VEDA'S
JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)
An International Peer-Reviewed (Refereed) Journal
Impact Factor (SJIF) 6.002 http://www.joell.in

Vol.13, No.4
(Oct.-Dec.)
2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ISSN: 2349-9753

HAUNTOLOGY AND THE SOUCOUYANT: UNSETTLING CLOSURE IN DAVID CHARIANDY'S *SOUCOUYANT*

Gopika. D[1*], Dr K.R. Vijaya[2]

PhD Research Scholar, Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai – 30
Assistant Professor, Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai – 30

Email: gopikarajan1911@gmail.com ; viji.murari@gmail.com
DOI: https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13408

ABSTRACT

The study examines the disruption of closure through hauntology and the soucouyant figure in David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*. Although existing scholarship has extensively analysed the novel's intergenerational trauma, cultural memory, and folkloric soucouyant as metaphor, a critical gap remains in approaches that treat memory as a recoverable or therapeutic narrative. This article argues that *Soucouyant* fundamentally rejects such resolution, instead staging a radical hauntology in which colonial and diasporic histories persist as spectral, disruptive forces. The novel recasts the soucouyant not simply as a symbol of fragmented identity, but as a metaphor for a consuming past that invades and transforms the present, resisting archival burial. Through the spectral consciousness of Adele, a mother with dementia who embodies traumatic history, and her son's frantic but futile research, the narrative confronts social pressures to forget history and assimilate into a sanitised Canadian multiculturalism. In response, it proposes mnemonic resistance exemplified by the son's archival desperation and Meiling's embodied, sensory knowledge that relinquishes closure. Ultimately, this article contends that *Soucouyant* forges diasporic identity not through reconciliation with the past, but through a courageous, ongoing dialogue with its ghostly, unresolved echoes. It thus redefines liberation as the autonomy to interpret a past that continually haunts the present.

Article history:

Received on: 18-09-2026
Accepted on: 12-10-2026
Available online: 02-11-2026

Keywords: *David Chariandy, Soucouyant, hauntology, memory, diaspora, postcolonialism, trauma, Caribbean folklore, Canadian multiculturalism, spectrality, archives, dementia, intergenerational*.

Author(s) retain the copyright of this article. Copyright© 2026 VEDA Publications.

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License.

VEDA'S
JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)
An International Peer-Reviewed (Refereed) Journal
Impact Factor (SJIF) 6.002 http://www.joell.in
Vol.13, No.4
(Oct.-Dec.)
2026

INTRODUCTION

David Chariandy's *Soucouyant* is a major meditation on memory, trauma and the spectral afterlife of colonialism in the Canadian Caribbean diaspora. There's a huge amount of critical writing on the novel's intergenerational trauma and its use of folkloric tropes, much of which assumes that memory can be retrieved, contained and healed. This piece would like to make the case that the soucouyant is fundamentally inimical to such a notion of healing. It is a text which enacts a form of radical hauntology in which the colonial and diasporic past is a persistent, disruptive force. The soucouyant is not merely a symbol of fractured identity but rather a metaphor for a history that is actively consuming. The novel takes the form of Adele's spectral consciousness as a mother with dementia and her son's equally futile attempts at archival work and in that form it confronts the pressures of historical amnesia and assimilation. The response is a form of mnemonic resistance which refuses to close the book on the past and which in fact creates a diasporic identity through the very act of engaging with the ghostly echoes that refuse to be silenced.

The novel's treatment of memory and trauma is on many levels. On the level of plot it's the story of Adele, a Caribbean immigrant mother now afflicted with dementia, and her unnamed son who is both the narrator and the carer. On the level of metaphor the soucouyanta (a Caribbean folkloric creature who is a ball of fire that can fly and who sheds her skin to do so, feeding on the blood of her victims) is the vehicle through which Chariandy examines the way the past consumes the present. On the level of form the novel is structurally fragmented and non-linear in a way that perfectly reflects the nature of traumatic memory itself, refusing the comfort of a linear narrative or a narrative with any kind of resolution. It's a book which is at once intimate and theoretical, personal and political. It is a book which forces you to grapple with the disturbing implications of having ghosts that will not go away.

This article intervenes by reading Soucouyant through Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, arguing that the novel systematically dismantles the therapeutic impulse that dominates much trauma theory and diasporic literature. Rather than seeking to heal the wounds of colonial violence or to recover a lost cultural identity, Chariandy's novel insists on the necessity of dwelling with the spectres of the past. This is not passive acceptance but active, courageous engagement, which the novel terms a form of mnemonic resistance that forgoes the false comfort of closure.

1. The Hauntological Framework: Spectral Pasts and the Soucouyant Metaphor

Soucouyant's narrative structure follows a hauntological logic, influenced by Jacques Derrida, in which the past refuses dismissal and persists as a haunting spectre that unsettles the present. In the novel, colonial and diasporic histories embody this concept: they are not mere background elements but active, invasive forces within a Toronto suburb's domestic life and within the psychological worlds of its characters. The narrator distils this condition of haunted belonging into a single, devastating catalogue:

> Metal monsters in the night. Dirty numbers and greasy doorknobs. This was our belonging.

> Memory was a carpet stain that nobody would confess to. History was a television set left on all night. The car chases and gun fights sponsored by oil companies. The anthems at the end of broadcast days (Chariandy 1314).

This is the hauntological vision of the novel. Memory is a carpet stain, something you can't get rid of, you can only hide. It's a stain of shame that nobody would confess to. History is a television set left on all night, it's always on, it's a presence that's going to seep into every corner of the house. It's full of images of violence, car chases and gun fights, the very images that are produced by the companies who are the very ones that are perpetuating the colonialism. The "anthems at the end of broadcast days" are the official closure of the day, the official closure of the nation, and they're just as hollow in the context of the diaspora.

The soucouyant (the Caribbean vampire who sheds her skin) is the perfect mythical analogue for this. Chariandy reworks her as the very embodiment of traumatic history. The past is a devouring force which engulfs the present and destroys any possibility of a coherent identity. The soucouyant sheds her skin to reveal the true, terrifying form beneath. Traumatic history does the same to the present, stripping away the skin of the identity to reveal the raw, wounded self underneath. The soucouyant feeds on the blood of her victims. The past feeds on the present. It is a draining of the very life out of it.

This framework has to be situated very carefully within the politics of Black diasporic memory. Hartman's work is absolutely fundamental here in terms of providing that tension. There is a very clear warning in Hartman against the consumption of Black pain through narrative, a warning that we must respect the 'non-narratable'. There is also the concept of 'insurgent nostalgia' which is an idea of a transformative reclamation of history. That very concept has a direct parallel in the way we think about the Jen Reid statue. Jen Reid, the Black Lives Matter subject, is enshrined in memory and in black resin. The statue is a symbolic answer to the call of the ancestors 'to come home'. In effect, it's a reversal of Hartman's own configuration: 'insurgent nostalgia' gives way to insurgency (a 'surge of power') and the 'imagination that transformed the space of captivity into one inhabited by the revenants of a disremembered past' (Henderson).

Soucouyant exists in the space between those two poles. Adele's dementia is not a public monument in any sense but a private, involuntary form of soucouyant. It is a form of embodiment where the present is shed and the past (the traumas of the past) comes through in fragments of speech, in haunting songs and in the very body. She is the site of the 'non-narratable' and her body is the 'space of captivity' in which the 'revenants of a disremembered past' literally dwell. That is the very essence of her condition and it is precisely why Hartman is so wary. In direct opposition to that is the act of narration by her son, the very act of writing the book. That is his insurgency. His relentless research and writing are his attempt to monumentalise his mother's very real spectral presence, to turn the captivity of her silence and the family amnesia into a space of narrative. The book does not resolve this tension at all. It simply presents it. It holds in tension Hartman's two impulses: the mother as the

embodiment of the disremembered past as a wound that cannot be spoken of, and the son as the insurgent nostalgia of the narrative.

The hauntological approach also requires us to be attentive to the novel's very specific spatial politics. The Toronto suburb in which Adele and her son live is not just a backdrop but a haunted landscape in its own right, one where the histories of the past are present in an unacknowledged way and which the official narrative of Canadian multiculturalism is very much in the business of erasing. The list of 'metal monsters in the night' and 'dirty numbers and greasy doorknobs' is a very clear indication of a landscape of urban decay and neglect, a place where the promise of Canadian prosperity has simply not worked out for the diasporic subject. The past is not safely locked away in a museum or archive but is actually present in the everyday, in the brokenness of the infrastructure and in the disorientation of the people who live there.

Chariandy's deployment of the soucouyant figure also engages with the gendered dimensions of diasporic trauma. The soucouyant is traditionally a female figure, an old woman who sheds her skin to prey on the young. In Chariandy's reimagining, this gendered dimension becomes crucial to understanding how trauma is transmitted across generations and how women's bodies become the sites where colonial violence is both inflicted and resisted. Adele's dementia is not merely a medical condition, but a manifestation of the gendered violence of colonialism and displacement, a violence that is inscribed on her body, that lives in her flesh, and that is expressed through the fragmented language of her 'non-narratable' suffering.

2. Mnemonic Resistance: The Failure of the Archive and the Epistemology of Embodiment

The novel critically juxtaposes two modes of engaging with this hauntological past: the archival and the embodied. The unnamed son represents a desperate, scholarly attempt to combat his mother's amnesia and the family's silence through research. His frantic gathering of historical documents mirrors a societal impulse to manage, contain, and assimilate the past into a rational, sanitised record. Yet this project is ultimately futile. The archive is revealed as incomplete, complicit with colonial erasure, and structurally incapable of capturing the visceral, sensory truth of lived trauma. His failure powerfully critiques the belief that documentation and narrative closure can exorcise spectral history.

The son's archival project is of many kinds. He's doing research into Caribbean history, the Middle Passage, the plantation system, the indentureship system in particular which brought his people to the Caribbean. He's gathering photographs, documents, testimonies. He's trying to put together a narrative of his family's past. He's reading like mad, filling notebooks with research, the idea being that if he can just know enough and document enough he can somehow in that way heal his mother's mind. Every discovery just opens up more gaps, more silences, more erasures. He realises that the archive is not a store of truth but a site of power, a site which is structured by the very colonial logics which produced the displacement of his people.

This is not just a personal failure. It's a structural one. The novel is suggesting that the Western archive is simply not up to the job of containing the truth of diasporic trauma. The archive is built on a logic of

exclusion which is in itself complicit in colonial violence. It demands documentation, evidence, proof of some kind. It demands a linear narrative, a chronological account, a cause and effect model which is completely inadequate to the experience of trauma. It demands closure, it demands that you can draw a line under it and move on. That very impulse to move on is itself a form of forgetting, a 'blundering' into a present which is not connected to its traumatic past.

Meiling is the other kind of mnemonic resistance. Her knowledge is not one of archives but of the sensory, of the performative, of the embodied. She knows Adele through touch, through rhythm, through the act of telling the story orally. She doesn't go out of her way to 'cure' the haunting. She learns to live with the echoes of it. The echoes that are manifest in the moments of total temporal collapse (e.g. Mother [runs] about the house trying to find and rescue a three year old child from the imagined fire. She crashes into me and screams not in relief but in rage. How could I be a teenager already?). That is the 'nonlinear, painful language' of trauma which Meiling understands and the son's archive is utterly unable to translate.

Meiling's practice is more than compassionate care; it actively instantiates what M. Jacqui Alexander theorises as "pedagogies of the Sacred." These knowledge systems operate through embodiment, ritual, and nonlinear temporalities, directly opposing the Western "archive of the body" the son inhabits. Alexander's framework reveals the clash in *Soucouyant* as an epistemic conflict of struggle over whose way of knowing has the authority to interpret history and pain. The novel validates Alexander's urgent political claim for transnational feminism: "Ultimately, then, I argue that a transnational feminism needs these pedagogies of the Sacred... because it remains the case that the majority of people in the world, that is, the majority of women in the world, cannot make sense of themselves without it" (Alexander).

Adele as a Caribbean woman whose consciousness is formed by the violence of colonialism and the experience of diaspora is situated within that very sacred epistemology. Her sense of self and her sense of history is in the fragmented somatic language of scars and songs and is only accessible through the relational, embodied pedagogy that Meiling offers. So the son's archival failure is not just a personal failure; it is a failure of the colonial knowledge structure to comprehend a subject who makes sense of the world through the sacred. The novel's ultimate act of mnemonic resistance is to validate through narrative the efficacy of Meiling's pedagogy, in that the only way to truly engage with the diasporic haunting is to abandon the archive and to enter into a sacred, embodied negotiation with the ghosts of a past that has been disremembered.

The novel is all about the contrast between these two epistemologies in relation to the body. For the son the body is a site of anxiety and alienation. His mother's body is failing, her mind is breaking up and he can do nothing about it. He approaches her body as a problem to be solved, as a mystery to be worked out through research. For Meiling the body is a site of knowledge and of connection. She touches her, she holds her, she sings to her, she attends to her physical needs in a way that the son can only ever

half-capture. Meiling realises that Adele's trauma isn't just in her mind. It's in her body, in her nervous system, in the way she breathes, in the way her hands move. That knowledge can't be accessed through the archives, can't be gleaned from documents. It can only be acquired through relationship, through being there, through the slow, gradual work of just being in the presence of another's suffering.

3. Forging Identity in the Hauntological Dialogue

Soucouyant is very much in opposition to the paradigms of reconciliation and recovery. It posits diasporic identity itself as the product of hauntological engagement. Identity is not something that is created in spite of the ghosts but is created through the very act of engaging with them. It is a form of identity that is inherently undecidable. As the text's spectral logic makes clear the spectre is "neither present nor absent, neither positive nor negative, neither inside nor outside". It is a force which "does not challenge only one thing or another; it threatens the logic that distinguishes between one thing and another, the very logic of exclusion or foreclosure, as well as the history that is founded upon this logic and its alternatives" (Derrida). The son's journey is thus one from a desire to solve the mystery of the past by recourse to the logic of exclusion (archival fact versus familial fiction, sanity versus madness, past versus present) to a much more difficult acceptance of the past's irreducible complexity. His final act is to simply listen to his mother's stories, which are fractured and looped, without the desperate need to correct or fully make sense of them. That is the point of the journey. That is the point of the story. In that space of undecidability, where the logic of distinction is dissolved, a new form of agency is possible.

This agency however is not simply an imperative to remember. The novel is in fact proposing a far more dialectical relationship with the past, as the narrator makes clear in his reflection:

> During our lives, we struggle to forget. And it's foolish to assume that forgetting is altogether a bad thing. Memory is a bruise still tender. History is a rusted pile of blades and manacles. And forgetting can sometimes be the most creative and life sustaining thing that we can ever hope to accomplish. The problem happens when we become too good at forgetting. When somehow we forget to forget, and we blunder into circumstances (Chariandy 32).

Here forgetting is reimagined not as a form of betrayal but as a necessary, creative act of self preservation in the face of history's sharp edges. The real danger is in the *unconscious* amnesia of assimilation, the "blundering" into a present which is completely disconnected from its roots, a foreclosure which is the very logic of a sanitised, multicultural history. There is a distinction to be made between two forms of forgetting: the conscious, deliberate act of forgetting in order to survive and the unconscious form of forgetting which is the very essence of assimilation. The first is an act of agency, the second an act of violence.

Liberation is thus redefined not as freedom *from* the past but as the self-constituting act of managing your relationship to a past which is always threatening to undermine the very categories by which we can understand it. It is the act of choosing

to listen, to inhabit, and at times to engage in creative forgetting. The novel is in no way committed to the idea that liberation requires us to lay the ghosts to rest and to act in accordance with some stable logic of exclusion. Rather it is the case that a genuine diasporic subjectivity is forged through the courage to maintain a conscious engagement with the spectres, an engagement which might involve both a gentle attentiveness to the 'bruise' of memory and the necessary, life-affirming distance of forgetting. It is in this perpetual, carefully managed conversation with the spectres (a conversation which is itself a threat to the logic of exclusion) that the ground for a resistant and self-determined subjectivity can be established.

The 'ending' of the novel if there is one, is not in the son's successful recovery of his mother's memories or the reversal of her dementia. It's in his acceptance of the impossibility of closure. In the final scenes he's just sitting with her, listening to her stories which are in fragments, not attempting to correct her, not attempting to reconstruct anything. It's in his failure that he has come to terms with the condition of the hauntological. He has come to live in the space of the uncertain. He has come to accept the hauntological as the ground of his own being rather than as something to be overcome. That's not a passive acceptance. That's an active choice to live with the ghosts, to acknowledge their presence and to let them be the stuff of his identity without them destroying him.

This redefinition of liberation has massive implications for our understanding of diasporic identity more generally. It suggests that the quest for roots, for origins, for a pure and authentic cultural identity is in itself a form of foreclosure, a form of denial of the very mixedness, hybridity and hauntedness of the diasporic condition. The novel presents an identity which is perfectly at home with its instability, an identity which doesn't try to resolve the contradictions of displacement but which learns to live with them. It's an identity which is formed through the ghosts rather than in spite of them, an identity which is formed through the work of the ongoing, never finished, work of reading and re-reading the spectral past.

CONCLUSION

In *Soucouyant* David Chariandy is doing a major intervention in the way we think about memory, trauma and the diasporic subject. He does this through the use of a hauntological framework and by reimagining the soucouyant as a figure of a devouring, inescapable past. The novel goes some way to undermining the very idea of the need for narrative closure or therapeutic recovery. The son's failed archive and Meiling's lived knowledge are both instances of mnemonic resistance in which the spectral is not merely tolerated but actively embraced. The novel's real achievement is in its redefinition of freedom as the very act of living with and engaging with the haunting. In the face of the colonial and diasporic histories of violence and displacement that are the subject of the novel, the only truly ethical and authentic position may be to reject the fantasy of closure and to find one's way in the unquiet, ever-present conversation between past and present. Soucouyant is a radical reassertion of the value of the unquiet.

The novel's significance goes far beyond the literary. It's a work that speaks to some of the most pressing questions we have about how societies remember and forget, how they come to terms with histories of violence and displacement and how they go about constructing a sense of identity in the aftermath of trauma. In an age of rising nationalism, xenophobia and the demand for assimilation, *Soucouyant* is a potent counter-narrative which insists that we must dwell with the ghosts of the past rather than attempt to drive them away. It's not an easy book to read and it doesn't offer easy answers. What it does do is to refuse closure and to insist that there is value in the unresolved. It teaches us that the ghosts are not something to be feared but something to be listened to. That the past is not something to be overcome but something to be engaged with. That the most radical thing we can do may be to live with the uncertainty, to live with the spectral and to find meaning in the unquiet spaces between past and present.

The novel's final lesson is about the nature of courage itself. To live with ghosts is not to be haunted in the sense of being possessed or paralysed. It is to recognise that the past is never really past, that history lives in the body and in the present and that the work of memory is never over. That's a difficult thing to grasp, but it is also a liberating thing to accept because it frees us from the impossible demand for closure. It allows us to imagine identity not as some fixed essence to be recovered, but as an ongoing process of negotiation and interpretation. It allows us to imagine liberation not as freedom from the past, but as the freedom to choose how we relate to it. It also allows us to imagine the future not as something built on the erasure of ghosts, but as something which is the product of a courageous and sustained dialogue with them.

WORK CITED

Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Duke University Press, 2005.

Chariandy, David. *Soucouyant*. McClelland & Stewart, 2007.

Derrida, Jacques. *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf, Pascale Anne Brault, and Michael Naas, Stanford University Press, 1998.

Henderson, Mae G., editor. *The Specter and the Speculative: Afterlives and Archives in the African Diaspora*. University of North Carolina Press, 2022.