Pain, Pleasure, and the Spectral: The Barfing Ghost of Burford Hall

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To worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends upon how familiar we are with our own ghosts (Kristeva 1991:191).

Politics, Legend, and the Spectral

We are well familiar with ghosts and things that go bump in the night; however, students at Indiana State University experience a ghost that barfs in the night. For several decades, stories about a vomiting, female ghost—along with other legends—have circulated among college students who live in the Burford Residence Hall at ISU. The first part of this article delineates the basic legends told in association with Burford Hall and looks at them against a political backdrop. The second and third parts of this paper provide a reading of the elements of pain and pleasure as they appear in the Burford legends that focus upon ghosts.[1]

In 1992, a resident assistant at the dorm recorded the following memorate detailing his experience with the legendary barfing ghost:

> I had an encounter with the Burford Ghost one night about 2:30 - 3:00 A.M. It was on a Friday night. I was in my room doing some homework and went to the restroom. I heard someone—sounded like throwing up in the restroom—as I was walking to the restroom. When I opened the door, I did not hear anything at all. I went ahead and went to the bathroom and was getting ready to head out the door. As I was opening the door, I heard the throwing up again. So I shut the door and went to get a drink. I went back in to see if anyone needed help or if everything was cool. As I went into the bathroom, I looked underneath the stalls and did not see any feet there. It seemed real weird, so I proceeded back to my room. As I got outside, I heard

> the barfing again. I never saw anyone in the restroom. (ISU Folklore Archives)

Besides her characteristic vomiting, the ghost is also known to play poltergeist-like tricks on the students in Burford Hall. A version of the legend dated from the late 1960s further delineates some of the ghost's activities:

> Last fall, Burford Hall supposedly had a ghost on the fourth floor—the floor I lived on. That floor has a Coke machine which is located by the basins, shower room, and the johns.
>
> The time the ghost struck was unpredictable, but it was always late when mostly everybody was asleep. There were enough girls who had heard the ghost to arouse the interest of the whole dorm, causing girls to stay up all night to listen in our cross lounge. Some of the girls who stayed in their rooms pushed furniture in front of their doors and slept with their doors locked. In the morning, they would find their doors unlocked mysteriously.
>
> The female ghost always did three things in a sequence. She would let out a hideous laugh, vomit in the john, then flush it graciously. Good thing—no telling what ghosts puke! (ISU Folklore Archives 1969)

Other versions in the ISU Archives indicate that the Burford ghost is also known to turn off alarm clocks and moan, or to flush the toilet and then scream. Burford Hall is not just the site of anomalous vomiting; there are other legends about frightening events happening there. One 1960s legend reports that Burford Hall was the home of a young African American woman, who, due to her association with a black power group that encouraged its adherents to kill whites, was driven to madness and to the attempted murder of a white coed (ISU Folklore Archives 1968). In the fall of 1992, a student in one of my folklore classes told me that Burford Hall is haunted by an irate lesbian ghost whose anger is prompted by the dorm's recent move to coed status. This legend version could be a conflation with another ISU dorm legend about a lesbian ghost who originally haunted the University of Western Illinois. This lesbian ghost followed a woman to ISU's Blumberg Hall (ISU Folklore Archives 1984). Whether the Burford lesbian ghost is the same ghost who haunts Blumberg Hall—note the similarity in sound between Blumberg and Burford Halls, which could lead to the substitution of one for the other—or not, I find the account significant because, like the 1960s black power legend, it demonstrates that the lore surrounding Burford Hall picks up and carries concerns about political issues of the era in which the legends are being circulated, and this political focus changes with the times. For instance, I have not heard the Burford black power legend from my own students, nor are there copies of it in the archives that date later than the end of the 1960s.

The 1960s are, of course, synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement and with the prominence of African American leaders and black power groups like the Black Panthers. Because of their visibility and quest to reshape the status quo, these people and groups appear in legends and are often depicted stereotypically as threatening and malevolent (i.e., they plot to kill whites). Another example of this type of lore is in William A. Wilson's work on Mormon folklore; he discusses legends that were circulating in the late 1960s wherein the Black Panthers were supposed to descend upon Salt Lake City and storm and pillage the Mormon Temple (1985:60). I should note that an impetus for much of this lore was the African American protest of the Church's discriminatory policy of not allowing blacks access to its priesthood.

Legends often depict scenes of liminality, and, during the 1960s, African Americans could be seen as liminal in their relation to dominant white America. That is, they were literally betwixt and between—they were American but not granted the full civil and human rights that white America enjoyed. They were betwixt and between two things emphatically ingrained in U.S. culture: America's promise and America's prejudice. The Civil Rights Movement was something that America, and particularly college students, frequently confronted, so a legend's emergence from this material is not surprising.

Today in America gays and lesbians are becoming as visible for their political quest for civil rights as were African Americans in the 1960s—not to mention the fact that, in 1992, President Clinton made a campaign promise to lift the ban on gays in the military, which has focused national attention on gay issues. Certainly, gays also find themselves betwixt and between promise and prejudice. Since legends are often so adept at incorporating current societal issues and concerns (as the work of so many legend scholars—like Baker, Brunvand, Dégh, Fine, Grider, Langlois, and Turner among several others—has demonstrated), it follows then that a gay ghost or two might emerge from the closets of college dormitories.

The aforementioned Burford legends are directly linked to political movements associated with specific periods in American history. Another Burford Hall legend reveals an etiology, which is not as *apparently* political:

> I heard a story about the Burford ghost called, "Old Lady Burford." Supposedly, in room 217, there had been some attempted suicides. People have attempted suicide and have heard some noises in that room. The room has been called "The Haunted Room." Supposedly, years ago, Old Lady Burford lived in this room and actually committed suicide in this room. Ever since her death, she has been haunting that room. Old Lady Burford is the common name for all the supernatural experiences [in Burford Hall, including

> the barfing ghost]. She has her picture in the main lobby of Burford Hall. Everybody claims that if you look at her picture for a period of time, something bad will happen to you. (ISU Folklore Archives 1992)

I visited Burford Hall and the picture of "Old Lady Burford" with some of my students. On our way to the lobby, I asked my students who she was and why her picture was hanging in the lobby, assuming they would explain her connection to the university. My students adamantly and sincerely maintained that Old Lady Burford's picture was in the lobby because she committed suicide in the residence hall. I responded by saying that most universities are not in the habit of hanging portraits in the dorm lobby of people who have successfully committed suicide in the building. My students laughed and agreed. We looked at the picture of the grandmotherly, but slightly stern-looking woman. Even though looking at her was supposed to cause "something bad to happen," her benign image belied the stories of her Medusa-like qualities. Across the bottom was a plaque revealing that Ms. Burford had been dean of women in the 1940s—a plaque that was conveniently ignored in the legend version.

I said earlier that this version is not so *obviously* political, but I think it does suggest the ways in which women have been caught betwixt and between American promise and American prejudice. In many American supernatural legends, women are commonly depicted as either villains (hideous, old witches) or victims and rarely as heroic, which is a role that male characters can access. The depiction of "Old Lady Burford" follows this same model and reveals some of the biases and power imbalances of the culture in which the legends circulate. Also, obviously just as African Americans and gays struggle for equitable treatment in America, so do women. These legends seem to be one way of marking the power of dominant American society—and often those people who threaten to disrupt the perceived norms are literally "unmade," to borrow a term from scholar Elaine Scarry.[2] That is, in several of these legends, the bodies of historically oppressed groups in America are divested of corporeality. They become a not-quite-human presence. They are specters who are outside of the flow of human life. To quote Scarry, "Power is cautious. It covers itself. It bases itself in another's pain and prevents all recognition that there is 'another' by looped circles that ensure its own solipsism" (1985:59). In other words, power often covers its tracks and refuses to recognize its relationship to another's pain. This occlusion can be seen in legends such as the aforementioned where the protagonists, as members of counter-hegemonic groups, are depicted as being in pain and appear solely responsible for their agony: *they* committed suicide, or *they* tried to murder someone else. It is because I'm looking at power's tendency toward camouflage—blending in and appearing "natural"—that I use the word

"hegemony" in this article. As I understand it, hegemony is defined as the permeation throughout society of a system of beliefs, attitudes and values that is supportive of the established order. This system is internalized by most of society to the point that it is seen as "common sense" or "natural." The system's constructed nature is then opaque and not very amenable to questioning (or deconstruction and reconstruction). Indeed, one of the first arguments any of the three groups mentioned thus far (African Americans, women, gays and lesbians) encountered when they questioned their assigned place was that their engagement in other roles or movement into other societal positions was not "natural." (For example, "It's not natural for women to work outside of the home.")

Spectral Pain: A Vomiting Ghost

To be denied human and civil rights is to be made more vulnerable to experiencing pain. To be denied humanness is painful; it is also the state of the ghost. In twentieth century American tradition, whatever the origin of the specter, ghost stories often serve as a way of marking pain: someone died awfully in this room; now it's haunted. The story keeps us from totally forgetting; it keeps the pain before us.[3] In her book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Scarry argues that experiencing pain creates an urge to move out and away from the body (1985:162). As I said, ghost stories often depict and suggest pain in some fashion, and certainly the ghost is literally a figure which has moved out and away from the fleshy body, and pain is often its *raison d'etre*. Ironically, even though ghosts are figures removed from corporeality, often the stories about ghosts focus our attention even more keenly on the body and the painful things that can happen to it, like painful deaths or the severing of body parts so commonly seen in the legends wherein the revenant searches for a missing appendage. Ghost stories make pain more visible.[4]

Scarry asserts that hurt and pain work as a vehicle of verification. In the case of war and torture—which is the focus of her book—pain and wounded or dead bodies attest to the political power of opposing governments or factions. Pain also verifies other things; if I burn myself when I touch the burner on the stove, my pain tells me the stove is too hot and shouldn't have been touched. Since hurt and pain are frequently associated with verification, perhaps this is one of the reasons why a ghost story, with its typical focus on pain, is believable. In the case of the Burford Ghost, perhaps the reality of, the memory of, and the fear of pain is more real to my students than a dean of women from the 1940s. So the plaque at the base of the picture that is inscribed with the words detailing this past is ignored, and instead, the students focus on pain and the

destruction of the body—the suicide story and the belief that looking at the painting will cause bad (or painful) things to happen to the viewer, too.

Sometimes the pain in ghost stories and legends can be used to reinforce the power of a group or worldview that is not associated with the ghost itself. For example, some of the Burford Hall legend versions can be understood as cautionary tales about the pitfalls of working against so-called dominant cultural norms. The message could be something like, "If you wanted to be spared the pain you see in these legends, don't become closely involved with movements that challenge the status quo." Pain, as it is seen in these legends and ghost stories, then can become a marker of the power of dominant or hegemonic cultural beliefs, and the legends can be used to subtly perpetuate these beliefs.

Just as Scarry posits that pain is not just "read" only as pain, she also argues that it is also understood to reference death:

> That pain is so frequently used as a symbolic substitute for death in the initiation rites of many tribes is surely attributable to an intuitive human recognition that pain is the equivalent in felt-experience of what is unfeelable in death. Each only happens because of the body. . . . Physical pain . . . mimes death (1985:31).

The Burford ghost stories commonly contain narrative elements linked to both pain and death. Indeed, most ghost stories make this link either explicitly or implicitly, since, in accordance with late twentieth century American notions of spectralness, a ghost is the spirit of a *dead* person, and the stories commonly detail the *trauma* that causes the ghost to haunt the human world.

Pain is also alluded to in the legend version's detailing of the ghost's propensity for vomiting—for emptying its already ethereal form.[5] This process sounds painful to me, at least in terms of how a human would understand it, although I certainly can't speak for how the ghost feels. The words of one of the aforementioned legend versions come to mind: "No telling what ghosts puke!" Indeed, a ghost vomiting seems an oxymoron; if a ghost has no corporeality how can it produce anything of material substance? Perhaps the Burford ghost is a throwback to the embodied ghosts of the ballad tradition, who have been known not only to have physical bodies but also to have attributes like bad breath. In such ballads as "Sweet William's Ghost" (Child 77) and "The Unquiet Grave" (Child 78), a revenant returns to visit a lover, who often is grieving excessively; the lover requests a kiss, but the revenant refuses, saying things like, "My cheek is as cold as the clay, true love/My breath is earthy and strong/And if I should kiss your lips, true-love/ Your life would not be long" (Child 1965:237). However, I don't think this type of embodiment is the state of the Burford

ghost. The legend versions give no hint of a ghost existing in the flesh and indicate that nothing is *seen*: "I looked underneath the stalls and didn't *see* any feet" (ISU Folklore Archives 1992); "Girls stayed up all night to *listen* [for the ghost]" (ISU Folklore Archives 1969).

Ironically, like the "ghost goo" depicted in the *Ghostbusters* movies, tropologically, a ghost with a characteristic like vomiting very firmly grounded in the world of substance works to link the ghost to the real, to the human world of flesh and pain. The ghost is nonhuman, but engaging in human activities humanizes it. In fact, one interpretation of the ghost on the individual level could be as objective correlative for a college student's pain and all the many reasons she could be vomiting into a dorm toilet at 3 A.M. on a Friday night: flu, stress, pregnancy, bulemia, dorm food, or too much to drink. Because this room is part of the milieu of college students, the Burford ghost has the unromantic task of haunting a dorm bathroom, instead of a hundred-year-old farmhouse or a Victorian mansion.

Scarry says that if the felt-attributes of pain are (through means that can include narration) lifted into the visible world, and if the referent for these attributes is understood to be the human body, then the "sentient fact of the person's suffering will become knowable to a second person" (1985:13). The act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain (Scarry 1985:9). With the legends of the Burford ghost, the students have created a narrative that details suffering and pain (death, suicide, and vomiting). Scarry says that we create by transporting some of what we are feeling inside to the exterior via artifactual forms:

> The interchange of inside and outside surfaces requires not the literal reversal of bodily linings but the making of what is originally interior and private into something exterior and sharable. . . .
>
> Thus, the reversal of inside and outside surfaces ultimately suggests that . . . by transporting pain out onto the external world, that external environment is deprived of its immunity to, unmindfulness of, and indifference toward the problems of sentience. (1985:284, 285)

Basically, according to Scarry, part of what is done in this creating is that we work at making the external world more animate. We project our aliveness and our pain onto inanimate or exterior things. In light of Scarry's argument, a residence hall restroom then is a highly appropriate site for a haunting. In this bathroom locale, a student confronts the corporeality of her body and its functions, which is an intimate and private process for adults in American culture and also one that is emotionally charged since it's so wrapped up with mortality, health, and taboo. Despite the intensely personal and private nature of restroom activities, a dorm bathroom is a public, cold,

and impersonal place. When faced with their very living and human bodies in this indifferent and non-sentient environment, what have the students in Burford Hall done but humanize it with a ghost.[6]

Even though a narrative (what Scarry calls a "verbal artifact"), like a ghost story, can be about pain in some aspects (as I've tried to demonstrate thus far), it is very difficult to render the actual, in-process experience of pain into language. According to Scarry, intense pain destroys the language of the sufferer:

> Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds . . . a human being makes before language is learned. . . . To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language. (1985:4, 6)

Scarry neglects to recognize that what she calls "prelanguage" or the state anterior to language is *not* entirely outside of culture and signification. She does not discuss what is, I would argue, at least the partial language of pain—the paralinguistic. According to theorist Julia Kristeva, even when we are in the state anterior to language as infants, we are shaped by culture, most notably by the interaction, and communication if you will, that emerges as a result of the interplay between our infantile cries, moans, gurgles, body functions, and the touch and responses of our primary caregivers (see Kristeva's discussion of "the semiotic" in *Revolution in Poetic Language*; also helpful is Chase 1984:194). Thus while not wholly linguistic, these sounds do signify according to the context in which they are uttered, and they can be shaped by adult responses to them. For example, all through life, one often feels an imperative to moan, cry, and scream when one is in great pain, just as an infant does; when these sounds are heard by others, they are understood to *signify* pain. These same paralinguistic noises are also a means of signification for ghosts; those moans, groans, and shrieks are the common "language" of specters. Such is the case for the Burford ghost as can be seen in this legend version:

> About two weeks before Christmas vacation a girl on the second floor of Burford Hall went down to the bathroom early in the morning. As she was heading down she heard sounds as though someone were barfing. But when she got into the bathroom, although the sounds were still there, no one was in the room. From that night on, for two weeks straight, sounds began to be heard on each floor. They were in the halls and sometimes in the rooms. The girls could hear sounds like someone *barfing, laughing, or moaning, but no one ever saw* anyone. (Baker 1982:220; emphasis mine)

Another version simply says: "Strange noises started happening. The toilet would flush, and someone would *scream*" (Baker 1982:221; emphasis mine). Even though it is not language per se—according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "para-" in the word "paralinguistic" means "alongside of, by, just beyond" (Philological Society 1961:443) language—so the paralinguistic does have some relationship to meaning. In the legends then, this spectral "language" can connote pain and the inarticulate irrational (the screams or the hideous laughter described in the versions). Paradoxically and depending upon their context, moans, cries, groans, and laughter can also signal pleasure.

Pleasure and the Impossible Text

Thus far, I have focused on pain and the Burford legends, but there is also a great deal of pleasure associated with these legends. Quite simply, they are fun to tell; like other legends, they have an entertainment function. From my own perspective, I find the image of a barfing ghost so preposterous, it makes me laugh. Sometimes my students also laugh when they hear some versions of the legend. In some respects, I think the Burford legend sounds like a parody of other legends; after all, vomiting sounds emerging from college restrooms are rather routine and seem hardly anomalous. Of course for many legends, it *is* anomalous occurrences that prompt the stories; for instance, the unexplained lights that trigger the will-o-wisp narratives or the stories about a ghostly figure carrying a lantern while searching for something missing (often a body part or loved one). However, at least for the students I talked to, there is no intentional parodying. The ghostly vomiting noises are not connected to the mundane for them, and they are truly baffled by the barfing Burford ghost.

What disturbs the students is that these sounds appearing to signify sentience of some sort have no traceable physical source. Because of *this* anomaly, a ghost materializes as the appropriate origin for noises that seem not to be coming from any human form, but that do seem human. The creation of a specter as an anchor for these sounds is pleasing because it lessens the tension created by sounds that communicate hurt and pain that have no seeming origin. So instead of being surrounded and continually mystified and frightened by an unlocatable sound which appears to convey human sentience, the legend allows the sounds to be located in the ethereal form of a ghost, and an object (or an author) is created for fear. So cultural and narrative logic are followed and a legend emerges. (See also Bennett 1987:212 for her comments on ghosts and the "rationalizing impulse.") While the legend may make some uneasy, it is not nearly as disturbing as the sound of human pain that cannot be traced.

Often when we hear a legend, we take a certain pleasure in trying to read and interpret the ghost's very presence—why is it haunting *this* place? We try to decode its moans, shrieks, and laughter—what is it trying to tell us? It is much like the pleasure associated with trying to decipher a puzzle or a mystery novel. We may also find comfort and pleasure in other functions of the legend. For example, a legend can reinforce belief in the supernatural. It can work to support power structures (that are beneficial for some, but painful for others). However, at the same time, the legend evokes core aspects of lived experience: physicality, pain, and death. And, the telling and creation of legend versions hold for us the pain of not quite knowing what to believe along with the pleasure of creating something knowable (a legend text).

In this article, I have been trying to identify some of the different and even opposing ways pain and the ghostly can be understood in the Burford legend versions. Obviously, this supernatural legend can work on many levels. Perhaps one of the most unnerving and frightening aspects of ghosts is their incredible, encompassing motility as tropes. As I said earlier, ghosts leave us with the task of trying to decipher their communications to us—or, at least, trying to understand the meanings of the legends about them. Because specters give us few clear and definitive answers, those of us who are the audience for ghost stories bear a great deal of responsibility for our interpretations (and our omissions in our approaches to understanding ghosts and their tales). Following a ghost through its legend versions is challenging and can result in the breakdown of tidy, culturally constructed polarities. A specter embraces the impossible; it is both form and formlessness; it is dead and undead; human and nonhuman. Ghosts move through impenetrable boundaries and move immovable objects. The ghost is a creation whose very being seems bent on encompassing and collapsing binary oppositions and demonstrating the possibility of accommodating contradiction. In these legend versions and their tellings, one sees the private and the political, the feeling and the unfeeling, the living and the dead, the processes of dehumanization and humanization, and pain and pleasure. Because of the way it can present the impossible, the ghost story also is a text of possibilities in terms of the variety of versions, interpretations, functions, and reactions it generates.

The Kristeva quotation that prefaces this essay delineates two possible reactions to the spectral: "To worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends upon how familiar we are with our own ghosts" (1991:191). For Kristeva, "ghost" is figural; it refers to the strange, the unknown, the foreigner. She argues that when we flee from or struggle against this ghost, this foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious—and we often refuse to acknowledge this foreignness (strangeness) within ourselves.[7] In the case of telling or responding to a

ghost story, we are struggling with our ghosts and with the strange (and the strangeness within ourselves). The choice *can* be an either/or one—either smiling or worrying, but often we do *both*. We smile when confronted with our ghosts because we know them well—we created them and they are a part of us—but we worry because we don't always *want to* or *know how to* articulate and confront the issues they evoke. And so we are haunted.

Notes

1 In this article, I outline or quote what I consider to be the main Burford storylines that exist in the archives, Ronald L. Baker's *Hoosier Folk Legends*, or as told to me by students. While it would be easier to focus on only one or two texts, I believe it is important to consider the various versions of this legend. Since legends exist in versions, multiplicity is one of the core aspects of legend. Looking at different legend versions and the varying interpretations that emerge is an attempt at fidelity to the multipicity that is such an integral part of legend cycles.

2 Scarry's work in *The Body in Pain* is important in my interpretations of these legend versions. I found many of her terms and articulations quite helpful, with one notable exception, her use of the word "deconstruction" was troubling (see Stoekl 1988 for a discussion of her use of this term).

3 The pain is kept before us as long as we *agree to recognize it*, as long as we *acknowledge* the suffering. Scarry says that, for the torturer, a prisoner's pain "is denied as pain and read as power" (1985:45). So, in order for groups to oppress others, as is the situation posited in the first section of this article, the oppressed group's pain is read or translated into something else for the oppressor—an affirmation of *power*. The oppressor's focus is reading pain as power and refusing to empathize with the prisoner's suffering and pain.

4 Again, following the premises outlined in the previous note, ghost stories make pain more visible to those willing to identify with the ghost (with the other) and to *hear the sounds of suffering made by the specter.*

5 The similarity in sound between "barf" and "burf-" as in "Burford Hall" probably has greatly assisted in the birth and perpetuation of this legend.

6 This need to animate, personalize, and humanize institutional and public restrooms is also an impetus for graffiti. Graffiti is, after all, making the walls speak—animating them. Graffiti is often about intimate body processes, and graffiti can be a discourse that works to connect the public and private with each other.

7 In relation to the issues of power and politics discussed in the first part of this paper and what Kristeva says about strangeness, I would argue that one thing that happens when a person reads another's pain *only* as power is that the person has refused to acknowledge the strangeness within himself or herself. If acknowledged

in this manner, this strangeness would not be seen as something requiring punishment or eradication in the other in order to demonstrate, reinforce, or protect someone's power. Instead, recognition of strangeness within the self (as opposed to something that is only external) could link the two: "The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners" (Kristeva 1991:192).

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