

THE GHOSTS OF LILITH: HAUNTING NARRATIVES OF WITNESS AND THE POSTCOLONIAL POETRY OF SHIVANEE RAMLOCHAN

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Abstract

This article discusses some of the themes and implications of Lilith's story. After setting the figure of Lilith in an historical context of Sumerian demonology and first millennium CE Babylonian midrash, we reflect on the current critical, feminist, postcolonial, and poetic up-take of this curious tale of Adam's first wife. We consider how Lilith's story appears in these readings, woven through migrated narratives of loss and trauma drawn from widely different communities, as a thread of ghostly witness to suffering and resilience within the everyday lives of women and others who have been bound by heteropatriarchal and colonial tropes and traditions, to the materiality of the body in birth, vulnerability to violence and death. Briefly illustrating Lilith as expressed in George MacDonald's *Lilith* (1895), we draw on the work of Gayatri Spivak and Mayra Rivera to explore contemporary traces of Lilith's presence in the writings of Alicia Ostriker and, especially, Trinidadian poet, Shivane Ramlochan. In reference to Ramlochan's debut collection, *Everyone Knows I am a Haunting* (2017) we consider how Lilith is used to challenge these limiting tropes and traditions, giving value to complex identities and material existences that resist efforts to impose silence or contest memories that trouble and unsettle.

Keywords: Lilith; Feminism; Haunting; Witness; Postcolonial; Poetry.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will detail the mythical and literary journey of Lilith from her first imaginings in Mesopotamian mythology to her presence in the poetry of 21st-century Trinidadian poet Shivane Ramlochan. We will explore the unsettling role her presence plays for the (postcolonial/feminist/queer) reader, writer, and theologian. We see how this ghostly presence and haunting, with reference to Gayatri Spivak and Mayra Rivera, is the perfect trope for postcolonial enquiry that continues to bear witness to painful (his)stories.

II. IN THE BEGINNING . . .

The story about the creation of woman is an old story in the so-called first world—the attempt to put a stamp on flesh, to dominate the body and that embodied (m)other, Eve who is the wife, the support worker and all-purpose domestic, the one who should not be allowed to put a stamp on you. Your sin as Man—to use a disputed term—is that in spite of yourself, you are still desiring flesh/body/earth/dependent/mortally vulnerable. You are too like woman.

So, God deliberately drew close with woman-flesh in real time, with the aim of rescuing Mankind—to use a disputed term—from his fatal involvement.

Whilst the Christian Church eventually committed itself to the incarnational statement of Chalcedon in 451CE, that established Christ's nature as equally human and divine, it also struggled with this form of entanglement. The first serious heresy it dismissed was that of Docetism: the claim that Jesus merely *appeared* to be human.¹ It is not hard to understand why some drifted in this direction, reflecting assumptions more in keeping with the gendered binaries of their Hellenistic inheritance, or subject to the influence of Jewish biblical traditions and their 'obsessively told and retold story of erased female power'.² Perhaps it is to the credit of the Church therefore, that it has continued to struggle with the conundrum, refusing to resolve flesh into Word or Word into flesh. Nonetheless, the privilege of (masculine) divinity has prevailed in this 'first' world context over two millennia, unchallenged overtly, until the emergence of feminist theology in the middle of the 20th century when we begin to hear and see more of Lilith.

III. LILITH

Lilith is a spirit of contestation in these terms, and her story is older even than Adam and Eve. Lilith, as goddess or patron saint, has been (re?)claimed in the 20th and 21st centuries, by women and writers, particularly feminists. But the

origins of her character and powers, and in most subsequent interpretation, align her with evil and malevolence. Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro claims that the oldest textual traces go back to Sumerian writings in the mid third millennium BCE, where she appears as a vampire demoness—‘a succubus’.³ In the epic Gilgamesh she appears as a desert-dwelling being, who, ‘with the legendary serpent and eagle dwell together inside a tree trunk in the garden of Inanna, the Goddess of fertility, sensual love and wanton sexuality, warfare, sudden death and rebirth’.⁴ In Mesopotamian mythology Lilith is one of a number of nocturnal demons.⁵ There is even a reference to her in the canonical biblical text in Isaiah 34. Here, too, she appears at home in Isaiah’s apocalyptic vision of the Day of the Lord, alongside hyenas and goat-demons in a landscape of inhospitable desert. In the first millennium CE, folkloric and archaeological evidence such as incantation bowls and rabbinic commentary emanating from Babylonian Judaism witness further development of the character as demonic.⁶ She continues to be associated with the desert but now also with the depths of the sea or ocean. As a winged spirit, she brings death and destruction into people’s homes. She is dangerous to the newborn. She seduces men for the purposes of stealing their seminal fluid to beget demons.⁷ What Shapiro describes as ‘Lilith’s integrative myth’ really only begins to appear in versions of the pseudo epigraphical Ben Sira literature which was widely available during the eighth century CE among Babylonian Jews, and attributed to a Sage of the second century CE.⁸ These accounts constitute midrashic reflections on the story of creation in Genesis 2–3, as in this version from the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*:

When the Almighty—may His name be praised—created the first solitary man, He said: It is not good for man to be alone. And He fashioned for man a woman from the earth, like him (Adam), and called her Lilith. Soon, they began to *quarrel* with each other. She said to him: I will not *lie underneath*, and he said: I will not lie *underneath* but above, for you are meant to lie underneath and I to lie above. She said to him; We are both equal, because we are both (created) from the earth. But they didn’t listen to each other. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced God’s avowed name and flew into the air. Adam stood in prayer before his Creator and said: Lord of the World! The woman you have given me has gone away from me. Immediately, the Almighty—may His name be praised—said to him (Adam): If she decides to return, it is good, but if not, then she must take it upon herself to ensure that a hundred of her children die each day. They went to her and found her in the middle of the sea, in the raging waters in which one day the Egyptians would be drowned. And they told her the word of God. But she refused to return.⁹

Whatever the early midrashists intended, Lilith could quite easily be discounted as an amplification of the Eve story. Tertullian infamously described

Eve as ‘the devil’s gateway’¹⁰ A 19th-century example of this form of interpretation of Lilith appears in George MacDonald’s fantasy ‘romance’, *Lilith*, first published in 1895.¹¹ Here Lilith is a beautiful, untrustworthy, unruly princess and a powerful magician and shape-shifter. Her evil deeds are most notably seeking to prevent the birth of babies or to destroy any infants that come to birth. She is a careless, tyrannical ruler of her own city and seeks the death of her own daughter. The daughter, in contrast, lives in a forest filled with abandoned babies whom she rescues, mothers and protects in a state of child-like innocence. It is easy to trace here the outlines of oppositional modes of femininity: only one of which is approved within this narrative context. MacDonald presses home the choices facing Lilith in terms that are redemptive within a clearly Christian framing: ‘There is no slave but the creature that wills against its creator.’¹² Lilith is finally induced to submit after a moral examination disturbingly represented as her penetration by a white hot, incandescent ‘worm-thing’¹³ and by the severing of her hand—in which it is implied, her wilful defiance resides—by an angelic sword.¹⁴ It is not hard to see how, from a (dominant, masculinist) Christian perspective, she must remain anathema. Nevertheless, given the history of feminist writing as a re-visioning¹⁵ and of feminist hermeneutics as practices of suspicious, desiring, and indeterminate interpretation¹⁶ it is clear why contemporary feminist readings of Lilith have claimed her, not the least because, as a result of her refusals, she takes no part in the drama that is called ‘the Fall’. In these forms of feminist re-readings, she is not subject to her husband. She does not forfeit eternal life.

So let us now turn to some more recent re-readings. Alicia Ostriker sits within a school of American feminist criticism known as ‘gynocriticism’, defined by Elaine Showalter in the 1980s as an historically-oriented criticism that ‘looks at women’s writing as it has actually occurred and tries to define its specific characteristics of language, genre, and literary influence, within a cultural network that includes variables of race, class, and nationality’.¹⁷ Ostriker is both a poet and a critic, and her response to the traditionally gendered body/mind dichotomy has been to propose the body as at one with the mind ‘an intelligently creative force’¹⁸ a gynocentric vision¹⁹ in which it is ‘not that the Logos condescends to incarnate itself, but that Flesh becomes Word’.²⁰ One example of her ‘revisionary mythmaking’²¹—with its reference to the work of another poet/critic, Adrienne Rich²²—occurs in a collection called ‘The Lilith Poems’.²³ Drawing on her Jewish heritage, there are many references in her work to the Hebrew Bible and its rich assortment of male and female characters. Interestingly, in focusing on Lilith, she directs attention to her in the company of three other women in the Hebrew Bible who are deliberately defiant.²⁴ Apart from Eve—who succeeds Lilith as Adam’s wife—women like Lot’s wife and Vashti provide at least footnotes on the female non-conformer within that biblical context.²⁵ As Ostriker has argued:

vital myths are paradoxically both public and private, . . . they encode both consent to and dissent from existing power structures, and . . . they have at all times a potential for being interpreted both officially and subversively.²⁶

Specifically, within the Jewish tradition of midrash, Rivkah Walton makes reference to the period between 70 and 1200 CE in which its genius was to:

read back into their ancient, immutable, foundational text resolutions of those conflicts that left the text intact, but to interpret it viably for the new worlds in which they found themselves. Most importantly, when they did so, they did not see the 'new' interpretation as new at all—but simply as another meaning that was lying in wait, just under the surface, to be uncovered.²⁷

This midrashic model holds out the possibility, not afforded to Lilith in Ben Sira's reading and only at a heavy cost in MacDonald's version, of staying within the fold. In a world that confronted Judaism with 'Hellenic thought, conquest by Rome, the destruction of the Temple, the loss of the land of Israel, and the rise first of Christianity and then Islam',²⁸ in this sense, then, new readings may perhaps provide feminist readers with a way of keeping faith with a tradition that otherwise appears out of touch with the 21st century, characterised by egalitarian aspirations and a desire to deconstruct gender binaries. Returning to Ostriker, we see that she locates Lilith not simply by gender but also by other intersectional considerations. Picking up on Lilith's relationship with Adam, Ostriker portrays her as the available and undefended maid with her 'black behind and . . .woolly black hair'.²⁹ She is also the childminder, the cleaner, the agricultural worker; all those who are necessary but whose claims (to justice and fairness, to be treated with humanity) are resented by the privileged (Adam). So, they cannot merely be forgotten but must be scrubbed out, much as Lilith scrubs the toilets. She is Cixous and Clément's 'ground where steps are taken'³⁰ but with the added resonance that this dependence must be repeatedly excised, repudiated: 'In this place you name paradise, while you/Wear amulets and cast spells/Against me in your weakness.'³¹ In other words, as subaltern, though she does not speak, she can still frighten her Master: 'Catch me on a Saturday night/In my high heels stepping out and you shiver/I have the keys to your front door/In my pocket.'³² And so, Lilith, pushed to the limits, 'jumps the fence'. She has had enough of Adam's pretensions. She knows, though he claims to be one, that he is not 'the boss of something' but simply 'taking orders',³³ and in reference to Genesis 2:19–20, Ostriker's Lilith derides his co-creator status: 'They say he invented names, and it's true/He called me shrew, bitch, witch/And dumb cunt . . .'.³⁴ Deconstructing scripture, Lilith observes that the new woman—Eve—is foundation, cause, 'mother tongue' whilst God's name for her is 'Be quiet'.³⁵ In the

final three poems of the sequence, Ostriker explores the kind of resistance Lilith offers in terms of both midrashic and feminist revision. Lilith is Eve's other half, and neither one emerges unscathed. Together, however, they make it clear that the primal female/maternal body that has caused patriarchal cultures so much anxiety, cannot simply be erased because it is:

... part of mystery that is
 Bigger than language
 And changes the language
 And bursts it apart
 And grows up and
 Wildly away out of it.³⁶

IV. SHIVANEE RAMLOCHAN

Whilst Lilith features as the main character of Ostriker's poem collection, she is simply one amongst many varied references that find expression in Shivane Ramlochan's collection *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting*.³⁷ Where Ostriker is clearly a feminist writer, Ramlochan's poetry draws us further into the discourse of women's postcolonial writing. Ramlochan expands her symbolic resonances further—with reference to the Virgin [Mary], and Duenne (Trinidadian female demon/goddess), as well as a Hindu pantheon of Kali, Devi, Shiva, Krishna, and Saraswati (amongst others)—to confront the restraints of colonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative narratives. The characters of Lilith, and others, as evoked in Ramlochan's provocative words, bear witness to alternative histories. The very existence of Lilith acts as a haunting; she haunts the contemporary reader and exposes the presence of an undesirable, ambiguous and violent past, present, and future.

We will offer a reading of Ramlochan's conjuring of Lilith, alongside reference to Mayra Rivera's article 'Ghostly Encounters: Spivak, Memory, and the Holy Ghost'³⁸ Rivera responds to Gayatri Spivak's idea of reading as 'hauntology' in relation to the Gospels as ghost stories, or at least, as hauntings.³⁹ She combines the idea of haunting (and thus hauntology) with the act and burden of bearing witness to or being the witness of (particularly violent and catastrophic) events, evoked by the Gospel stories of Mary Magdalene and the disciples witnessing the ghost of Christ after his death. Rivera links her own reading of the Gospel stories as haunting narratives with postcolonial enquiry. It is 'a space of questioning—[it] explores the intervals between history and narration'. Postcolonial enquiry and reading therefore 'entails not merely a different reading or appropriation of history but an investigation of the very

dynamics of remembrance: the possibilities and limits of a relation to the past and the responsibilities bestowed by an encounter with ghosts'.⁴⁰ Ramlochan's debut collection of poetry, poignantly called *Everyone Knows I am a Haunting*, presents a provocative example of the way in which our bodies bear witness to history and the burden of being haunted by its ghosts. For Ramlochan, this spectral encounter is utterly embodying; she herself is a haunting—something that exists in-between, outside of, the normative structures of the world, or existence itself. The particular ghost of interest within the poems is Lilith, and how she (as a Talmudic, mythic figure) came to be conjured by an Indo-Trinidadian poet alongside Duenne and Kali. Though when we compare the stories of these mythic figures, and the violent struggles they experience, the link between them is clear.

Ramlochan describes what she calls her 'religious hybridity' in the following way:

My mother is Roman Catholic, the product of an Indo-Caribbean family subject to, and (largely) happily resident in, Christian proselytization. My father's people are Hindu. With neither parent didactic in their approach to household gods, I found myself positioned reflectively in the grey space between both faiths in my girlhood. I was drawn to but did not understand Hinduism; I understood more of, but was not drawn to Christianity or any of its chambers. This faithful/faithless doubt, rapture, and curiosity I've grappled with for two and a half decades has seeped into everything I do, I imagine. All souls' is as native to some of the intention and sculpture of this work as is Divali. Across both faiths, I have absorbed markers of ritual like tattoos, and several of these sentiments show up in the poems: that the preparation of one's dead for burial or burning is an imperative responsibility of the adult child; that feasting and fasting are both ways to converse with the divine; that song transports us to the weald of the God-Beloved.

Perhaps the most important thing I've learned from my religious hybridity is that no faith has ever fully given me a home. In these poems, part of what I strive to teach myself is the charity of turning my face from God, to grant her some respite from the endless labour of saving and setting on fire.⁴¹

Ramlochan is both haunted by and bearing witness to a cacophony of ritual and myth; these are inscribed on her body, as she says, like tattoos. She is the haunting of these faiths and their myths, alongside the precarious and violent histories of colonialism, slavery, and indentured labour. Her poetry, and her encounter with these traditions, is about the 'dynamics of remembrance'. Our racial, gendered, othered bodies often expose physical dynamics of remembrance: our physical bodies determine how we are treated in certain ways in certain contexts, and therefore entangled in histories of conflict, racism, and misogyny. These 'dynamics' and histories then become inscribed into the very fabric of our being, and becoming (and maybe our ability to recognise God in

our reflected image). Ramlochan's final sentence quoted above is particularly telling. Through her poetry she hopes to teach herself 'the charity of turning my face from God, to grant her some respite from the endless labour . . .'. This magical rendition of devotion turns its usual manifestation (that is the constant communication with the divine via prayer, dedications and requests) on its head. Ramlochan presents an alternative notion of (female) piety by turning her face away from God to configure a more mystical communication with the divine.⁴² It is Ramlochan's humble outside-ness, or ghostliness, that seals her devotion.

It is at this point that Ramlochan's conjuring of Lilith prompts some careful reflection. There are three particular aspects of interest that we will explore here: (1) That Lilith's body, as captured in myth, is the ideal conduit for Ramlochan's explorations of the colonial, queer, female body. Lilith emerges as a trope for those excluded from the patriarchal and colonial norms of standardised histories. She bears witness to another version of history and narrative; (2) That her poems can be read as a response to Lilith as captured briefly in Isaiah 34:14 as a desert creature who dwells in the wilderness with other 'taloned' and hooved creatures such as owls and hyenas; (3) That the presence of Lilith in Ramlochan's poetry demonstrates the central role that postcolonial literature and poetry play in bearing witness to uncomfortable and forgotten pasts, so, as Spivak says, the 'ghost can dance in the fault [line of history]'.⁴³ 'Hauntology' becomes the material act of bearing witness again. What is important to remember is that it is in the material realities and movements of the world and the body that these hauntings are realised; as Ramlochan says, this history is imprinted on her, like tattoos on her skin.

V. LILITH: A TROPE FOR EXCLUDED BODIES

In the poem 'Duenne Lilith',⁴⁴ Ramlochan engages in a dialogue with goddesses and ghosts inherited from an upbringing of 'religious hybridity'. Duenne and Lilith are the named voices but there are also echoes of the relationship between Adam and Eve, and Eve and Lilith (as well as the Hindu festival of Holi). In particular, the poem might be read as Eve's fictional reply to Lilith after she was banished from the Garden of Eden. As we identified in relation to Ostriker's poetry, Lilith is Eve's 'other half' and both carry the scars of patriarchal narratives:

He breaks, weeping, but
I basket his falling ribs

...

... Pierce
 the wasp-netting that masks me, sternum to swollen lids
 with your goddess tongue. Haunt me; say
 my name and hoard me—fold my bones, fit me thimble, docile—
 I will breathe in to the welts, endure it.

Lilith/Duenne is called to the wilderness ('before the woods/called you to bride') and the narrator (Eve?) remains to 'press our father's body back together again', to bear witness to Lilith's banishment, for all of eternity. The poem becomes a prayer to Lilith: 'Sister, find me ... Haunt me'; 'Save me'; 'Sister, keep vigil'.⁴⁵ Eve will forever be haunted by Lilith's ghost; and offers her own body to bear witness to this haunting. The narrator's voice can be extended further; it is the voice of all those silenced by the creation of a heteronormative, white, male world. We all ask to be found and haunted by Lilith, by Duenne, so we can bear witness to this exclusion. What is particularly powerful in this poem, and most of the collection, is the physical suffering imposed on the body as a result of this haunting. This is not a passive ghost that dwells outside of the physical body and immaterial world, but a ghost that manifests in the 'swollen lids', and broken bones of our bodies: 'I will breathe into the welts, endure it.'⁴⁶ In the context of the Caribbean, and the presence of Duenne, this haunting is about the continued *physical* memory of slavery, colonial violence and indentured labour. In Ramlochan's poetry, this is particularly about the memory and haunting of sexual violence and rape in the colonial context; this is about the very *real* impact on bodies that continue to be marginalised and violated as a result of colonial and gendered violence. Ghosts emerge across these histories and memories; these ghosts of different traditions 'dance in the fault lines' and present the possibility of survival and the presence of hope. Lilith appears to be one such ghost dancing in the faultlines of Caribbean (and Christian) history. It is here that we see Lilith and Duenne acting as powerful tropes for alternative identities, violated bodies and unspoken histories.

In the poem 'Duenne Lara', the physicality of this haunting is again emphasised:

I scratch you through the water mirror, suck you under my talons,
 will you knock and claim me? I keep
 this one soft garden in my trachea vacant; I
 stripped speech for split gourds, choking on seeds so you
 might come live in me, little
 lover, come

claim these metatarsal prayers.
Everyone knows I am a haunting.⁴⁷

In the Caribbean context, Duenne is a ghost child who lures children and babies away to the forest to dwell in the world between life and death. The lure of the ghost child is also the lure of Lilith (or even the goddess Kali) as demonstrated in the referral to the narrator's talons: 'I . . . suck you under my talons.'⁴⁸ A dominant theme of these figures is that they challenge or pervert the ideal maternal and female body. The Goddess Kali fiercely protects her children but wears the skulls of babies around her neck. Lilith's eternal punishment is to give birth to hundreds of dead babies every day. She brings fear and death to your home, and hunts newborn babies, as does Duenne. Lilith is sexually promiscuous and a monstrous form of femininity (she has talons and dwells with other demon creatures of the wilderness). Ramlochan's combining of a love poem alongside the use of very physical, anatomical, and often violent, language jars the reader. The haunting is this discomfort and ambiguity; it is that nagging sense that these things don't belong in the same sentence, or poem: 'I keep/ this one soft garden in my trachea vacant/ . . . come claim these metatarsal prayers.'⁴⁹ Will she embrace me or devour me? Is this a love poem or a horror story? This discomfort is a very provocative example of ghosts dancing in the faultlines of history.

Duenne dwells in the forest, as Lilith does in the desert wilderness. This peripheral space in folklore and sacred texts is presented as a threat—a place of demons and disorder, where all creation ceases, a place that you need to stay away from. It is outside of the normative, structured and safe world. However, Ramlochan uses the metaphor of the forest and wilderness to indicate the possibilities that dwell outside the parameters of the colonial and heteronormative white world:

Darkling son, neither female nor filial,
the schoolmistress tried to beat the unchristian out of you.
I rinsed her religion from your blue shirt every Sunday.
I kept your khakis clean and my own tail hidden.
Nothing the forest raises is a monster.⁵⁰

It is in the forest that creativity can flourish, for nothing it creates can be a monster. For those that are banished from the Garden of Eden (or from the colonial, Christian, white world), those 'darkling son[s], neither female nor filial', because their bodies do not conform ('I rinsed her religion from you . . . and my own tail hidden'), the forest provides a home.

VI. A RE-IMAGINING OF ISAIAH 34:14

The references to Lilith, to the forest/wilderness, and to taloned and tailed creatures are evocative of the one biblical reference to Lilith in Isaiah 34:14: 'And desert creatures will meet with hyenas, and goat-demons will call out to each other. There also Liliths will settle, and find for themselves a resting place' (ISV). For Isaiah, reference to Lilith and other creatures of the night and wasteland, provides a threat to the people of God about what will happen to them if they worship false idols and dwell with outsiders and foreigners. Ramlochan's poetry, in many ways, can arguably be read as Lilith's response to Isaiah on behalf of all those excluded from the standard (white, male) narratives of history. What would Lilith say about her 'resting place' and how she came to be there?

The poem 'I see that Lilith hath been with thee again' elucidates Lilith's provocative place in the theological world, whilst also bearing witness for those who exist at the faultlines of history. The poem also provides reflection on the key themes of this special issue on materiality, religion and writing:

Love,
 I saw our daughter in the grocery store again.
 This time, she'd discarded the old shoes,
 because finally,
 her hooves are coming through.
 She was using her talons to tear through meat packets.⁵¹

To locate the taloned wild creature that is Lilith in the mundane and every day (the grocery store), recognises that our bodies, and our becoming, is entangled in the material realities, and social structures of the world around us. As Rivera reminds us, transcendence, or 'incarnation', is realised through and in our material bodies not beyond them ('my becoming is dependent on and bound to other bodies'.⁵²) To locate Lilith's wild body in a supermarket, and to present her as the child of same-sex parents, who are worried about their daughter and if they have raised her well, reminds us that Lilith, in all her monstrosity and divinity, is a human creation. We birthed her from within the misogynistic realities of the world. In the poem, mother and daughter talk. Lilith reassures her mum that she is ok, she has found her place in the world: 'Tell Mum don't worry ... You raised me well ...'.⁵³ In her letter to her partner, Mother writes 'Honey, oh honey,/ we did good .../ We know how to breathe now ...'.⁵⁴ The sigh of relief from Lilith's loving parents is testimony to the complex layers of the past that define our present, and our future. The very fabric of our beings and bodies bear witness to horrors from the past but also love (the first word of the poem, set alone on the first line), which paves the way for hope, creativity and survival. The divine dwells among the

perverse commodities of the everyday, in the meat packets and produce aisles, in unusual and abject ways. Our human vulnerability is the site of creativity.

VII. POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE AS BEARING WITNESS

Ramlochan's work is a fine example of the role postcolonial literature and poetry plays in bearing witness to uncomfortable and unforgettable pasts. The ghostly presence of Lilith, and other divine figures, within the collection is utterly compelling, and speaks directly to what Spivak calls 'hauntology'. Writers, such as Ramlochan, conjure remnants of the past, of unusual, discarded, abject stories that dwell in the fault lines of a variety of histories (Christian, Hindu, Caribbean, European, colonial, female, queer, etc.) with magical results. Lilith as the monstrous form of femininity, who presents as both a threat in George MacDonald's terms (you will be banished from Eden if you don't conform to patriarchy) and a saviour (she is evidence that alternative forms of femininity exist in the fabric of our traditions) is exactly the type of 'ghost' that Ramlochan is haunted by and that her poetry bears witness to. Through Ramlochan's witness, her expert hauntology, if you like, we are able to bring to the surface the ghosts that dwell in all of us in our material interrelationships with the complexities of our literary and—here—biblical hi/stories. Her writing ensures that alternative versions are always told/celebrated. The poem 'My sister at the coral mouth' reads as a lament or prayer to the gods, as they stitch together the fault lines at the bottom of the ocean: 'sewing drought in damp recesses'.⁵⁵ Ramlochan draws the reader to this divine presence with reference to the very literal and material act of sewing with a needle and thread:

I carry your son's name under my tongue in barbed suture.
 You wanted my speech to keep his memory safe.
 On that fault line,
 ...
 you test yourself with sharp filial bones,
 writhing. Ghosting the bedrock.⁵⁶

A grieving mother is the earth itself, crying out for her children. Her scars show in the fault lines of the ocean floor and she labours to re-stitch the very fabric of herself. The sea, particularly surrounding the Caribbean islands, is a memorial to those lost at sea through slavery, indentured labour, and the contemporary horrors of forced economic migration. Ramlochan here captures the importance of the poet's role—as witness: she observes this intimate relationship between human, divine and earthly suffering, and then carries it

‘under my tongue in barbed suture/You wanted my speech to keep his memory safe.’ The poet, the Gospel writer in Rivera’s vision of haunting, becomes the custodian of painful histories of loss; it is no easy task to bring these memories to words (as evidenced in the image of barbed sutures under the tongue), to listen to the wails and the writhing of the ghosts and gods that dwell in the fault lines of the ocean floor. The human body (tongue, speech, eyelids, sharp filial bones, writhing, and wailing) is central to this process of remembering, of bearing witness, and communicating with the past. The poem also reads as a prayer (as do many of the poems.)⁵⁷ The opening line reads ‘Forgive me/ I was instructed not to pray for you.’ In response to Spivak’s call to ‘pray to be haunted’ Rivera writes:

Prayer locates agency not in the authority of the narrator, but in the relation to the Other. A prayer implies the possibility of a response from the Other—a response that is never within the control of the one who prays. Thus prayer is not pure origin, but simultaneously a witness to having been called—haunted—and an expression of hope for something still to come.⁵⁸

Ramlochan’s prayer to the earthly and/or divine Other is an expression of hope, not for complete healing, but that we can walk with our scars, which tell the tales of our journey. This act of prayer also draws the reader, as Other, into this process of remembrance (the ‘dynamics of remembrance’, as Rivera said). The reader is part of this spectral conversation, and another custodian of the past; this is, for me, what Spivak is alluding to when she describes reading as ‘hauntology’.⁵⁹

VIII. CONCLUSION

‘Lilith’ is barely visible in the Bible and there is an aura of indeterminability around the very name. Syriac translations refer to Bath Na’amin (i.e. an owl) and many Hebrew commentators agree, presumably viewing the owl as an appropriate symbol of desolation in this biblical context, given its unearthly wail. In English translations of the Bible, however, ‘Lilith’ as a proper name, has only very recently emerged from translations of ‘night hag’ (RSV) or ‘screech owl’ (AV), and is even now sometimes referred to in the plural form as ‘Liliths’ (ISV). There is even less agreement about the name itself. Perhaps the name comes from *Layla*—‘night’ in Hebrew—as the owl is a night bird, or from the Hebrew and Aramaic word for a wail—*yelala*. But this very indeterminability seems appropriate. We have traced a path along which Lilith has taken on a series of shapes and forms, figures and narratives of human creation, encountered ‘at the faultline’ of history, flickering between monstrosity and divinity and somewhat aptly symbolising unsettling memory. In moves that very much

reflect the feminist project of revisioning (Rich) and, more significantly still in this case, Rivera's notions of haunting, Ramlochan chooses Lilith to witness to the incalculable loss of life represented by imperial and colonial projects of the last several hundred years. We have argued that Ramlochan's poetry guides the reader to the ghosts that dwell in all of us, and the power of postcolonial writing to bear witness to these ghosts of history. Lilith is an ideal trope, as an abject ghost of Christian misogyny, for Ramlochan's literary project of bearing witness to, and being haunted by, alternative histories and ways of being in the world. We have explored how Ramlochan's poetry might also be read as a reimagining of biblical reference to Lilith, alongside other divine figures. Through her poetry, Lilith is freed from the monstrous trappings of sacred texts and given an alternative (his)story. Ramlochan's poetry bears witness to the way in which postcolonial writing, materiality and religion are perfectly entangled.

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- 41 Majiv Mohabir, 'Coolitude Poetics Interview with Shivanee Ramlochan', in *Coolitude Poetics of the Indian Labor Diaspora*, www.Jacket2.org.
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- ⁵⁷ 'come/claim these metatarsal prayers' ('Duenna Lara', p. 20). 'her old prayers quiver, faced with fresh ghosts' ('Materna', p. 27).
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