

Fear Itself, or Fearing Ourselves: The Literature of Ghosts and Cultural Hauntings

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*“What is even worse, our lack of insight deprives us of the capacity to
deal with evil.”*

—Carl Jung, pp. 53

We are a culture of fear.

Since our inception (and I use the collective deliberately), the United States has equipped this useful system of fear to control, suppress, influence, and protect. The failure of Reconstruction, for example, and the subsequent rise of Jim Crow tyranny were not the products of White fear over the fabricated mythos of innate Black male violence because, of course, that was a narrative constructed to justify White acts of terrorism against Black communities and life. No, Jim Crow was instead an outgrowth of White fear over the possibility of losing White hegemony. By indulging in this heinous narrative, White America asserted aggressive force to suppress Black success and equality while protecting White control through the use of fear. Our culture has not changed, as evidenced by the propagation of a narrative of urban danger and resultant avoidance (“Make sure to stay away from that neighborhood!”), the continuous acquittals of individuals committing acts of police brutality (“I feared for my life”—even when the innocent victim was unarmed), and

the backlash against the Obama Era manifested through the Trump Administration. Perhaps the clearest expression of fear can be found in the War on Terror and the surrounding discourse created to justify the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and to garner support for those campaigns.

Fear controls us.

The global pandemic of COVID-19 in which we all currently live perfectly demonstrates these enduring ghosts of fear and hatred. The fear I speak of when I mention COVID-19 is not our worry about leaving our homes. Instead, I mean the resurgence of xenophobia against Chinese people. The emergence of this lethal, frankly terrifying disease has provided the perfect excuse for racist individuals to justify their hatred for Chinese citizens and anyone who appears Asian more generally. People are afraid of COVID-19, and they utilize that fear to their racial benefit.

Simply look at the films and literature we enjoy. A plethora of horror films about ghosts and hauntings maintain their vast audience, from the timeless legacy of *Ghostbusters* (1984) to the immense success of *The Conjuring* (2013-2020) series. Simply put, we love to be scared. Some films, such as *A Ghost Story* (2017), accomplish similar work to this year's edition of the *Digital Literature Review*, elevating a simple haunting to a profound position that sentimentally explores love, loss, reconciliation, and, perhaps most iconic of all ghost stories, peace. Novels such as Shirley Jackson's 1959 *The Haunting of Hill House* have enjoyed a resurgence of cultural relevancy as a result of Mike Flanagan's 2018 reimagined Netflix series, and Stephen King's 1977 *The Shining* dares audiences to wonder what is truly more frightening: strange apparitions of twins at the end of hotel corridors or the gripping, destructive ghost of alcoholism? Apparently, ghost stories are more than jump-scares and ensuring the audience cannot sleep at night. Like any tale, ghost stories offer an intimate meditation on culture and the individual.

The *Digital Literature Review* has thus turned our focus towards the paranormal this year. Literature of ghosts and hauntings offers a medium through which we can better understand ourselves, our culture, and our experiences. Ghosts can remind us of past injustices by blurring the division between history and the present, such as in LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* (2001) when Auda Billy, through the influence of her ghostly ancestor Shakbatina, repeats history by planning to murder the Choctaw Chief Redford McAlester for corruption and greed. Ghosts can comfort, as we can see in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991), when Ethel Rosenberg's ghost sings Roy Cohn a lullaby on his deathbed or the titular Angel helps Prior Walter find solace as he struggles with HIV. Ghosts can disturb, like those in the aforementioned *The Haunting of Hill House*, when Eleanor Vance, a woman desperate for affection and community, believes herself to be holding a hand in the isolating darkness—only to find no one was there. Some ghosts, such as the titular

one that haunts the residents of 124 Bluestone in Toni Morrison's magnum opus *Beloved* (1987), can accomplish all three. While encountering Sethe, Denver, and Paul D's traumatic experiences with slavery and its aftermath, everyone—character and reader alike—finds remembrance, disturbance, and somehow, despite it all, comfort by the end of the novel. Ghosts are manifold, and to neglect serious academic inquiry into the genre is to neglect the deepest aspects of human existence. Tales of ghosts and cultural hauntings force us to face our nightmares head on, offering insights into past and current evils. Through these insights, we gain the ability to exorcise and lay to rest that which haunts us—whether it be colonization, the AIDS Crisis, familial trauma, or slavery. As Carl Jung implies, these evils persist until we finally engage in serious, critical reflection with them and their legacies.

To help break ground into this excavation, the *Digital Literature Review* spent ample time studying useful theories that help us understand the world of ghosts and cultural hauntings. Sigmund Freud's conception of the uncanny offers perhaps the most direct entrance into understanding our fascination with fear, ghosts, and hauntings. Freud describes the uncanny as an overlapping of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, which translates to homey, or familiar, and strange, or unfamiliar, respectively. We experience animated dolls like Chucky, for example, or *déjà vu* as uncanny because something about these instances ring as simultaneously familiar and strange. We know dolls are not human, of course, but they sure do *look* like humans, and their movements at least mimic those of humans; we see ourselves within them but know they are not us and we are not them. Likewise, *déjà vu* leaves a person confidently aware they have never experienced this moment before yet equally as confident that the moment is familiar—*too* familiar. Ghosts and hauntings often embody the uncanny, as some of the essays within this edition discuss, and to understand why these apparitions are strange we must understand why they are simultaneously familiar and vice versa. The uncanny allows us to understand not only why we are drawn to ghosts and hauntings, but what they reveal about us—even though we may not be ghosts, we see ourselves in them. As Avery Gordon posits in her essay “her shape and his hand,” “The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course” (8). Ghost stories and hauntings humble us, revealing just how little we truly know about ourselves; our “well-trained eyes” are not as vigilant as we would like. Ghosts also, however, imbue people, places, and events with the dignity and agency they were denied in life, now able to assert their undeniable presence “in [their] own way.” In these ways, ghosts are educational, ghosts are healing, and ghosts are respectful in ways the living often is not.

A discussion of ghosts and cultural hauntings must not neglect an inclusion of trauma. Ghosts are perfect embodiments of trauma, physically symbolizing the ways in which past people and experiences linger on in the present. Like trauma, ghosts make peaceful living an impossibility. They throw pots and pans, stare back from a darkened room, and hide under your bed. Ghosts invade the home. Trauma likewise invades the home, or the self. Healing remains a disembodied goal until trauma has been laid to a peaceful rest. The literary analysis of ghosts and cultural hauntings thus offers practice in addressing and handling trauma, culturally or personally. In sum, ghosts are an intimate, yet terrifying, relationship between the self and the community, between how we construct our own fantasies and the reality in which we live. To tie these ghosts back to Freud, “the uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred” (150). Ghosts bring us closer to and makes us more aware of ourselves and our nation.

Starting this edition of the *Digital Literature Review* is Eliza O'Donnell's essay, “Hauntings of Bodies, Selves, and Houses: A Comparative Reading of Three of Emily Carroll's Short Horror Comic Series.” Instead of exploring how ghosts are disconnected from the body, the author understands them as predatory forces attempting to *reconnect* with the body. Through analyzing several of Emily Carroll's publications, O'Donnell's essay ties the cultural to the personal, exploring how cultural ideologies of femininity and domesticity entrap women in Carroll's texts. Addison Paul's “Haunting the Body: An Exploration of Scars as Ghosts” that further grounds us within the embodied self by exploring the physical impact of trauma. The author analyzes Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) and the HBO 2018 miniseries adaptation to understand how self-harm, trauma, and hauntings all are interconnected, while also questioning the exploitative representations of female self-harm in entertainment.

Paul's essay leads us directly to the next couple essays, written by Isabel Parham and me, respectively. Parham's essay, “Peace at Last: Grappling with Ghosts and the Family Structure in *The Sixth Sense* and *The Haunting of Hill House*,” furthers our study of the self's response to trauma and gender by connecting ghosts and hauntings to the heterosexual family. The author analyzes the main characters of the primary sources to better understand how the characters embrace the uncanny to defy or accept nuclear family structures, ultimately allowing them to reconcile with their traumas and find peace at last. My essay, “‘Outside the Gate’: Family, Selfhood, and Post-Traumatic Growth in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*,” unites the previous themes of selfhood, trauma, and cultural issues of familial structures to illuminate the complexities of familial trauma as well as the nuances of post-traumatic growth (PTG). With these two essays, our journal shifts focus from the self back to the culture.

Ashley Burns's "Political Polarization and Demonic Possession: How American Culture is Haunted by its Own Fascination with Good and Evil" explores how films about possession and exorcism reflect political polarization. The author provides a critical framework with which to understand how cultures become possessed. The following four essays analyze various facets of cultural hauntings more broadly. Clare Nee's "The Haunt of Injustice: Exploring Homophobia in Vampire Literature" looks at Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* (1872) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to analyze the ways in which homophobic violence haunts societies past and present. Jacob Garrett, in "Taking a Look in the Mirror: The Inversion of Middle-Class Fears of Urban Decay and the Representation of Racial Violence and in Bernard Rose's *Candyman*," posits that Rose subverts horror film tropes to force audiences to grapple with the enduring presence of classism and racism. "Stolen Spirits: The Appropriation of the Wendigo Spirit in Horror Literature," by Kallie Hunchman, reads Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983) and Algernon Blackwood's "The Wendigo" (1910) to demonstrate how Native American culture—and the windigo figure in particular—faces continuous exploitation and appropriation by Anglo-Americans. Adam Ladner's "The American Midwestern Haunting: The Asylum Lives On" explores the histories, similarities, and differences in stories of "haunted" Midwestern asylums to elucidate fears of mental health patients, gradually bringing the journal back to the focus on the individual.

From these, we move to the last set of essays, beginning with Brooke Lilek's "Horrors of Society: The Reflection of Societal Fears in American Horror Films." The author argues that *Polytergeist* reflects how technology haunts us, using the differences between the original film (1982) and its recent remake (2015) to demonstrate how our relationship with technology has (and had not) evolved over time. This edition of the *Digital Literature Review* concludes with Erin Goff's "Death in the Digital World," bringing us back to modern day and the self. Goff explores a new, unique phenomenon deserving of attention: how technology such as social media morphs our individual ability to grieve and mourn.

The structure of the journal intends to guide you, the reader, through that back-and-forth relationship between the self and the community. By beginning with a focus on the self, evolving into an exploration of culture at large, and eventually returning to the self, this journal's structure is intended to leave you with a better understanding of how we all are haunted, personally and culturally, and how our ghosts influence one another; we are haunted because of society, and society is haunted because of us. Literature of ghosts and cultural hauntings helps us see clearly, even if we must peer past shimmering, translucent specters to reach these revelations.

Do not be afraid. Look under your bed. You will be amazed by what you find.

Works Cited

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