

– Introduction –

# *The Haunted Caribbean*

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Every island of the Caribbean is the site of a deep haunting. Before Columbus, the various indigenous peoples – the Arawaks, the Caribs, the Tainos – lived in relative harmony with the land, the sea and each other. Everything changed in 1492: the Amerindian people quickly were decimated, their presence erased by disease, wars and overwork. These are the Caribbean’s oldest ghosts, almost invisible in history yet still present in the form of place names, fragments of language, ancient foods and pockets of descendants speckling the islands.

Following Columbus, the islands saw some of the most brutal systems of work in all human history. The Atlantic slave trade fed the plantation system with an apparently endless supply of African bodies, uprooted and transported to the New World in a passage that must have felt like a death. To be a slave was to be a kind of ghost, living a half-life in a foreign land, an existence that denied the African’s humanity, making of the slave a kind of non-being, a shadow of history. The end of slavery did not lead easily to liberty for the formerly enslaved, nor did it erase the psychological, societal and economic effects of the institution. Slavery continues to haunt the Caribbean, the ghosts of the past live still in the minds and habits of Caribbean people, and history

is at times a burden, made heavy by the passage of time and the sheer magnitude of suffering that occurred on the plantation.

The haunting effects of slavery are felt not only in humans, but also in the landscape, which remains marked by the cruelties and excesses of the past. Plantation slavery was an environmental disaster: the efficiency with which the forests were cleared to make way for sugar, coffee, cocoa and other crops mirrored the callous treatment of transplanted Africans. The land itself became a kind of slave, one that bears to this day the scars of the past, in treeless landscapes and eroded hillsides, polluted rivers and beach resorts that are like new plantations, sites of privilege and exclusion that show time has done little to exorcise the ghosts of the past.

The sea is no less haunted and is often figured in Caribbean writing as an embodiment of the past: “The sea is history”, as Walcott wrote. The sea is a constant reminder of the passage from Africa; unlike the land, its form and appearance change little with time, and one senses when looking out to sea that the past remains close; its echoes return with the tides, ebbing and flowing in a way that recalls the many who died at sea and those who survived only to exist in a half-life on the plantation.

The Africans and Europeans were not the only people to traverse the sea, leaving behind their previous lives and travelling in some ways as ghosts of their former selves. When slavery ended, the labour shortage on the plantations was met by indentured labourers, largely transported from Asia – China, but mainly India. The *kala pani* in the Indo-Caribbean imagination becomes something like the Middle Passage, a rupture with the place of belonging and an initiation into a new place in which living and working conditions are barely distinguishable from slavery. The subsequent migrations to the Caribbean of diverse groups such as the Lebanese, Portuguese, English, Irish and Germans, in addition to intra-Caribbean migrations, make the region a place in which memories swirl, and the past is often associated with displacement, hardships, death and hauntings.

The descendants of the planters, existing now in various elite,

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largely white groups, must be no less haunted, though less by memories of hardship than of lost fortunes, privileges eroded, and a sense that the present and future will never bring back the perceived glories of the past. Economically, the Caribbean never will bring the riches that the past provided. More obliquely, such elite groups may be haunted by the attitudes and prejudices of the past; the ghosts of the forefathers might stand as exemplars of what white Caribbeans are supposed to be: apart from, and yet in control of, the broader society. Elitism haunts the Caribbean, and in the stark contrasts between rich and poor are found phantoms of social attitudes that continue to deform its societies.

Caribbean history tells another story: that of revolt and revolution, of turbulent times past and present, and of the will of the people to live in freedom. The victory of the people of Haiti over the French, sealed in the Proclamation of Independence, made by the former slave Jean-Jacques Dessalines on 1 January 1804, stands as one of the most remarkable events in world history. The memory of the glorious revolution, however, brings into sharp relief the subsequent difficulties that Haiti has endured, and in a sense the victory haunts the present, so that figures such as Dessalines, Toussaint Louverture, Henry Christophe and the tens of thousands of rebel slaves are ghosts of a sort, haunting the present with their unfulfilled promises of freedom and liberty. In Haiti and other Caribbean nations, the end of colonialism did not signal the end of repressive political regimes. Indeed, dictatorships and other forms of authoritarian rule have had the effect of perpetuating the violence of colonialism, and it is significant that notorious pro-government militia groups in Haiti – the Tontons Macoutes and the Chimères – adopted names that refer to folkloric, ghostly figures, and thereby play on the fear that to live in the present is to be haunted by the vengeful and violent ghosts of the past.

Caribbean folklore is itself extremely rich in its evocation of terrifying, ghostly figures. Duppies are believed to be ghosts that roam the earth at night; duens represent the souls of unbaptized children, again condemned to walk the earth restlessly. Faceless, and with their feet turned backwards, they seem to recall child slaves, their identities

erased and their bodies contorted. The Diabliesse figure also appears as a figure from colonial times: with one cloven foot, and dressed elegantly in a fancy blouse and long petticoated skirts, her face hidden under a wide-brimmed hat in a way that suggests the faceless tyranny of the planter class, cast as devils in the popular imagination. Mama Dlo is a half-woman, half-snake figure who lives in the forests and takes vengeance on men who cut down trees or kill animals indiscriminately by forcing them to marry her, a state that endures through life and into the afterlife. The environmental subtext in many of these stories indicates the folkloric awareness of ecological destruction and the ways in which such actions come back to haunt future generations. In other ways, nature brings death directly, through hurricanes, floods, volcanoes, earthquakes and other events that have shaped Caribbean history. Each new event brings back memories of previous deathly natural disasters and creates new ghosts for the living to remember and be haunted by.

Modern migrations from the islands involve new journeys for many Caribbean people, including the considerable number of writers who live outside the region. The displacement and ruptures of exile in turn constitute a break with the place of origin, and with the individual and collective contexts in which the migrant was born. In many cases, the island becomes a place of troubled memories, of events that continue to live with the exile, making the displaced person an individual haunted by the lost time and place.

Given the history of the Caribbean, it is not surprising that much of the region's literature bears a haunted quality: ghosts are everywhere, be they of the Amerindians, the African ancestors, the slaves, the planters, the indentured workers, the victims of dictatorships, foreign invasions and natural disasters, or the modern exiles. To a large extent, Caribbean fiction in general is a collection of ghost stories, tales of haunted people, memories and places. The authors featured in *The Haunted Tropics: Caribbean Ghost Stories* were encouraged to explore this idea, and to create a specifically Caribbean ghost story genre. Their remit was to draw on their own understanding of Caribbean time, history, place and being, and to renew a genre that has long been one of

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the most popular of all literary forms. What, they were asked, can the Caribbean add to the ghost story genre? And conversely, what can the ghost story genre reveal about the Caribbean, past and present? The first collection of its kind, this book brings together some of the region's leading contemporary authors, from the anglophone, francophone and hispanophone Caribbean, as well as the United States and Canada, and constitutes a unique, transcultural anthology in which living authors evoke the dead, the undead and the dying, the ghosts that haunt their experiences, and their works as modern writers of the Caribbean.