

# Phantasmagoria 101: Teaching and Learning Haunted History Beyond the Classroom

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It is a misty and moon-dappled October evening on the Texas High Plains. A tour group is beckoned by a lantern-bearer, who guides them as they wind their way past campus buildings with ornate, Spanish Renaissance façades. On their journey, they encounter a cast of student storytellers who dramatically narrate the darkest events to have scarred the university's past. Like children around a campfire, they listen with palpable enthusiasm to a dozen grim tales. Many of these stories are familiar to the audience, especially alumni. Attendees have heard tell of the "Boy with the Ball", the "Cowboy Chemist", and the "Man in the Red Sweater"... yet they return anew, eager to hear them again because this is their own local history.

This event is the *Haunted Tour of TTU Campus*, conceived, researched, written, and performed by Raider Power of Paranormal (RPOP), a student group at Texas Tech University (Figures 1, 2, and 3). To realize this production, they learned how to identify, examine, and evaluate primary source materials in order to compile cohesive narratives out of facts recovered from both oral histories and archival records. This tour, generously sponsored by Texas Tech's Military & Veterans Programs, was held in 2021 and 2022. Both years summed, this cast of 52 hosted a fundraiser attended by at least 750 people and raised nearly \$3,500. We present RPOP as an unconventional, but highly successful, example of students engaging with history through the study of ghost stories.

As students returned to Texas Tech University for the autumn semester of 2019, three undergraduates had the idea to form a new student-led club centered on their mutual interest in the paranormal. To gain university approval, they needed the support of a staff or faculty advisor, a requirement for extracurricular organizations. After a dozen e-mails went unanswered, the three friends feared their search for an intra-university advocate was in vain.<sup>1</sup> Finally, a doctoral candidate replied and agreed to help. Although graduate students exist in a nebulous student-staff duality, bureaucratic requirements were satisfied, and the new club was formed.

By the end of that semester, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, and only a few new members had joined the nascent club. Social distancing would prohibit campus activities for eight months, which stymied recruitment efforts. RPOP student leaders grew to believe the very survival of their fledgling organization hinged upon hosting an event with mass appeal. Inspiration came to them one spring evening as they speculated on the everchanging rumors about the storied campus buildings. RPOP could host a haunted tour of their campus! The plan — to explore the histories behind supposed hauntings in an open-minded, yet critical manner — would require an audacious amount of effort, but would offer a public spectacle never before seen on campus.<sup>2</sup> Not unlike the "ghost walks" held in some cities, this too would be a place-based experience<sup>3</sup>, intended to amuse, inform, and delight attendees with strange tales of a locale's past.

Their new advisor was not without his concerns. Although Garret is a wildlife ecologist actively conducting

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1 We acknowledge there can be marked reluctance on the part of academics to engage with the paranormal, as very real sociocultural taboos on the subject persist. However, scholars who critically examine the topic prove it can be a rich subject of investigation, e.g., Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln, "Toward a critical hauntology: bare afterlife and the ghosts of Ba Chúc," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 1 (January 6, 2015): 191-220, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417514000644>.

2 For a similar project, see Yanique Chuntall Leonard, "They Won't Stay Dead: University of West Georgia Ghostlore" (M.A. Thesis, Carrollton, Georgia, U.S.A., University of West Georgia, 2018), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2050059965/abstract/FC90E2BE822D490FPQ/1>.

3 Tamara Chase Coleman, "Place-Based Education: An Impetus for Teacher Efficacy" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Kalamazoo, Michigan, U.S.A., Western Michigan University, 2014), <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/370>.

research on the paleobiology of the area<sup>4</sup>, he is no historian. Serendipitously, the enduring collegiate appeal of the paranormal itself would offer succor. Garret contacted Nicola at the Brooklyn Museum, whom he had first met through a paranormal-themed club at their *alma mater*. Nicola holds a master's degree in History and Museum Studies, and offered to serve as a history and material culture consultant for RPOP.

In their own words, RPOP describe their club as: "Actively exploring the boundaries of human knowledge through alleged paranormal phenomena. Our discussions and investigations invoke curiosity, while our analytical and systematic approach sharpens reasoning."<sup>5</sup> Being an interest-based organization, their membership is diverse in both discourse and representation.<sup>6</sup> Amongst extracurricular organizations, interest-based groups seem unique because they create and nurture environments that foster a diversity of thought.<sup>7</sup> A reflection of that ethos, today RPOP's membership exceeds 300 students, representing over 100 different majors. Students regularly state that RPOP is the best place on campus to meet their peers from different fields of study. Members even vary widely in their view of the paranormal; some are true believers, others empirical skeptics. However, all of them unite behind the idea that there is value in asking questions about the paranormal.

Ghost stories are a way of remembering histories fraught with difficult facts.<sup>8</sup> They tell of past events we may wish to forget but cannot, because their legacies remain present in the very landscapes we inhabit. The prevalence of ghost stories acknowledges that history is all around us. In America, belief in ghosts has been steadily increasing for decades: 25% in 1990, 32% in 2005, and 46% in 2019.<sup>9</sup> A survey in 2018 revealed that 58% of Americans believe places can be haunted by spirits.<sup>10</sup> Recently, a study found that 72% of Americans believe in some form of paranormal phenomena, despite the fact that such beliefs are stigmatized.<sup>11</sup> Yet the popularity of the paranormal, and the rise in thanatourism (journeys to sites associated with death)<sup>12</sup>, attest to an undeniable desire to engage with the darker facets of history.<sup>13</sup> This very human interest is one educators can ill afford to ignore, given that studies have shown critical thinking about such topics develops most markedly only when paranormal

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4 Garret D. Langlois *et al.*, "The North American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) is Recolonizing the Llano Estacado," *Western North American Naturalist* 82, no. 1 (March 4, 2022): 190–195, <https://doi.org/10.3398/064.082.0120>.

5 Raider Power of Paranormal, "Raider Power of Paranormal," TechConnect, October 2019, <https://techconnect.dsa.ttu.edu/organization/raiderpowerofparanormal>.

6 We parse student organizations accordingly, with some partial overlap: activity-based (*e.g.*, games, sports, teams, *etc.*), identity-based (*e.g.*, gender, nationality, religion, *etc.*), interest-based (*e.g.*, hobbies and passions), service-based (*e.g.*, community betterment), and sponsor-based (*e.g.*, extension of a department, college, or national supporter). Identity-based groups tend to be the most homogeneous by definition, while interest-based groups tend to be the least.

7 Additionally, interest-based organizations are generally student-initiated and unique to their campus of origin. Often they must self-advocate and lack the institutional backing enjoyed by some other types of student groups, such as sponsor-based organizations. Thus, interest-based organizations greatly benefit from mentorship and support.

8 Colin Dickey, *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places* (New York, New York, U.S.A.: Viking Press, 2016).

9 Anna P. Kambhampaty, "Many Americans Say They Believe in Ghosts. Do You?," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2021, sec. Style, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/28/style/do-you-believe-in-ghosts.html>.

10 Wilkinson College, "Paranormal America 2018 - Chapman University Survey of American Fears," *The Voice of Wilkinson* (blog), October 16, 2018, <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2018/10/16/paranormal-america-2018/>.

11 Tony Silva and Ashley Woody, "Supernatural Sociology: Americans' Beliefs by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Education," *Socius* 8 (March 10, 2022): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231221084775>.

12 Julie Rugg, "Funerary Heritage Tourism: Definitions and Principles," *Revista Murciana de Antropología* 28, no. 2021 (December 19, 2021): 31–58, <https://doi.org/10.6018/rmu.435441>.

13 An interest in thanatourism does not require a belief in the paranormal, but they can be related and complementary, *e.g.*, María Genoveva Dancausa Millán, María Genoveva Millán Vázquez de la Torre, and Ricardo Hernández Rojas, "Dark Tourism in Southern Spain (Córdoba): An Analysis of the Demand," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 5 (March 8, 2021): 2740, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052740>. Lincoln and Lincoln's work on Ba Chúc is also relevant to studies of thanatourism and the paranormal.

phenomena are considered explicitly.<sup>14</sup> The importance of teaching critical thinking is fundamental, but we have found an unlikely ally in that pursuit. We posit the power of the paranormal to inspire, captivate, and educate.

Most undergraduates struggle when initially attempting to conduct research, being unsure in approach, indiscriminate in sources, and superficial in examination.<sup>15</sup> Educators likewise struggle with how to motivate those students who consider history to be inherently uninteresting.<sup>16</sup> One way to counteract this resistance is connecting history to student interests from outside the classroom; here the allure of the paranormal was an exciting motivator.

Ghost stories can be a significant part of the shared historical memory of a community.<sup>17</sup> Intuitively aware of this, RPOP first inquired about campus lore from an oft overlooked repository of institutional knowledge: custodial and maintenance staff. While most every undergraduate is passably familiar with the ghosts said to haunt their campus, the stories often lack saliency. Because of their decades spent in the community and on campus, university staff recalled specifics that had been lost across subsequent generations of students. The intergenerational nature of ghost lore transmission<sup>18</sup> creates an ideal environment for experiential learning.<sup>19</sup> It was those memories, candidly shared in hallways and stairwells, that taught RPOP the value of oral histories firsthand.

One such tale begins on a Wednesday evening in 1971, when the Business Administration building echoed with blood-curdling screams and raucous laughter. Graduate students were so disquieted, several calls were made reporting the disturbance to the police, but officers could find no source for the ghastly sounds. Reports continued into the following day. On Thursday afternoon, the body of Bobby, a local high school student was discovered at the bottom of an elevator shaft. No one knows why he was in the building that night. According to the date and time on his watch, broken upon impact, he died Tuesday night — twenty-four hours before witnesses reported hearing his screams. To this day, students working in the building late at night claim to hear his cries and laughter, and occasionally even glimpse a young man disappearing into a classroom or down a corridor.

The tale of Bobby's death, and how his ghost resides in what is today the Media & Communication building, is now campus lore. To uncover the history behind this tale and others like it, RPOP next met with a university librarian, who introduced them to the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. Seeking the undergraduate perspective on campus news of the macabre, RPOP combed through issues of Texas Tech's official student newspaper. They discreetly paged through Tech's short-lived and controversial underground newspapers.

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14 Richard Wesp and Kathleen Montgomery, "Developing Critical Thinking Through the Study of Paranormal Phenomena," *Teaching of Psychology* 25, no. 4 (October 1998): 275–278, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00986289809709714>; Lou Manza *et al.*, "Exposure to Science Is Not Enough: The Influence of Classroom Experiences on Belief in Paranormal Phenomena," *Teaching of Psychology* 37, no. 3 (June 29, 2010): 165–171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00986283.2010.488554>.

15 Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, *Truth Be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age* (Information School, University of Washington: Project Information Literacy Research Institute, November 1, 2010), 72, <https://projectinfolit.org/publications/evaluating-information-study/>; Library Journal, *First Year Experience Survey: Information Literacy in Higher Education* (New York, New York, U.S.A.: Credo Reference, 2017), 47; School Library Journal, *Information Literacy/College Readiness Survey: A Survey of U.S. High School and Middle School Librarians* (New York, New York, U.S.A.: Credo Reference, June 2019), 79.

16 Solomon K. Smith, "Stepping Out of the Classroom Into Virtuality: Using MMORPGs to Teach History," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 42, no. 2 (November 4, 2017): 73–82, <https://doi.org/10.33043/TH.42.2.73-82>.

17 Targeted study of ghost lore through oral histories has proven fruitful for historians, *e.g.*, Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska, "It's scary here.' Haunted landscape as a research tool to look into post-expulsion landscapes," *Polish Journal of Landscape Studies* 3, no. 6 (October 9, 2020): 27–47, <https://doi.org/10.14746/pls.2020.6.2>; David Waldron, "How Folklore Informs History," *Agora* 58, no. 2 (June, 2023): 18–21, <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.051751040401463>.

18 Michael Clinton, "'I'll Remember That': Oral History, Service Learning, and Historical Understanding," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 40, no. 2 (November 1, 2015): 107–116, <https://doi.org/10.33043/TH.40.2.107-116>.

19 George White, Jr., "Crafting History: On Oral History Projects, Experiential Learning, and a Meditation on Teaching and Learning," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 38, no. 1 (May 1, 2013): 23–38, <https://doi.org/10.33043/TH.38.1.23-38>.

The students even examined blueprints in an effort to verify the existence of underground tunnels, said to be a haunted warren beneath campus. RPOP marveled at these documents as if they had discovered some eldritch tome, where all the half-remembered dormitory stories were laid bare before them. In some cases, they were even able to put names to faces through historical photographs.

Within these archives, RPOP learned the true story of Bobby's death. Robert Kent Ramsey was visiting campus with his friend, David. The fifteen-year-old boys told David's father, Dr. Richard Cole, they needed to visit the brand-new Business Administration building to work on an assignment. In reality, the pair had discovered it was possible to enter the elevator shaft of that ten-story building. They had been there before, climbing the elevator cables until their hands shined with graphite. On the night of Wednesday, February 10<sup>th</sup> 1971, David was re-entering the elevator car when he heard Bobby fall, crying out in agony upon landing. Too afraid to look down the elevator shaft himself, he telephoned the nearest hospital, which referred him to the police. David's call was the first anonymous report of a scream in the building, but not the last, yet no one found Bobby that night. David recounted how he anxiously awaited a news report of Bobby's discovery throughout the following Thursday. When none appeared, he called the police again, nearly twenty-four hours later. When officers thoroughly searched the building on Friday night, Bobby's broken body was found at the bottom of the elevator shaft.<sup>20</sup> The investigation determined that Bobby and David gained access by opening the elevator shaft doors while the car was on another floor. Maintenance workers initially dismissed the suggestion as the doors were meant to be locked, however three had been overlooked and left unsecured.<sup>21</sup> A series of unfortunate circumstances had thus occurred. Actions that may otherwise have been characterized as benign neglect instead resulted in the heartbreaking end of a young life, whose death continues to haunt the campus over fifty years later.

Like most ghosts, Bobby refuses to be forgotten. But now he is a real person with whom students can empathize, not some disembodied spirit floating through campus. News accounts described Robert Ramsey as a typically rebellious teenager, who had run away and been reported missing before. There was even discussion of his broken watch, a small detail that had taken on outsized importance in the legends. According to detectives, the sheer force of the impact had rolled the dial backward from Wednesday to Tuesday; a jarring fact that echoes the truly frightening circumstances. RPOP commiserates with the tragic tale of this troubled youth, and commemorates his memory by relating the historical facts behind his demise.

While researching other well-known ghost stories, RPOP found some that could not be verified, which news reporters came to regard as local legends. Recognizing that there were two distinct types of campus ghost stories, the students composed a tour script that clearly distinguishes between fictional legends rumored to have occurred, and factual accounts surrounding the deaths of real people. True stories are conveyed with respect and sensitivity toward both the deceased and those who mourn them, "to honor those who have been touched by violence" in a tone both "somber and serious".<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, RPOP maintains a strict self-imposed moratorium against the inclusion of any real tragedy that happened less than fifty years ago, half of Texas Tech's hundred year history.

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20 United Press International, "Lubbock Boy Tells of Fatal Plunge," *Dallas Morning News*, February 13, 1971, sec. D, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A0F99DDB671832188%40WHNPX-0FD52C03BB40F8DF%402440996-0FD52C04324990B9%4032-0FD52C07DFC58BA6%40Lubbock%2BBoy%2BTells%2Bof%2BFatal%2BPlunge>.

21 James Boyett, "Dead Youth Discovered in Tech Elevator Shaft," *University Daily*, February 12, 1971, <http://collections2.swco.ttu.edu/handle/20.500.12255/127556>.

22 Tali Russell, a junior majoring in Theatre Arts, e-correspondence with Garret D. Langlois, February 6, 2023.

Despite these precautions, members of RPOP are still asked if their tour could be misconstrued as disrespectful and exploitative. In an age where books are banned<sup>23</sup>, language is sanitized<sup>24</sup>, and facts are censored<sup>25</sup>, they offer a refreshingly bold response: “History doesn’t exist to make you comfortable.”<sup>26</sup> RPOP feels strongly that presenting grievous yet factual events is important. They see it as an opportunity to “give a voice to those who never got the chance to tell their story, or those whose stories might otherwise go untold.”<sup>27</sup> It also allows them to raise awareness. “Sharing [true] stories with students and the public can spark a healthy discussion about public safety and resources available in the event of a crisis.”<sup>28</sup> Only legends are sensationalized for spooky effect. Having unearthed exactly where facts ended and rumors began, RPOP created an event that educates and entertains the audience simultaneously.

The *Haunted Tour of TTU Campus* is RPOP’s moment to share their passion for paranormal-themed experiences and teach what they have learned. Their efforts have been richly rewarded, and the public’s response was overwhelmingly positive. For the cast, the experience reinforced the importance of studying history. “It is important to know the history of where you are educated and living... It provides backstory about the morals, values, and safety of the school.”<sup>29</sup> This sentiment was echoed in most of our interactions with the cast. “These stories let people learn about the history at this school. History is told to educate people on what not to do in the future.”<sup>30</sup> Overall, students consider the haunted tour a valuable part of their university education; “it covers campus history that is not often discussed”<sup>31</sup> in a fun, friendly, and welcoming environment.

In order for “teaching to be transformative for students, instructors must teach beyond the content of their courses”, which “might mean challenging the scholarly and popular consensus about the value or importance of certain people, groups, or events.”<sup>32</sup> Ghosts have haunted societies’ peripheries since time immemorial.<sup>33</sup> Is this history not worthy of study? Dr. George White, Jr. also reminds us, “the best teachers set a tone that helps students to develop both an inquisitiveness and healthy skepticism that allows [them] to draw connections and make comparisons.”<sup>34</sup> RPOP warmly welcomed the insights of custodians, the guidance of a librarian, and the mentorship of a scientist, all of whom encouraged their emerging scholarship. With that support, RPOP drew those connections, made those comparisons, and sifted fact from fiction. Why not invite students to gather ‘round

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23 Alexandra Alter, “Book Bans Rising Rapidly in the U.S., Free Speech Groups Find,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 2023, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/20/books/book-bans-united-states-free-speech.html>.

24 Angel Eduardo, “Why ‘Sensitivity Readers’ Are Bad for Free Speech, Art, and Culture,” *FIRE Newsdesk* (blog), The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, March 31, 2023, <https://www.thefire.org/news/why-sensitivity-readers-are-bad-free-speech-art-and-culture>.

25 Tyler Brunner, “Censorship in History Textbooks: How Knowledge of the Past Is Being Constructed in Schools,” *Ursidae: The Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado*, McNair Scholars Edition, 3, no. 2, article 9 (January 2016): 40–56, <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/urj/vol3/iss2/9/>.

26 Nick Adams, class of ‘23 who graduated with a degree in History, e-correspondence with Garret D. Langlois, February 6, 2023.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Amy Shaw, class of ‘22 who graduated with a degree in Accounting, e-correspondence with Garret D. Langlois, February 5, 2023.

29 Kyndal Houff, a freshman majoring in Animal Science, e-correspondence with Garret D. Langlois, February 5, 2023.

30 Bailey Bradshaw, a freshman majoring in Psychology, e-correspondence with Garret D. Langlois, February 6, 2023.

31 Daniel Ozlowski, a sophomore majoring in Natural Resources Management, e-correspondence with Garret D. Langlois, February 7, 2023.

32 George White, Jr., “Crafting History: On Oral History Projects, Experiential Learning, and a Meditation on Teaching and Learning,” *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 38, no. 1 (May 1, 2013): 23–38, <https://doi.org/10.33043/TH.38.1.23-38>.

33 Irving L. Finkel, *The First Ghosts: Most Ancient of Legacies* (London, U.K.: Hodder & Stoughton, 2021).

34 George White, Jr., “Crafting History: On Oral History Projects, Experiential Learning, and a Meditation on Teaching and Learning,” *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 38, no. 1 (May 1, 2013): 23–38, <https://doi.org/10.33043/TH.38.1.23-38>.

the proverbial campfire, to share the kinds of stories we usually tell in the dark... tales of the improbable, the uncanny, the frightening? Within the atmosphere of suspense and hushed excitement, they may just find the frisson of fear, the element of truth, and the historical food for thought that make such tales endure.

RPOP was founded by three undergraduates with \$100 and an ecologist as their advisor. Their existence has not been a painless one; a student protested against them, and a professor repeatedly challenged their access to basic campus resources. But RPOP's remarkably successful transformation of research findings into public performance earned them legitimacy and recognition. The *Haunted Tour of TTU Campus* empowered RPOP to engage their local community, raise their budget thirty-fold, increase membership a hundred-fold, and save their club. RPOP's success demonstrates how having fun while learning haunted history can be a powerful educational experience, if not banished as irrelevant. Even if no such clubs exist at your own institution, haunted history could still be explored within a traditional classroom model. As demonstrated, even a modest start can yield impressive results. Imagine what the expertise of a historian could achieve through evoking their own local spirit.



Figure 1. Attendees in 2022, outside Drane Hall, listening to “Med. School Cadavers” and learning about how the willed body program was housed there back in 1973.<sup>35</sup> Photograph courtesy of Hunter Pitman.

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35 Suzanna Cisneros, “Caring for Families and Students,” *Daily Dose* (blog), January 28, 2016, <https://dailydose.ttuhs.edu/2016/january/caring-for-families-and-students.aspx>.





Figure 2. The 2021 cast; word of the event spread, and the cast size increased by nearly 80% the following year. Photograph courtesy of Sierra Mello-Miles.



Figure 3. A dramatic storyteller in 2022, outside Knapp Hall dormitory, regaling attendees with the tale of the “Boy with the Ball”. Photograph courtesy of Disha Ganjegunte.