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Forum Prompt: Haunted Subjects

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forum prompt

Haunted Subjects

Jayne Elizabeth Lewis (Univeristy of California-Irvine)

In her recent study of the “Indian ghosts” that, she argues, haunt the American literary tradition, Renée L. Berglund proposes that “all stories are ghost stories,” if only insofar as all stories are told in words, and all words conjure something that is no longer present—and possibly never was. Perhaps because its object is so often language, much recent literary and cultural criticism invokes the notion of haunting to describe pasts that make themselves forcibly felt in the present, absences that still seem somehow present, things supposedly dead which still and endlessly insist upon mixing their business with that of the living.

In the shadow of the First World War, Sigmund Freud pioneered the underlying notion of the so-called return of the repressed. For Freud, this return initially occurred primarily within the individual mind—that of the subject, in 1917’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” who remains ambivalent toward the dead, or of the one who, in Freud’s later essay “The Uncanny” (1918), has never fully come to terms with forbidden desires. But the repressed also returns at the level of whole cultures, like the ones that Freud later depicted in *Totem and Taboo* (1918) which make enemies of their dead and thus doom themselves to be visited by those dead again and again in perpetuity. Freud’s distinctions between psychological and cultural models of haunting charted a theoretical divide that persists even now.

Common to both models—about which more anon—is a revenant of a stock ghost story formula, one in which the spirits of the dead return to impart the whereabouts of buried treasure, or to bring guilt to light. And yet the notion that ghosts turn up to expose what has been hidden is a distinctively modern one which goes hand in hand with the enlightened conviction that ghosts as such do not exist except figuratively. This conjunction shapes two influential efforts to account for modern conceptions of the apparition by the literary critics Stephen Greenblatt and Terry Castle to account for modern concepts of the apparition. Greenblatt's 2002 study *Hamlet in Purgatory* examined the figure of Hamlet's dead father that literally stalks the wings of Shakespeare's tragedy. Greenblatt found that the kind of ghost that he embodies (or does not)—the riddling specter who arouses tormenting ambivalence, stirs a sense of personal guilt, and simply will not be gone—came along at exactly the point where a longstanding relationship between the living and the dead collapsed. In that relationship, Roman Catholic theology and an accompanying, communal set of mourning practices and death rituals allowed it to be common knowledge that the spirits of the dead work their way between worlds: it was possible in the context of Purgatory to question ghosts, to acknowledge them, and thus to assist them in their movement onward to the next world. This process was in Greenblatt's view disrupted by a Protestant Reformation riveted on inner lives and the isolated individuals who live them; suddenly, there was nowhere for the dead to go and so they lingered indefinitely in the phantasmal space between life and death.

In *The Female Thermometer* (1995), Castle moves the marker forward another two hundred years to find that, before the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, ghosts were believed to exist objectively, outside the mind. Debunked by enlightened rationality, they were, however, less exorcised than turned into psychological entities—hallucinations, delusions of presence, inescapable thoughts that certified the isolation of the modern mind. In their classic theoretical work, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno made a similar point: for them, secular and rational modernity is characterized by a “disturbed relationship with the dead.” Because we have been spoiled by apparent advances in knowledge, claim Horkheimer and Adorno, we are no longer able to acknowledge our likeness to the dead; thus we project onto them our “our own purpose and fate.” In all of these examples, the experience of haunting—which can include that of *not* being visited by

culturally sanctioned spirits—marks modern subjectivity, separating it from the relatively decisive thought forms and belief structures of the past.

In none of these guises is modern haunting imagined with pleasure, although it might be said that ghost stories at least convert the fear and dread with which they *are* imagined into pleasure. Etymologically speaking, the word *ghost* might be the revenant of the German word for guest (*gast*), but, at least in modernity, ghosts mark the unwelcome intrusion of what should remain outside, the insistence of psychic or cultural material that we would rather forget. Haunted houses are a standard trope in gothic fiction (itself an invention of modernity, circa 1765) because they so concretely express what refuses to be shut out, what is unwillingly inherited, what is woven into everyday life without quite belonging there. (This is a view indebted to Freud's concept of the uncanny adopted in, for example, Dale Bailey's *American Nightmares: The Haunted House in American Fiction* [1999].) The haunted house thus flatters an interiorized, psychological concept of haunting that begins with Freud and persists in the work of the Lacanian psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. In *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), Abraham and Torok develop the notion of "transgenerational haunting"; here, children are forced to confront gaps in their parents' accounts of reality, thus taking on the unspoken traumas that created those gaps in the first place.

Although the return of the repressed remains a constant, it is possible to theorize haunting not as the private property of the individual psyche but rather as the burden of entire societies. At the level of nation, for example, America is supposed to be haunted by wrongs committed in the past: slavery; the Native American genocide; crimes perpetrated against POWs or carried out against innocent populations during wars in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan. At the same time, again in America, immigrants are often understood to be haunted by the worlds of suffering and injustice whose traces they bear from one world into another. In the "new world," these same immigrants, ghostlike, often remain invisible because of the groups to which they belong; illegal aliens are often officially referenced as "ghosts."

In a somewhat different sense, social psychology also informs standard studies of the so-called female gothic. Classic works such as Kate Ellis's *The Contested Castle* (1989) or Claire Kahane's "The Gothic Mirror" (1985) trace women's apparent affinity with (or at least their relative openness to) the supernatural to their historical oppression; Victoria Dickerson's more recent *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide* (2012) identifies women's cultural marginality

to the ontological marginality of the undead. In turn, studies of Victorian sensationalism like Richard Noakes's "Spiritualism, Science, and the Supernatural in Mid-Victorian Britain" (2004) consider how a culture uncertain about what can be termed natural, or even bodily, fostered widespread fascination with the kinds of disembodied sensation that ghosts exemplify. A similarly collective approach has been taken recently in studies of postmodern, postnational diaspora by Michael O'Riley, Hirshini Bhana Young, and Marelen Goldman. All find that a shared experience of haunting can bind individual displaced persons to like-minded others.

Haunting may also be imagined in broader economic and class terms. When in 1848 the first sentence of Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* sounded the alarm that "a specter is haunting Europe," the reference was to the bodily relations of labor and power and the accompanying subjugation of a laboring class. Both had to be denied so that the abstract corporate entities that we call national economies could emerge in their modern form. Later, in *Capital* (1867), Marx would liken coins themselves to specters whose connection to materiality has been all but worn away—a connection developed in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994), where Marx himself becomes a haunting presence within critical thought which would rather forget what he had to say. In *Ghostly Matters; Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1998), Avery Gordon proposes that ghosts are "neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis" but rather "a generalizable social phenomenon of great importance"—a phenomenon in which such past crimes as slavery or state terror are experienced both by those who committed them and by those who suffered them as a "felt presence." Likewise, Gabriele Schwab's *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (2010) traces the ways in which experiences of violence—rape, torture, betrayal by the state—that can be neither remembered nor forgotten compound the psychic fate of individuals to the political state of corporate bodies. While such experiences can block communication between subjects and indeed between groups, they can also have the perverse effect of producing corporate unity in the present and even of binding otherwise severed generations together. For this reason, Berglund's study of what she calls "the national uncanny" proposes that ghosts can be desired as well as feared.

No matter their focus or conclusion, however, theories of haunting do not necessarily differ in their deep structure. The ghost stories that critics tell—sometimes about ghost stories themselves but sometimes about psychology,

culture, and their interactions between them—are always stories of dispossession, retrieval, unresolved ambiguity, guilt and desire. The recurrence of such motifs suggests that ghosts and the haunting they do “are” not phenomena in themselves to be accessed by criticism but are rather critical tools in and of themselves, devices that critics of culture use to communicate their perceptions of human reality.

And so an invitation: take up this tool! That would mean experimenting with any of the aforementioned perspectives on ghosts and the subjects they haunt. One possible approach would be through literary history. A work of literature may be interpreted in light of the concept of haunting that seems to be in play at any given historical moment—whether in Victorian confrontations with sexuality and embodiment, in the early modern loss of Purgatory, or in the rationalizations of the Enlightenment that attempted to turn ghosts into the fictional property of a barbarous past or into popular entertainment (for this last, see Simon Durning’s *Modern Enchantments* (2004), or E. J. Clery’s *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction* [1995]). A second approach to this topic would be theoretical: many of the theorists cited above develop notions of haunting that can be applied to a literary work, or that can be critiqued by citing counter evidence. In contrast to that kind of hypothesis-testing, a third essay option would be to compare two different theories of haunting (e.g., sociological versus psychological) with their respective limitations considered, and a third perspective proposed which might transcend those limitations. A fourth possibility would be a close reading exercise that focuses on a classic ghost story—for example, Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) or Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987)—and probes the social and psychological dynamics encoded in the experience of haunting at the heart of the work under consideration. Finally, it is significant that in modernity ghosts are understood to be primarily visual phenomena; they are also often linked to visual media like writing and photography. Alternatively, those committed to literary criticism in and of itself might look at the way media consciousness—the device of the found manuscript or the frame tale, the use of intertextuality—realizes the experience of haunting for readers of literary fiction.