognate genres, such as magical realism. Perhaps speculative fiction can be best appreciated as a 'field of cultural production' that eschews both 'consensus reality' as well as traditional generic boundaries (Oziewicz 2017). Intriguingly for this paper, Oziewicz (2017) reflects on the fact that speculative fiction has come to be at the forefront of 'the proliferation of indigenous, minority, and postcolonial narrative forms that subvert dominant Western notions of the real'. It would appear then that speculative fiction is a tool that is being used to challenge hegemonic Western colonial ideas of what counts as real. Mhlongo's writing in this collection of short stories is consonant with the above explanations of speculative fiction, both in terms of the realistic presentation of fantastical elements as well in the way his short stories subvert colonially-derived accounts of civilisation and the real.

Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree, however, remains difficult to pin down in terms of genre. Yet, as I will discuss, this ambiguity may be a sufficient basis to argue that it be classified as speculative fiction. Furthermore, I believe that such ambiguity in terms of genre is, in fact, an attempt to reflect the existential fault lines navigated by the majority of post-colonial black South Africans. One may even suggest that the collection constitutes a form of sociological realism in its astute representation of the liminality inherent in contemporary black South African experience. 'Sociological realism' is a 'genre' suggested by the by the seminal work of Avery F. Gordon (2008). She maintains that to show the historical spectres (especially colonial and racist) that continue to haunt contemporary society psychologically, sociologically, structurally, and economically, is to be more accurate in one's description of that society than if one elected to use a more traditional form of realistic depiction. In doing so, she suggests it is necessary for authors to include elements that will terrify and unsettle; fiction can powerfully bring about the realisation that 'sociological haunting' is not only intellectual, but also visceral.

It may be a disservice even to try to pin down the genre of Mhlongo's work, but a consideration of how one might classify it is instructive. I contend that it could be classed as a form of magical realism. This is not only because it presents the fantastic as real, explores the clash between the fantastic and the 'real', and envisions a different possible experience of reality, but also because, as per Camayd-Frexias's (1996:583) Latin American definition of magical realism, it serves as an allegory for the experience of colonisation and constitutes an attempt to decolonise mindsets of the 'reality' that has *occupied* colonised territories.

In crafting his allegory, Mhlongo has also made use of elements more commonly seen as part of gothic literature or horror and ghost stories, specifically uncanniness

and forms of haunting. The forms of uncanniness and haunting in Mhlongo's collection are multi-layered and complex. There is the return of a magical primitivism, which some characters do their utmost to repress; there is haunting in the sense of the persistence of historical colonial trauma; and there is also a doubling of subjectivities in divided characters, resulting in traditional and post-colonial doubles or *doppelgängers*.

The return in the present of that which has been repressed or supposedly overcome and doubling all form part of Sigmund Freud's analysis of the uncanny. In his essay, 'The "Uncanny"' (1919), Freud identifies multiple sources of disconcerting feelings by way of an analysis of a horror tale called *The Sandman* by E.T.A. Hoffmann (2014). Freud is primarily interested in the unease caused by the return of repressed formative experiences (mostly traumatic), seemingly coming from the outside: these are people and events that are strange, but, at the same time, troublingly familiar ('homely' and 'unhomely' or *heimlich* and *unheimlich* at the same time). However, he also suggests that uncanniness can arise when 'primitive [often magical] beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' (Freud 2018:950):

> We — or our primitive forefathers — once believed that these possibilities were realities, and were convinced that they actually happened. Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have surmounted these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny (Freud 2018:949).

In addition, Freud makes a special point of delving into the instances of doubles in horror stories. He cites the work of Otto Rank in connecting the theme of the double 'with reflections in mirrors, with shadows, with guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul and with the fear of death' (Freud 2018:940) and suggests that the uncanny double is the remnant of primary narcissism or identification with an ideal ego. The once-god seemingly returns from without as a threatening demon (Freud 2018:940). In the case of Mhlongo's characters, it may be that the uncanny double is the result of colonised subjects' being compelled to identify with the coloniser (and whiteness/Westernness) as ideal ego, thereby rendering their own alienated ego a ghostly presence (as opposed to any conventional narcissism). Such a conception would accord with Franz Fanon's account of the psychological trauma/pathology caused by colonisation (see Fanon 2008). Unfortunately, a full exploration of this theme would constitute another article.

A further element of Freud's discussion of the uncanny, which is relevant to this article, is his acknowledgement of the work of Ernst Jentsch (2018:931) in suggesting that the uncanny is also a result of 'intellectual uncertainty'. This uncertainty can be the result of confusion as to whether something is alive or artificial or whether something is real or imagined. While Freud does not find this to be the central aspect of the experience of the uncanny, he is happy to acknowledge that such uncertainty or ambiguity is unsettling to a reader: 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality' (Freud 2018:946). This idea of the uncanny would bring us back to the ambiguity expressed in magical realism as well as in other speculative fiction: 'Uncanny events are situated at the heart of the fantastical tale. Their ambiguous character almost invariably generates the hesitation that defines the fantastic' (Tatar 1981:169). In Mhlongo's collection, readers and characters alike are often uncertain as to what is real and what is imagined. Such uncertainty is, I contend, a reflection of the divided society and subjectivity of a postcolony. Such uses of the uncanny by Mhlongo would also suggest that his work may also be seen as speculative horror. However, the ambiguity of the uncanny can be linked to the ambiguity that is explored in magical realism. One should also bear in mind that Mhlongo's horror has more to do with the psychological and sociological remnants of colonisation and apartheid than with more conventional ghosts.

Indeed, perhaps the most horrifying form of uncanniness for the reader in *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* is the (material) return in contemporary social relations of the spectre of colonial-style racism along with structural exclusion, inequality, and discrimination. This, it would seem, has always been lurking just below the surface. It can erupt at any moment and render a seemingly decolonised social sphere simply post-colonial or even quasi/neo-colonial.

The uncanny and ideas of haunting have become fertile concepts when considering colonised and postcolonial spaces as well as discussing the ongoing work — psychological and structural — of decolonisation. Nayar (2010:89) suggests that the uncanny can be used in fiction to explore dispossession in the postcolonial world:

> It deals with people who are "out of place" and seeking a "home" … . The uncanny is the name of this experience of double perception of any space which it at once familiar and strange, safe and threatening, mine and not mine.

He further contends that such uncanniness leads to ambiguity and hesitation in classifying, defining, or identifying (Nayar 2010:89). Mukherjee (2018:102) reflects on the fact that it is not a straightforward nostalgia for a pre-colonial time or place that an indigenous postcolonial metropolitan subject experiences, but, rather, an ongoing sense of unsettled unbelonging (which can be equated with nomadism) amidst what should be home. He is also intrigued by postcolonial spaces and the infrastructure that people try not to see because it constitutes an instance of uncanniness at the heart of the modern metropole that summons the 'planned violence' of the past into the present: 'interstice, under-city, leftover space, urban township, tenements, shantytowns, tent cities, shitholes' (Mukherjee 2018:89). Mhlongo's Soweto in this collection —specifically the Avalon cemetery — could form part of this list. Gelder and Jacobs (1998:24) see uncanniness arise in postcolonies owing to the ambiguity generated by reconciliation and the impossibility of reconciliation, which 'coexist and flow through each other'. They write that while reconciliation is meant 'to bring the nation into contact with the ghosts of its past' and lay these to rest, instead these ghosts 'in fact set a whole range of things into motion: arguments over land, debates over "proper history" …, compensation and saying "sorry"' (Gelder & Jacobs 1998:30). Here we see manifestations of the sort of sociological haunting that Avery F. Gordon sets out and shows through her analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Such forms of haunting are at the root of her conception of 'sociological realism' (2008:147). From this, it appears that 'postcolonial horror' may already constitute a subgenre of speculative fiction.

Mhlongo's collection can, thus, be thought of as magical realism, horror, and even, in a special sense, realism. Any 'realism' in this collection is one that takes account of the ghosts and hauntings encountered in the postcolony. His stories are, perhaps, not the product of concerted efforts at evoking the fantastical, but, rather, a dedicated representation of the peculiar social world that now exists in the previously colonised space that is South Africa. This world of bizarre and startling juxtapositions is the result of repressed trauma and the blending of histories, cultures, subjectivities, and identities.

I contend that Mhlongo's work can further be considered 'speculative' in the sense that liminal spaces and societies, like South Africa, are inevitably caught up in ongoing speculation about identity, both at a national and a personal level. Mhlongo is a new African voice in speculative fiction who reflects this liminality in character, plot, and generic ambiguity. He also contributes to the ongoing internationalisation of magical realism and horror. In doing so he is helping to outline a 'genuinely Third World consciousness' (Rushdie 2012:301). The ghosts or shadows of those who are still alive, those who are dead, and those who are never truly dead haunt the

speculative social space of his fiction as much as they are haunted by it; they call upon their addressees to ensure that any future must be decolonised in order to be authentic and authentically the future; they demand to find rest in (a) land that has been returned and cleansed. Mhlongo's stories show this at the same time as they hint at the unlikelihood of doing so.

In the eponymous short story 'Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree,' the titular tree produces 'one mysterious rotten apricot annually' (Mhlongo 2018:193). The tree was planted by Apartheid authorities when they forcibly relocated Black people to Soweto, which had formerly been farmland: 'Maybe it was to fool us and make us believe this place was better than where we used to live' (Mhlongo 2018:195). Not only does the tree perpetually return this bitter uncanny harvest — one is reminded of Sterling Brown's poem 'The Bitter Fruit of the Tree' as well as the song *Strange Fruit* made famous by Billie Holiday — and thereby perpetually recall the trauma of the past, but the roots of bluegum trees from the original farm have cracked the windows and foundations of the houses. Here colonial socio-historical trauma returns materially from the outside, suggesting an ongoing uncanny 'unsettling' of this site of 'resettlement,' belying the Venda name given to the land, 'a place to rest' (Mhlongo 2018:195).

The plot where the tree is planted is also the burial ground of the umbilical cords of the five children born in the house. These create an ancestral bond to the land, but also act as an archaeological record of the suffering endured by the narrator's mother as a Black woman: '[l]ike any other black woman her age I know around this place, she has mastered the art of putting the past behind her' (Mhlongo 2018:196). The rope used by one character's father to hang himself to death from a tree is the double of the umbilical cord. Life and death intermingle intimately in historically-constituted liminality.

The tree comes to represent a peculiar duality. It is at once a spectre of colonial/Apartheid violence and a place of communion, the site of a ritual remembering, of narrating and sharing the past (births and deaths), and working through trauma. Hence, the fruit of this tree, while inherently rotten, is not only bitter in Mhlongo's account, but bittersweet: 'This apricot tree has multiple souls that fill me with wonder every morning and enchant me by afternoon. This tree has bittersweet memories, just like the fruit it bears' (Mhlongo 2018:207). The ghosts that the tree harbours are accommodated; they become more part of the gathering than they are feared; the tree's mysterious, ghostly aspects are embraced. It is a living memorial and a monument to shared life in the face of oppression and marginalisation.

In the story, the family gathering under the apricot tree takes place after the unveiling of the tombstone for the narrator's Uncle Tso at Avalon cemetery in Soweto. This cemetery features in several of the short stories in the collection, even giving its name to one. Much like the apricot tree, the cemetery is as much concerned with life as it is with death; it is also about death as a way of life. This is true in a double sense. On the one hand, there is the reflection from the narrator of 'Avalon', that 'city people have been desensitised when it comes to death' (Mhlongo 2018:101), which is a corollary to Mhlongo's own comments in an interview about the collection:

> I was born in Chiawelo, the Midway part. My home is literally facing Avalon Cemetery. All my life on weekends I would be woken up by a hearse siren, because Avalon is the biggest cemetery in South Africa, where millions of Sowetans have buried their dead. I guess this caused me to internalise death and burial so much that it has become sort of my weekend diet. But it's not just me; death has become so much part of our life in the township that it no longer scares us. In fact, the 'after tears' party is something most people look forward to. We have experienced so much death, from apartheid brutality to HIV and Aids, that it has almost lost its meaning. And it is within these sombre spaces that stories are born and told (Malec 2019).

Here death is interwoven with birth and life as the inevitable result of centuries-long colonial violence and ongoing post-colonial maladministration, corruption, and deprivation. A character in the short story 'Avalon' reflects bitterly that the cemetery is the 'only land that black people own here in Johannesburg' (Mhlongo 2018:87). On the other hand, there is the traditional African belief in ancestors, which means that, as the narrator asserts, 'Our dead are not dead. The dead never completely die, and the living never die' (Mhlongo 2018:98). One of the other characters in the story argues that these beliefs orient most Africans towards death in a problematic way: 'I think as Africans we care more for the dead than we do for the living' (Mhlongo 2018:102) and the narrator himself also reflects, 'Even when I'm dead, my living relatives are indebted to me' (Mhlongo 2018:98). The central role played by the 'living dead' and by death in African life becomes a topic of debate in the story along with the respect (and contemporary lack thereof) shown to the dead.

While the narrator of 'Avalon' assures us that, as an African, one must show respect for the dead to prevent them from haunting the living (Mhlongo 2018:98), these living dead still do not constitute a gothic motif in Mhlongo's fiction or make these stories horror stories. Instead, Mhlongo's stories in *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* fit more readily into definitions of magic realism, which (from its origins) has been concerned with casting off Western paradigms by presenting 'radically different world views (rational and magical) as well as natural and supernatural events without explicitly

problematizing them' (Chanady 2003:430). Chanady (2003:431) makes a distinction between Western-based 'fantastic' fiction where the supernatural is shown as 'a threat to reason (as well as personal safety)' and magical realist fiction where 'supernatural and natural co-exist on a seamless world' (Chanady 2003:433). The stories in the collection present an African worldview in which the supernatural and magical are necessary parts of rational consideration and decision-making; and, indeed, the stories' plots usually undermine any characters who problematise this seamlessness. While the storylines serve to reinforce this non-Western paradigm, there are many characters who, owing to being caught between African and Western paradigms, question this unified perspective. This is because Mhlongo's stories, while representing supernatural beliefs and events as non-fantastical, set these beliefs and events alongside contemporary post-colonial realities and spectacles. Avalon cemetery, at the intersection between the living and the dead, as well as between those who will never die and those who will never completely die, is also a crossroad between the traditional and the contemporary: 'Cemeteries like Avalon are just another convenient place to meet old friends and show off your new car and designer clothes' (Mhlongo 2018:101). They are places where one can frame political projects, gossip, announce news, and sign 'multimillion-rand tender deals' (Mhlongo 2018:101). Aesthetically, as well as for some characters, there is a clash of 'cultural imaginaries between Western and non-Western, modern and traditional' (Camayd-Freixas 1996:582). It is in that clash that Erik Camayd-Freixas locates the generating force of magical realism. Mhlongo's collection embraces and plays out both conceptualisations of magical realism.

Accompanying the duality and doubling of the cemetery as a place to show respect to one's ancestors, as well as a 'marketplace' (Mhlongo 2018:86), is the doubling and duality in the identities of characters. In 'My Father's Eyes', another story centred on Avalon cemetery, the narrator, Naledi, goes in search of her father's grave because her husband's family believe that, until she knows who her father is and where he is buried (his current 'address'), she cannot make peace with her ancestors. They believe that her ancestors' anger is the reason Naledi's daughter, Fufu, was born with cerebral palsy. They have been told by a traditional healer that the couple will never have healthy children until she makes peace with her father and paternal ancestors.

Naledi's mother will not tell her anything about her father other than that he died when she was very young. As a fatherless child, Naledi identified strongly as a Christian and welcomed having a heavenly father instead: 'Christianity swept away my boredom and loneliness' (Mhlongo 2018:9). She therefore takes exception to this request on the part of her husband and his family: 'I really don't understand

why we black people have to slaughter goats and cows to ask ancestors for money, employment and things that are beyond us by nature, like Fufu's disability' (Mhlongo 2018:9). However, she complies with her husband's wishes and extracts the address of a grave at Avalon cemetery from her mother. She visits the site regularly and eventually comes upon a party of people performing traditional rituals at the side of the grave. She is excited to meet her father's family, only to discover that her mother has lied to her about this being her father's grave. In fact, her father is still alive and her mother hid his identity from her because she was the product of rape. After confronting her father about his actions, she eventually finds marital happiness with the man she met at the side of what she thought was her father's grave, after her first marriage ended unhappily. The reader comes to understand this as she tells it to her mother's grave at another 'address' in Avalon cemetery.

'My Father's Eyes' problematises the dual character of post-colonial subjectivities in an ostensibly decolonised country and the story displays a particular form of uncanniness that operates on multiple levels. While Naledi does not believe in traditional religion, she comes to admit that it is 'a big mistake to assume that the dead are indeed silent, lifeless and powerless,' partly because she observes that, even today in the township, the dead are being asked to step in constantly (Mhlongo 2018:16-17). She also seeks out a traditional healer at a time of great indecision in the narrative and seems to have prescient dreams. The plot itself also seems ultimately to succumb, despite initially foregrounding a sceptical attitude, to a predestined happy ending once Naledi has made peace with her paternal ancestry. There is also tension, but not horror, as a result of the clash between Naledi's Christian beliefs and those of her traditional culture. The prescient dreams, omens, and the efficacy of the traditional healing, all unsettle Naledi and seem other-worldly, even if they ultimately become comforting. This is one aspect of uncanny experience as set out by Freud, where primitive beliefs, which a subject believes they have surmounted, resurface and appear true. But there is, simultaneously, the more psychoanalytic aspect of the uncanny, insofar as the events of the story recall Naledi's childhood trauma of not having a father and even, as in Hoffman's *The Sandman* (2014), elicit a primary myth of paternal prohibition. When she is told repeatedly by her mother that she has her father's eyes, Naledi remarks:

> It invoked the superstition that was always tucked away in my memory about fathers. I used to think that all fathers have big bright eyes to warn and frighten their daughters when they become naughty with the boys. My friend Morwa's father used to warn us with his big eyes when he caught us talking to boys along our streets (Mhlongo 2018:12).

Intriguingly, in this uncanny tale, as in Hoffman's, an unconscious association between eyes and masculine potency is thematically central to the piece. It may be that the story will uncannily recall Hoffmann's story for some readers.

Certainly, in 'My Father's Eyes,' as in *The Sandman* there is a strong association between sight, sexuality, and prohibition. In *The Sandman*, the protagonist, Nathaniel, is threatened with being blinded by a paternal figure as punishment for seeing something he was not supposed to see. Freud sees this threat as one of symbolic castration in that it would render the organs through which one desires inoperative. In Mhlongo's story a father's gaze polices young women's sexual behaviour. In addition, such a patrolling gaze is presumably pitted against the desiring eyes of the young men who survey the bodies of Naledi and Morwa. Such prohibitive paternal eyes are also a stark contrast to those that the narrator has inherited: those of a rapist. As in the *The Sandman*, there is a doubling of the paternal figure between the protective father and a perverse father (in this case, a rapist). In fact, there is further uncanny proliferation insofar as there is also the ghostly blameless father of Naledi's mother's invention (as Hamlet can attest, dead fathers often seem preferrable to any living equivalents). Naledi's eyes are, of course, also a repetition of her father's and she is, in a sense, haunted by his DNA. There may also be a lingering degree of unsettling ambiguity for the reader concerning the extent to which Morwa's father's eyes are not only policing, but also, perhaps, desiring. At very least, Morwa's father would almost certainly have looked in the same way at young women as the young men are now looking at his daughter; he must also, to an extent, be able to look at his daughter and her friend in the same way as these young men are looking in order to make such daily non-verbal warnings seem necessary. One might even suggest that there is a kind of 'double vision' in operation here, where eyes police precisely because they can see the desirability of that which they seek to police.

Mhlongo's collection seems to accord both with the characteristics of magical realism and with aspects of Freud's uncanny. Indeed, it seems that whether characters experience a sense of the uncanny or an affirmation of their traditional beliefs largely depends on which side of the decolonial divide they stand. As with Naledi, there may also be a journey from a sense of the uncanny to a reaffirmation of her traditional beliefs, which suggests the decolonisation of subjectivity. His collection accords to a great degree with the notion, as set out by Camayd-Frexias, of magical realism as a post-colonial discourse (also see Slemon 1995), which seeks to present an alternative worldview by reclaiming an indigenous past and thereby promoting a form of 'primitivism' (Camayd-Frexias 1996:584-585). In this sense, then both magical realism and Mhlongo's work, are gestures towards decolonisation. Mhlongo's work also fulfils Camayd-Frexias's theoretical definition of magical realism (even though

Camayd-Frexias derives his definition from the consistent features of Latin American magical realism) in the following respects:

1. That the 'primitive' narrative viewpoint is presented as given and that it clashes with the modern 'optic deemed rational and pragmatic';

2. That a different everyday reality is created through the invocation of alternative cultural norms and conventions, constitution a new basis for verisimilitude; and

3. That when it is read, the supernatural or mythical elements can be seen as allegorical for a history largely composed of colonial oppression and indigenous marginalisation (Camayd-Frexias 1996:586).

Yet, I suggest, Mhlongo's work goes further in that it consists of a metafictional double take. Mhlongo's characters live out clashes between realities, between the magical and primitive and between the pragmatic and modern, but this is explicitly debated within and between characters. While some characters present a narrative viewpoint where supernatural beliefs are a given, others struggle to reconcile these with their modern lives and subjectivities.

Nowhere is this struggle more pronounced or more clearly played out than in the Phala household in the story 'Curiosity Killed the Cat.'. In the story, a white neighbour's beloved pet dies in the Phalas' swimming pool at their upmarket home in the wealthy northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Their helper of fifteen years, Ousie Maria, firmly believes that cats are signs of witchcraft and bring bad luck. She cannot understand why white people seem so hypocritical in their treatment of different animals or how they can become emotionally attached them. She convinces Mr Phala to consult a traditional healer after he dreams about the dead cat; she firmly believes that the swimming pool needs to be ritually cleansed. Mrs Phala discovers this and is disgusted by Ousie and her huband's collusion and superstition in this matter. She marches out to Ousie's cottage and fires her, observing with disdain as she does so that Ousie has put her bed on bricks in order to be safe from evil spirits (tokoloshes). One can clearly see here the clash between traditional and modern imaginaries, made starkly evident by the context of the wealthy, traditionally white northern suburbs. Mrs Phala clearly feels that she and her husband left these beliefs behind them as part of their upward social progress. Class and culture further intersect here when Mrs Phala equates traditional beliefs with a lack of education. Mrs Phala is aghast that her husband would take advice from their 'illiterate domestic worker' (Mhlongo 2018:45). Mrs Phala is far more of a pragmatist and is horrified

by the emergence of these bizarre (and yet familiar) beliefs in the midst of her home and family. It is also fitting that the cat should drown in the swimming pool, a long-time symbol of white affluence in South Africa. The beliefs that this event rekindles in Mr Phala means that that the cat becomes an inescapable anamorphic stain of primitivism in the middle of Mrs Phala's white suburban fantasy. As with 'My Father's Eyes,' it would appear that a marriage has once more become a staging ground for the tension between traditional beliefs and a modern worldview.

Despite Mrs Phala's disgust and scepticism, the dead cat does seem to bring bad fortune to the Phala family. However, this comes in the form of the re-emergence of racism in the supposedly integrated suburbs of the new South Africa. Mrs Phala's children are labelled cat killers and Satanists by their classmates and the white parents at their expensive white private school; they are eventually expelled. Mrs Phala is irate at the injustice of this, but seeks a pragmatic solution by speaking to the white owner of the dead cat, to no avail. The horror in this story for the reader, apart from any sense of the uncanny experienced by Mrs Phala or her family, is the return of the racism and prejudice, so familiar and yet so often repressed in the national narrative and the narrative of so-called modernity. There is also the satirical suggestion that the white family's love for the cat is as 'irrational' as the beliefs that Mrs Phala has worked so hard to distance herself from.

We also see Mhlongo present the clash between indigenous beliefs and modern sensibilities and allude to the stalking presence of racism through the narrator of the story 'Avalon'. In observance of township custom, the narrator (Senzo), his girlfriend, and friends are attending the funeral of a neighbour. Bra Makhenzo, the friend driving the expensive vehicle they use to go to the cemetery, has recently switched allegiance from the ANC to the EFF and is arguing for the decolonisation of Avalon cemetery by removing the two white people buried there, namely the anti-apartheid stalwarts Joe Slovo and Helen Suzman. The funeral of their neighbour happens to coincide with the anniversary of Joe Slovo's death and the cemetery is full of people commemorating this. Also, in the back seat of the car, the reader discovers midway through the story, is an old man who says nothing but who shakes his head often and gestures with his eyebrows. The narrator tells us he is from a rural area and imagines that he must be offended by the disrespect the party in the car shows towards traditional beliefs, the graveyard, and by extension, to their ancestors. However, he rationalises their behaviour as an inevitable side-effect of urbanisation:

> The old man remained quiet. There was no sign of disgust or surprise in his eyes. But his thick black eyebrows rose, so that his face seemed surprised and a little frightened. This is Johannesburg, I reminded

> myself. The majority of people here know little about customs. It's not that we hold customs in contempt, but we have lived in the city for a long time. And this city has different cultures (Mhlongo 2018:90).

The old man seems in part to be a manifestation of the conflict in the narrator himself; indeed, any thoughts he appears to express are attributed to him by Senzo. It may be that he is the embodiment of the Senzo's own sense of guilt and alienation; he causes Senzo to recall a time when he lived in a rural village and was exposed to traditional customs. Senzo cannot help seeking the old man's approval by chastising his friends and telling them to be more respectful towards the dead.

The old man is an ancestral and uncanny, if not entirely ghostly, presence (no one else in the car even acknowledges him). This figure is also doubled by an old man who speaks later at the graveside, specifically reproving young people who continue to neglect their traditions and their ancestors, even though the country has ostensibly been decolonised. While no-one 'seemed to be taking him seriously'(Mhlongo 2018:101), Senzo is almost able to glimpse the spirit world as he speaks: 'He paused and looked up, as if he was inhaling and exhaling those invisible connections between the cemetery and the ancestors' (Mhlongo 2018:101); 'He spoke like a person with psychic abilities, who sees dreams and visions, and has the ability to communicate with the spirit world' (Mhlongo 2018:101). Senzo also documents two mysterious gusts of wind that come up and die away suddenly while the old man speaks. These experiences sit side-by-side in the story with his assertions that he does not believe in the power of ancestors because this equals a belief in 'predestination and fate' (Mhlongo 2018:98) and he prefers to cling to a belief in a combination of free will and chaos. There seems to be vacillation here between denial and repression and recognition and borderline epiphany. This wavering is further reflected in most of the stories in the collection, where attempts to deny the traditional and supernatural are met with prescient dreams and material consequences.

In the story 'Every Dog Has its Day', the character, Thapelo, is also attending a funeral at Avalon cemetery. He is unsure but anxious that he may have caused the death of the boy being buried. While he is not a believer in traditional medicine, he was persuaded by an elderly colleague to consult a *sangoma* after his belongings were stolen from his car. His colleague swears to the fact that, after he consulted this *sangoma*, items stolen from him were returned. Thapelo acquiesces and the *sangoma* gives him two liquor bottles filled with a strange concoction to put in his car, warning him not to drink the contents and reassuring him that these will protect him from evil. As much as Thapelo is not a believer in traditional medicine, the reader is told, '[t]he *sangoma*'s eyes seemed to look deep into Thapelo's heart and soul'

(Mhlongo 2018:190). As in the story 'Avalon', this representative of tradition seems to have extra sensory perception, as if dwelling in two realms simultaneously: 'When he spoke, [the sangoma's] nostrils dilated as if he was trying to catch the scent of Thapelo's problem' (Mhlongo 2018:190).

Later, Thapelo is carjacked at gunpoint by two young men, one of whom is Nino, the son of his girlfriend (Abongiwe). The hijackers lock him in the boot of the vehicle, but he manages to escape through the back seat. Upon doing so, he discovers the pair, who, thinking the bottles contained expensive whisky, have drunk their toxic contents and died. In addition to the dilemma of whether to tell Abongiwe how her son died, Thapelo is caught between two undesirable interpretations. According to the first, Nino's death is no doubt a result of poison, and more broadly the drugs, crime, and gangsterism that have become prevalent amongst the unemployed youth of South Africa; the second is that his death is a result of supernatural forces unleashed by Thapelo's consultation with the traditional healer. For Thapelo, ironically, the interpretation that seems more fantastical impinges more directly on him in terms of responsibility. There is also irony generated when Nino's teacher (someone apparently educated beyond superstition) assures those gathered at the grave that 'There is no supernatural solution to [the problems faced by the youth]. We must strengthen the important roles of structures such as community policing forums and neighbourhood watches' (Mhlongo 2018:184). It would appear from the story that there may actually be supernatural solutions available, even though they may be a little drastic. In this story too, two worlds co-exist and dual subjectivities persist. Also, once again, colonialism resurfaces structurally through inequality and social decay, alongside the potency of supernatural forces. Thapelo does not tell Abongiwe the truth and the reader wonders if this is because he does not want to admit to himself that supernatural solutions may indeed be efficacious as this would threaten his modern urban identity.

In addition to the uncanny effectiveness of traditional healers and beliefs in Mhlongo's collection, in 'Every Dog Has its Day', 'Avalon', and 'Curiosity Killed the Cat', the truly horrifying spectre that returns in the context of a supposedly decolonised contemporary South Africa is a form of inequality or white privilege. In 'Avalon', the driver of the expensive car in which the narrator is a passenger, Bra Makhenzo, argues that the cemetery itself still needs to be decolonised because of the two white struggle icons buried there. He wants their bodies to be exhumed and moved. He insists that the reason why black people now have to be buried two to a grave is 'because people like Slovo and Suzman have colonised our graveyards. We must decolonise Avalon and South Africa' (Mhlongo 2018:87). While it seems extreme to blame the lack of space in Avalon on these two individuals being buried there, the

implications in terms of land are far broader. Underlying Bra Makhenzo's invective is an integral aspect of decolonisation, namely taking back or repossessing the land from the colonisers and their descendants, calling in the debt of colonisation. Ironically, Bra Makhenzo's silver BMW is repossessed by a white agent hired by the bank during the funeral. The repossession agents choose the cemetery during the commemoration of Joe Slovo's death as the place to strike because they know that they will be protected from any mob by the police. This is even more ironic as Joe Slovo was General Secretary of the South African *Communist* Party (SACP), which opposes capitalist greed. The spectre of white privilege still haunts contemporary South Africa in the sustained racialised systems of banking and private property. There is further irony in the story when Bra Makhenzo accuses the repo men of not showing any respect by intruding on a funeral. The additional irony here is that Bra Makhenzo has shown little respect for tradition and the ancestors, claiming that traditional culture remains one of the 'greatest traps' (Mhlongo 2018:102) for Africans. He even takes issue with Africans getting themselves into debt to cover the cost of week-long funeral events for vast extended families, unlike whites who only have small functions for immediate family (Mhlongo 2018:102). He, however, has gotten himself into debt to buy a flashy car. The debts in question, however, go further than Bra Makhenzo and those who pay excessive amounts for funeral rites. There is a greater unspoken debt here that is the shadow of a legacy of deprivation; it is that incurred by colonisation and Apartheid and is so great that few dare confront it or talk of repossession and reparation. As with the other stories, one could also conjecture that Bra Makhenzo is being punished by the ancestors for his lack of respect. The mysterious gusts of wind arise just before the appearance of the repo men. The supernatural, contemporary, and historical are all knotted into one.

Mhlongo's (2018:97) myriad contrasting levels, the 'contradictory worlds' of the dead and the living, the uncanny and the commonplace, the supernatural and the natural, the sacred and the profane, the decolonial and the post-colonial, all playing out in a cemetery, are not combinations that have been artificially generated in order to generate a fantastic or marvellous effect. Rather they are in keeping with Alejo Carpentier's seminal definition of the marvellous real in that the short stories bring to light what is implicit in contemporary, post-colonial South Africa: 'the fantastic inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place, where improbable juxtapositions and marvellous mixtures exist by virtue of [South Africa's] varied history, geography, demography, and politics' (Zamora & Faris 1995:75). Of course, the original quote says Latin America in place of South Africa, but I contend that it is as true of Mhlongo's form of the marvellous real as it is of the various contexts (including Latin America) that Carpentier surveys in his article. Intriguingly perhaps, Carpentier himself finds inspiration for his conception for the 'marvellous real' in a

Jewish cemetery in Prague, with the haphazard headstones generating 'fortuitous encounter[s]' (Zamora & Faris 1995:82) with other sites in the city and recalling a supernatural being of Jewish folklore, namely a Golem (a created creature that is both alive and dead and whose purpose is to protect Jewish people). This is an allusion to a Czech folk tale, in which a Rabbi in Prague, Judah Loew ben Bezalel, creates a golem to take vengeance against those who oppressed the Jews both politically and culturally.

In the story named after the cemetery in Mhlongo's collection, 'Avalon', not only does the narrator assert that there is no such thing as a natural death in African culture, because every death is linked to witchcraft (Mhlongo 2018:97): he also claims the never-completely-dead ancestors haunt the living (Mhlongo 2018:98). It is worth exploring what could be meant by 'haunt' here.

I suggest that is not only about an individual needing to live in fear of displeasing or disrespecting his or her ancestors: 'if you don't respect the dead, you know what will befall you and your family' (Mhlongo 2018:98). It is also not only the uncanniness of encountering a form of primitivism in the middle of contemporary modernity (like a dead cat in one's aspirational swimming pool) or the unnerving presence of a silent disapproving figure. Mhlongo's stories show that haunting also occurs at the level of society and that it is not only a matter for the individual or a personal experience. As Eve Tuck and C. Ree (2013:642) reflect, 'individuals are haunted, but so are societies'. In post-colonial societies like South Africa, part of this haunting is the 'relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society's assurances of innocence and reconciliation' (Tuck & Ree 2013:642). Not only do colonial crimes and their victims haunt contemporary post-colonial societies (like mysterious rotten fruit that return perennially), but the very systems (or remnants thereof) which victimised them. Ghosts speak to the 'whole complicated sociality of a determining formation that seems inoperative (like slavery) or invisible (like racially gendered capitalism) but that is nonetheless alive and enforced' (Avery 2008:183). Mhlongo's stories address Apartheid and racial inequality. As in Morrison's Beloved, these are not private traumas that haunt only those directly descended from those wronged: 'the ghost cannot be simply tracked back to an individual loss or trauma' (Avery 2008:183). Instead, these ghosts have materiality and material effects that can be experienced by anyone who listens to them or for them: they are out there. As Avery points out with regards to *Beloved*: 'social memory is not just history, but haunting, not just context, but animated worldliness, not just the hard ground of infrastructural matters, but the shadowy grip of ghostly matters' (Avery 2008:165-166). Social relations, like those created by colonisation and Apartheid, are prepared in 'advance and they linger well beyond our individual time'

(Avery 2008:166). Anyone can bump into them, and they have an undeniable presence in the present. The ghosts that inhabit the apricot tree in Mhlongo's story of the same name are also present in the relations that have shaped and determined the narrator's existence. His mother did not marry his father out of love or to honour tradition, but to secure a home, a roof over her head, as the Apartheid government only gave homes to married couples: 'Were my mother's marriage and my birth really accidents of apartheid?' (Mhlongo 2018:205). This thought overwhelms the narrator, Sipho, and embitters him: 'Then let me part from mercy this very day, because mercy always devours its owner' (Mhlongo 2018:205). Tuck and Ree contend that mercy, as Sipho experiences, is always only temporary in a context haunted by colonisation and its material effects. The narrator of 'Under the Apricot Tree' is no more able to grant a permanent form of mercy than he can escape the ghosts that manifest themselves through his most intimate social relations: instead they are as 'deciduous' as the rotten fruit of the Apartheid-sown apricot tree. They return as often as the fantasy that they can be forever eluded through trite rhetoric about reconciliation or forgiveness:

> Mercy is a gift only ghosts can grant the living, and a gift ghosts cannot be forced, extorted, seduced, or tricked into giving. Even then, the fantasy of relief is deciduous. The gift is an illusion of relief and closure. Haunting can be deferred, delayed, and disseminated, but with some crimes of humanity—the violence of colonization—there is no putting to rest (Tuck & Ree 2013:648).

Senzo's words about haunting in 'Avalon' now take on additional significance. His exact words are that the dead 'haunt the hell out of the living. This is why the living live in fear' (Mhlongo 2018:98). As I have said, in the African tradition presented in the collection, the ancestors will seek to punish those who disrespect them. But it is also possible that the reason the living exist in a state of fear, at the least the living in Mhlongo's stories, is that these ancestors, these ghosts, have 'designs' (Avery 2008:64) on the living: '[t]he ghost has an agency on the people it is haunting and we can call that agency desire, motivation, or standpoint. And so its desires must be broached and we have to talk to it' (Avery 2008:179). The ghosts of colonial violence, according to Avery (2008) as well as Tuck and Ree (2013), desire to be heard and remembered in the interests of justice. Avery further hopes that, in acknowledging these ghosts, the living will be jolted into recognising the 'animating force' behind them, namely an 'oppressed past' (Avery 2008:66). This shock, for Avery, should mobilise the living to fight for this oppressed past, making it a 'lever for the work of the present: obliterating the sources and conditions that link the violence of what seems finished with the present, ending this history and setting in place a different future' (Avery 2008:66). In other words, these ghosts prompt those

they haunt towards the work of decolonisation: 'Decolonization must mean attending to ghosts, and arresting widespread denial of the violence done to them' (Tuck & Ree 2013:647). Colonisation's ghosts will not be put to rest or appeased 'by the settler society's assurances of [that society's] innocence and reconciliation' (Tuck & Ree 2013:642). It is up to the living to try to provide a 'hospitable memory for ghosts out of a concern for justice' (Avery 2008:60), to make a place for them under the apricot tree, and to represent them in stories: 'to write what can represent that haunting reminder, what can represent systematic injury and the remarkable lives made in the wake of the making of our social world' (Avery 2008:25). This is part of the respect that needs to be shown to these ghosts and also an apt summary of Mhlongo's collection.

Sipho in 'Avalon' humorously reflects that he will never know peace as an ancestor, because his descendants will constantly barrage him with requests for favours: 'decent jobs, houses, families, even if I died poor and without these luxuries' (Mhlongo 2018:98). The ancestors ask to be remembered and honoured, but the demands made on them also reflect the fact that the social relations under which they suffered are still part of the present. The ghosts of the ancestors are as tragically present in this way as they are in the traditions designed to propitiate them.

In the story 'Roped-In' the reader is almost given a glimpse of a bizarre underworld or afterlife, one that is not free from the scars of colonial inequality and exploitation. This surreal depiction takes the form of a story told by an impoverished illegal miner in an attempt to elicit money from a foolish and prejudiced old man. The old man is called Oupa Eastwood, but he has changed his surname from Oosthuizen. This is because he resents the Apartheid government for designating him 'coloured' and forcing him to live in Riverlea, a coloured township in the south of Johannesburg. The skyline is dominated by mine dumps, themselves reminders of colonial exploitation and looting of resources.

Oupa therefore wants nothing to do with Afrikaans or Afrikaners. The source of his bitterness is not, however, the racism and prejudice of the Apartheid government, but that he feels that he is white and that he should have been categorised in that way. He spends time imagining the successful life he might have had as his white *doppelgänger*: Oupa Oosthuizen in a nice Afrikaans middle-class suburb. His title, 'Oupa' (which means grandfather in Afrikaans), is ironically emblematic of his struggle with his own ancestry and cultural belonging: he appears to have no family or descendants. This may partly be the reason he seems to 'adopt' some of the young illegal miners who are also, in effect, without family or connection in South Africa.

At the centre of the story is a mystery of Oupa's own making. He is puzzled by the young men who walk around carrying lengths of rope and who subsequently disappear. He imagines they must be using the rope to commit suicide. He seems blissfully unaware of the illegal mining going on underneath his feet, taking place in the old dumps and in the holes in the ground surrounding Riverlea.

Having made friends with a young illegal immigrant from Zimbabwe, Kuda, who was trafficked to a white man, Mr Visser, for the purposes of mining, Oupa goes in search of him when he disappears. In his place, he finds another Zimbabwean immigrant called Tawanda. Tawanda weaves a fantastical tale for Oupa, telling him that Kuda, Oupa's friend, has probably returned to Zimbabwe after stealing money from his employer. The fantastical aspect is that Tawanda says that Kuda took the money from Mr Visser's underground supermarket or spaza shop. Tawanda tells Oupa there is an entire community living underground and that there are shops and prostitutes servicing this community. He tells Oupa that prices are exorbitant down there but that there are also opportunities for business and suggests that Oupa invests in starting a business with him in the underground city.

It is clear to the reader that Tawanda is attempting to trick Oupa out of some money. Oupa himself is not sure if this underground community is part of the 'spirit world' of black people, of which he is entirely suspicious; this is most likely because he likes to think of himself as white and, according to him, 'black people had an entirely different spirit world than white people' (Mhlongo 2018:83). If it is a spirit world, it is not one that is free from the social relations, exploitation, and white privilege of the everyday world. In some sense the fantasy does speak to Tawanda's desire to make profitable use of his not inconsiderable wits in a community where there are opportunities for illegal migrant workers. But, at the same time, according to Tawanda, Mr Visser owns the store down there and he is the one who beats Tawanda with a sjambok (Oupa observes the scars). The sjambok was a weapon favoured by the Apartheid police and the fact that black men are still being beaten with them in contemporary South Africa is another instance of the horrifying chronological uncanny I have discussed above.

In addition, Tawanda claims there are specialised thugs underground who rob the miners as they pass between this world and that above. If this is an underworld or afterlife, it is one that has become polluted with the social relations created through colonial history and ongoing dehumanisation, which has corrupted any pre-colonial imaginary. It is also a doubling and a literal figuring of the underclass that foreign illegal miners constitute.

Oupa is unsure if he will invest and is still perturbed by the ongoing disappearances. In an instance of personal uncanniness, Oupa associates Kuda's disappearance with that of a friend, Pieter, who, he swears, was swallowed by a hole near Riverlea when they were both children. Lately he has seen strange lights, shadowy figures, and strange noises near the hole. He avoids the hole because he fears seeing Pieter's ghost. The story suggests that the strange lights, noises, and figures Oupa sees are illegal miners using the old hole to as an entrance to the underground. However, they are, in a sense, 'ghosts' as they are liminal beings, with no legal existence and destined for premature death. Once again in Mhlongo's collection, the uncanny and the ghostly intermingle with social commentary. Perhaps the most unsettling thought is that beneath Johannesburg is a graveyard almost as populous as Avalon; and that the city of gold is still hungrily consuming the lives of impoverished black people, growing on top of their discarded, disregarded, and decaying corpses. These are living ghosts calling on us to account and to also provide a fuller account of the past.

In conclusion, Mhlongo's work represents the uncanny, magical, and ghostly elements operating in the peculiar post-colonial socio-cultural milieu of South Africa. His stories demonstrate that the work of decolonisation has barely begun, but also to show that an oppressed past has also led to a remarkable form of endurance and community. His South Africa is a speculative place and, indeed, many of his characters overtly speculate about their identities and wonder to which of the contradictory worlds that they occupy they actually belong. Mhlongo's South Africa is a place of possible futures and possible presents, a half-formed society (in V.S. Naipaul's sense of still suffering the effects of colonisation and subsequent corruption). It is poised between past and present, tradition and modernity, the dead and the living, post-colonialism and decolonisation, and this is fitting for a collection that reveals both a 'sociological and mythical reality' (Avery 2008:188), encompassing 'haunting and the complexity of power and personhood that inheres in its work' (Avery 2008:147). *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* is a work that effectively explores the liminality of Black people's experience in contemporary South Africa. It further reflects this liminality in the ambiguity of its genre. Finally, it underscores the fact that any work that wishes accurately to depict the sociological reality of spaces yet to be decolonised must make room for ghosts.

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