

# **HAUNTING PRESENCE: PLACES AND THE PERFORMANCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARANORMAL**

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*Session organizer*

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Ghosts, spirits, haunting, and other phenomena that are conventionally classified as paranormal inhabit all sorts of places. Ethnographers have long documented the intimate relationship between the land and the ancestors in many societies, and the crucial role of the spirits of the dead in myths and storytelling. But ghost stories and beliefs are not confined to “exotic” settings. This session deals with the ways in which places, people, and stories relate to the paranormal, with a special focus on haunting in Western contexts. It is organised around two analytical takes on ghosts, stories, and perception.

Firstly, we want to discuss the growing tourism devoted to the pursuit of the paranormal. Ghost tours, secret séances and spiritual “investigations” increasingly make their way into heritage settings and tourist landscapes, often spurred on by and feeding back to paranormal TV shows, web communities and other media representations of “the other side”. Even though many westerners remain sceptical towards embracing ghosts and ghost stories as “real”, a great many number of locations are regarded as special due to the deaths and horrors connected to them, and the spirits thought somehow to inhabit or “hallow” the ground.

Secondly, haunting is profoundly connected to human experience. We thus wish to investigate the figure of ghost stories as they are shaped by haunted people. Conventionally, haunting has been categorized as something connected to the past, to the less educated or more esoteric oriented parts of society. This is far from the characteristics of perceptions of ghosts in a Western context of today. Haunting is experienced in contemporary spatial and material settings of computers, TVs, and cellular phones, and by all kinds of people. Furthermore, it also goes for many haunted people that they do not embrace ghosts as real. This often leads to perplexity.

In this session we seek to discuss the role of ghosts and other paranormal creatures from different perspectives which may inform each other: on the one hand the performative aspects of staged ghost stories in the tourism and heritage sector, and on the other hand ghost stories as they are shaped by the witnesses to ghosts. Furthermore we would like to discuss different notions of place through the topic of the paranormal.

We invite papers that delve into (e.g.):

- Ghost stories/performances as narratives and temporal constructions
- The role of media in paranormal tourism industry and in the ways in which people describe their personal ghost experiences
- The notion of experience in connection to ghost stories
- Paranormality and normality
- Belief, religiosity and purpose in ghostly settings and/or ghost experiences
- The role (and construction) of “science” in the paranormal industry and/or the shaping of haunting experiences
- The ways in which staged ghost stories and individual experiences of ghosts inform each other

## **HAUNTED HOMES – ON THE GHOST AS A POSTMODERN FIGURATION**

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The ghost is yet again haunting the Western imagination. Documentary-style TV-series based on 'ghost-hunting' are increasing in popularity, and the ghost story has found its way back into the horror genre – and thus into stories about inhabiting the postmodern, technologically advanced home.

But why is the postmodern home, with all its advanced technologies such as laptops, internet connection, mobile phones, and electrical lights still haunted? And how does the postmodern subject inhabit and orient herself/himself in these technologically advanced, yet strangely haunted spaces?

I wish to discuss these questions by approaching the postmodern ghost as a possible figuration - a guide which knows its way around the haunted spaces of postmodernity. To do so I will be drawing heavily on the work of the American feminist Donna Haraway as well as the Italian/Australian/Dutch feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti. Both Haraway and Braidotti are part of what one might call a 'corporeal feminism' that uses theories on corporeality and affect to discuss the postmodern, gendered subject's abilities to find positions/spaces from whence she/he can speak and be heard. Can the ghost be a guide that points out such positions?

## **LOOKING FOR SOMOZA. TRACES AND MEMORIES OF DICTATORS AND REVOLUTION IN MANAGUA, NICARAGUA**

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Managua's old down-town was largely destroyed in a 1972 earthquake, as well as being the center of the final phase of the civil war that forced the last ruling Somoza dictator out of Nicaragua in 1979. This paper is part of a post-doctoral research project carried out in Nicaragua 2008-2010 and focuses empirically on some of the mundane (i.e. not museum collections) material remnants of the Somoza dictatorship clan that can still be found in Managua, especially two of the Somoza family's formerly private houses in Managua. Through investigating and laying bare the material and symbolical layers of history of these houses, this paper tries to pinpoint the use of the lingering memories of the Somozas, especially how official memories (the 'big history') and more emotionally laden unofficial memories (e.g. "gossip") interact to form a contemporary national myth of the country's former dictator and his family.

## **GHOST EXPERIENCE, CONTEXTUAL AUTISM AND POSTMODERN CONNECTIONS – HAUNTED HOUSES, A FIELDWORK IN CONTEMPORARY DENMARK**

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This is about real ghosts. It is about the uneasy feeling tied to experiences of haunting, a feeling of something not real manifesting itself as real. Ghosts are often perceived as something not *being* in the world, they are out of place, not in time. They seem to point to something not here but there, not now but before or even in the future. They seem to walk in and out of time and space. The insulting feeling, haunting can cause, is partly due to this lack of shared context; it is as if the ghost invades your context, while you are not part of the ghost's context. This contextual autism of the ghost makes the haunting seem pointless: no reason, no story, no suspense – only something you do not understand.

The experiences of ghosts take place in homes with cellular phones, CD players, televisions, and computers, some of the homes have also been renovated. These changes are common, even global, including bigger rooms, fewer walls, computer screens, and television screens. A spacious feeling overrules the cosiness of small intimate rooms; poly-functional rooms are popular, and so are rooms with poly-sociality. The tendency towards bigger windows let light in, blurring the limit between the inside and the outside might affect the way ghosts are perceived, but it does not alter the fact that many people experience ghosts in such settings.

In other words ghosts are perceived as on the one hand out of context on the other connected to the modern – or post modern – world of today.

My work in progress, *Haunted Houses*, is part of the research project *The Limits of Reason* at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. Focusing on the relations between space and haunting, I conduct fieldwork on haunted houses in Denmark today.

## EMOTIONAL HAUNTING AND THE ETHEREAL FEMALE IN VICTORIAN ARCTIC GHOST FICTION

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Emotional forces are moving landscapes, the histories of which can be grounded in developing knowledges of place. In 1875 John Franklin's nephew, Alfred Lord Tennyson, invoked the categories of the supernatural and the spiritual when declaring that Franklin's soul was heading 'Towards no earthly pole'. Historians have traditionally misdiagnosed the notion of Arctic otherworlds as a signs of Victorian sentimentalism rather than taking seriously their implications for understanding the Arctic as a landscape rich with emotional meanings of place. To what extent did such expressions attempt to appeal to emplaced spirits and ontologies? This paper seeks to bring gender into a discussion of how Victorian Arctic exploration was imagined. In popular and pulp ghost stories there existed an idea of *sublime love* in relation to the Arctic which drew its spiritual power and purity from the contrast between masculine endeavour amid horror and feminine fidelity on the home front: in this motif the woman was psychically connected to her male lover across the cartographic divide, transgressing even the boundaries of what was natural in the physical world.

Such was the power of polar love to unite souls across space and time that it was inextricably linked to the supernatural, to the world of ghosts, haunting memories, and celestial melodies – features which were all performed in an environment of death or impending death. Examples by Bryant, Dickens and Collins, Hood, and Conan Doyle demonstrate how the Arctic became a theatre of psychical courtship, consummation, and even transubstantiation as the woman, envisioned through the idea of the North, was fatefully bound to her lover by supernatural means. Did this spiritualization of the Arctic as a 'heavenly' realm merely disguise a sense of the malevolent Arctic, a *genius loci* which could itself emote?

## **GET REAL: SÉANCES AND SCIENCES IN PARANORMAL GETTYSBURG**

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In Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the spirits of the dead still linger. The famous civil war battlefield hosts roughly 2 million tourists each year who tour the “hallowed ground” where General Lee’s confederate army suffered defeat in 1863 at the hands of the Union Army. More than 50,000 casualties shed their blood here over three fatal days of battle, and the town of Gettysburg and its surrounding fields were turned, almost instantly after the battle, into an iconic site of memory and an emblem of American patriotism.

In recent years, following a general surge of “paranormal” interest spurred by TV, internet and other media, Gettysburg has seen a considerable paranormal tourist industry evolve. Even though much of this is often discarded as mere “commercialism” by critics – especially by those who consider the area’s popular “ghost hunts” as signs of sacrilege towards the fallen – many of the tour operators and “investigators” (and an astounding number of tourists and enthusiasts that take part) seem to hold a serious and deep belief in the “other side”. Paradoxically, such beliefs are often expressed or acted upon through practices seemingly in line with a paradigm of rationalism and science, as participants struggle with categorizing and “debunking” ghostly “evidence” and other activities along ostensibly scientific measures.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2010 among ghost tourists and paranormal investigators in Gettysburg, this paper investigates human sense-making in the blurry territory between myth, science and history, and between the normal, the abnormal and the paranormal.

## **LANDSCAPES OF DESTRUCTION AND CREATION: STORYTELLING IN KALAPANA, HAWAI’I AND *MELE* (SONG) COMPOSED IN CONNECTION WITH THE SHARING OF KNOWLEDGE IN KALMAR**

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In 1990 lava flows from Kilauea Volcano on the Island of Hawai’i nearly destroyed all of Kalapana Village and two adjacent subdivisions. 50 feet of lava now covers the nearby Kaimu community and its black sand beaches. Once well-known landmarks were buried under lava, forests and fields disappeared, homes were destroyed, and

the coastline changed. In spite of this apparent full-scale destruction of Kalapana and adjacent communities, the Hawaiian community of Kalapana has retained a vivid cultural memory of Kalapana as a special place to identify with. Kalapana, haunted by memories and forever broken apart as a community, remains the geographical nexus of a geocultural imaginary that seeks emotional suture and cultural continuity amidst volcanic eruption and other violent forces of nature.

This presentation is based on oral family lore collected from an extended, dislocated Kalapana family. We will examine the distinct ways in which storytelling functions to process sense of place when geographical parameters (landscape, village, coastline) are in a constant state of flux with the unpredictable movement of molten lava. How does one belong to a village that no longer exists? How do intersections between a tangible landscape and an intangible geocultural imaginary produce a sense of place? Which ritual practices are reinforced in storytelling about destruction and creation? And, by examining this testimony of the impact of natural catastrophe on people's sense of place, how does haunting function in the recovery of collective identity tied to a specific location? These questions will be explored through an examination of storytelling about the continuing transformation of Kalapana.