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Memoirs

A Ghost Story on the Edge, A Memoir

JANET LANGLOIS

Wayne State

Prefatory Note

Elizabeth Tucker

Janet Langlois, a dear friend and colleague of many of us in the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on February 25, 1946 and passed away in Detroit, Michigan on May 22, 2021. Shortly before her passing, Janet received the Linda Dégh Lifetime Achievement Award for Legend Scholarship. This well-deserved award made her very happy. Having received her Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1977 and taught folklore for thirty-eight years at Wayne State University, Janet devoted her life to study of legends and other forms of folklore. She loved legends of all kinds but especially enjoyed ghost stories, which had been important to her family since she was a small child.

In 2003, Janet began working on her "Other Worlds" project, a study of end-of-life experiences that involved interviewing hospice staff members and others who had uncanny encounters. As her memoir explains, she interviewed me for "Other Worlds," because I had seen my mother appear six months after her passing. Janet and I had been friends since our graduate student days at Indiana University, so my tape-recorded interview soon shifted to informal discussion of our families' experiences, and I asked Janet about her family's encounters with a Native American ghost in Taos, New Mexico. Janet's reflections about this ghost morphed into this memoir piece, which she sent to me via e-mail on March 26, 2017.

Family ghost stories tend to be both mysterious and complex; telling them may raise ethical questions. Janet told me several times that she had hesitated to write about her family's supernatural experiences, saying, "It was not *my* ghost story." She asked her brother Steve and sister Linda whether they would give her permission to describe what had happened to them, and they agreed. After finishing this memoir piece, she discussed the family ghost by email with Steve, Linda, and their younger brother, Ed, who mentioned that he had seen the family ghost too. In a memorable email exchange on April 3, 2017, Janet told me, "In the copy of Steve's e-mail, attached to mine, a new

word appeared that hadn't been in the original: 'mother.'" This uncanny addition suggests the possibility of a revenant's presence. Whose mother might that revenant be, and on what edge does Janet's ghost story stand? I wish I could ask Janet these questions, but she has gone beyond our world's borders.

Because Janet is no longer with us, the editors of *Contemporary Legend* have decided to make no substantive changes in her memoir piece. They and I agree that it is important to respect Janet's choices. Co-editor David J. Puglia made an important point when he told me, "This is essentially Janet's final statement to her legend brethren." Her writing style in this piece differs from the scholarly style of her academic publications, but that's okay; memoir is a more personal kind of writing.

In an e-mail that Janet sent me on March 26, 2017, she wrote, "I had a little fantasy that I could read this piece via Skype at the ISCLR meeting in Lafayette in July. After all, it would be the only paper I ever finished before a meeting! It made me feel incredibly close to you and to my family—maybe that's what memoirs can do if one is lucky." I feel very lucky to have been Janet's friend and heard her tell her family's ghost story. She would, I think, have been delighted to share it with you now.

A Ghost Story on the Edge, A Memoir

I've always loved ghost stories. The first one I remember hearing was from my French-Canadian grandmother, my father's mother, who often told us kids about her childhood in Quebec when she was babysitting. We three older ones encouraged her so that we didn't have to say the daily rosary. This particular time, probably in 1958 when we lived in Kansas City, I was twelve, Linda ten, and Denis seven. Steve was just a baby, and Phil and Ed weren't born yet. Gama, our name for her, told us that she had read in the *Liguorian,* a magazine still published for Catholic families, about a parish priest who had heard strange noises in the basement of the rectory one wintry night and had gone downstairs to investigate. Coffins were stored there until the spring thaw allowed funeral services to proceed. Gravediggers could then bury the dead in the ground no longer frozen. Sounds were coming from a particular coffin. He pried it open to find the reviving body of a woman he recognized. She had been the girl he had left behind when he'd made the decision to enter the seminary. He had told her at that time that he would help her in any way he could if she ever needed him. She opened her eyes and asked him to hear her confession. Gama said that she had committed "every sin in the book," but he absolved her. She lay back down in the coffin, all color drained from her face, and he closed the lid. I think we got the point that he had reached her just in the nick of time (although I see it now as an indictment of celibacy for the clergy, but that's another story).

Linda and Denis don't remember Gama's telling, but she and I still think twice before going down into basements, liminal spaces in houses much like attics where hauntings traditionally cluster. It must have sparked something in me though because I read every book on ghost stories I could lay my hands on, whether local or regional "true accounts" or literary renditions, beginning in my teenage years and continuing thereafter. "The Uninvited," the 1944 movie classic, starring Ray Milland, Ruth Hussey, and Gail Russell as the girl haunted by two ghosts in a house on the Cornish coast, remains a favorite. I think I saw it first when I was watching late-night TV alone while babysitting. Our family moved to Colorado Springs in 1961 when Phil was two and where Ed was born three years later. I told my four younger brothers, my built-in audience, bedtime stories about picking up "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" and about calling "Bloody Mary" back in the mirror. These were two popular contemporary ghost stories I'd first heard from other students in high school at St. Mary's in the Springs and later in college at Colorado State University in Ft. Collins. Denis and Steve tell me they had trouble looking in

mirrors for years afterwards, traditional points of entry as they are into other worlds.

This interest played no small part in my decision to become a folklorist. After getting an M.S.L.S from Columbia University in 1969 and working in branches of the New York Public Library, I returned to graduate school in 1971. I chose the Folklore Institute, Indiana University at Bloomington, stating somewhat hyperbolically that I heard "better stories on the street than in the library." In 1977, with Ph.D. just barely in hand, I began teaching folklore and folklife courses in the English Department at Wayne State University in Detroit. For the next 30+ years, I incorporated supernatural legends in both undergraduate and graduate courses, culminating in a topics course, "Spectral Evidence and Narrative Form" (i.e., ghost stories), taught in the decade before I retired in 2015. Students' field research interviews yielded evidence of rich storytelling traditions concerning contact with the dead. We also discussed authors' and filmmakers' uses of the spectral. Henry James's 1898 *The Turn of the Screw* and Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved* were two staples in an ever-widening choice of class materials. Critical literature on the haunted proliferated also in the years surrounding the millennium and beyond. I actually announced that I'd "come out" as an academic interested in the supernatural.

So it is strange that I did not remember my own ghostly encounter. When students and colleagues asked me if I had ever seen a ghost or felt a presence, I usually answered "no." It wasn't because I didn't want to admit it; it simply didn't come to mind often, that is, not until I began my own ethnographic project on "Other Worlds" in 2003. My brother Steve had lost his wife Chris too soon the year before. At her memorial in the Springs, I had mentioned to him that he shouldn't be alarmed if he felt her presence. I was thinking of medical humanist and folklorist David J. Hufford's statement that consoling visits from the dead were not unusual experiences for those grieving. Steve told me then that that had been one of the first things the hospice staff had told him. I credit that conversation when we were mourning together with the project's beginning. I wanted to talk with hospice staff, family members, and others who had experienced, witnessed, or heard about meetings with the dead, and who were willing to speak with me and two assistants. Once the project protocol was approved by WSU's Internal Review Board (IRB) for Research with Human Subjects, we held focus groups, administered questionnaires, and conducted interviews with willing staff and volunteers at a Detroit-area hospice, 2003-2006. I also continued to interview others in the general population intermittently until 2015. I am working on a book manuscript now, hoping to join a multidisciplinary conversation on numinous experiences during trauma, end-of-life, and in bereavement which share some common ground with traditional narratives of haunting.

It was while conducting two of these interviews that my own ghost story intruded. The first was in late September of 2003 with friend and fellow folklorist, Libby, then visiting my husband Andrea and me in Detroit. She and I had met in graduate school at Indiana University in the 1970s, although

coincidentally she was also from Colorado Springs. She had just shared with me her experience of returning to the Springs in the summer of 1995 to help her father sort through her mother's dresses for donation not long after her mother's unexpected death. She told me that she, grieving, had lain down for a short rest in what had been her childhood bedroom. She saw her mother standing at the foot of the canopied bed, looking younger and wearing a favorite dress from the 1960s, and she was comforted. Her bereavement account dovetails with others in which the deceased loved ones appear in visions or dreams in better health and younger than they had been most recently. Associations of time and place must have prompted me, because I began to tell Libby about an experience I had had many years earlier in New Mexico, probably in 1968.

As I remembered it, I had come back on Christmas break after my first semester at Columbia to see my parents and brothers in Colorado Springs and my sister Linda and her husband Gene in Taos. They were living then in a small adobe house on Brooks Street, on the edge of the Taos reservation near an *arroyo*, or dry creek bed, separating town from pueblo. I slept on a daybed placed against a wall across the room from the house's only door, left open for ventilation. I was slightly uncomfortable sleeping there. Living for just a few months in an apartment on the upper west side of Manhattan, I already knew you did not leave the door unlocked, much less open at night. (The same was and is certainly true for our house in Detroit.) I was glad that it was mild enough to leave the door open though so I could see part of the starry night sky and part of Taos Mountain. I didn't like the mountain blocking my view; it seemed to be looming over me.

One night I woke up to see a young Indian man sitting on the end of the bed. He was leaning against the wall with one leg stretched out and the other drawn up to his chest. He wore a sombrero and a *serape*, or striped woven cloth, across his shoulders, Pueblo men dressing in Hispanic style at the time. He was looking at me quizzically, half smiling. I looked back at him. I told Libby that, oddly enough, I wasn't afraid, only thinking to myself, "Oh, Taos really is enchanted," playing on New Mexico's state motto, "The Land of Enchantment." Then I went back to sleep. When I'd mentioned the experience to Linda the next morning, she said that it was possible. When Taos men drank at bars in town at night and felt that they couldn't safely maneuver the very narrow plank bridge across the arroyo, usually dry but sometimes filled with irrigation water, they would sleep in their shed and cross over the next day. Had he mistaken house for shed? He did not seem drunk. Had I had a dream within a dream, a false awakening conditioned by my impressions of the place? He seemed so real. Or was he something else? We left the experience as open as the door.

But then Linda had called me later, maybe a few months later, to tell me that their friends Mike and Shelley had come to visit them when they were living in a second, larger adobe house that Gene had renovated. Mike, quite upset, had asked them in the morning, "How come you let these Indian men in the house?" From the 2003 transcript:

J: And they had moved to another house. And my brother had a, had a similar experience.
L: It was a whole new house they were in but the same thing happened?
J: Umm hmm.
L: Was it still on the edge of the reservation?
J: No. But it still was in Taos [actually in El Prado nearby]. And then my brother Steve and Blanca, his first fiancée—they broke up—he also came down [*sic*] and said he saw someone.
L. On the foot of the bed again?
J: ….Umm hmm. Umm hmm.
L: How interesting.

Libby and I reversed roles here. She became the interviewer and I became the interviewee. Like other tellers, I used Mike's and Steve's similar unusual encounters to corroborate my own. As the locus and time of the reported events moved out from the initial town/pueblo dividing line in 1968, so I began to perceive the Taos man as "something else."

Although I never spoke with Mike, I did follow up with Steve about his experience, but only in 2004. We hadn't ever spoken directly to each other about our encounters before then. I had come back to the Springs before the WSU semester began to visit with our family, especially with our father Jim who would soon enter hospice and pass away in December. Steve had agreed to speak with me about his late wife Chris while I was there at that hard time. We were sitting on the grass next to her tombstone in Evergreen Cemetery on the first day of September when we had our formal interview. He told me that he had never sensed his late wife's presence, but he had witnessed her end-of-life experiences. In the last weeks before her death, the room had been filled with people to whom she talked, but whom he couldn't see or hear. "And she was incredibly social," he told me, "so I'm sure she was just glad to see a lot of people." We both laughed with love. We decided to compare our Taos experiences first to "warm up" before we spoke of Chris's death-bed visions, so his was the second interview in my "Other Worlds" project in which my ghost story intruded.

Steve told me that it had probably been in the late 1970s when he and his college girlfriend Blanca were driving from Ft. Lewis College in Durango, Colorado to Albuquerque to see her family. He was studying Southwest regional and cultural history and enjoyed doing things with her and her family who were Hispanic. On their way, they had stopped in Taos. Linda and Gene had divorced in 1978, and she had already moved back to Colorado. They visited Gene who gave them the master bedroom in the second adobe house to use during their stay. From the 2004 transcript:

S: I remember imagining, or dreaming, or actually seeing [laughs] the—what felt almost like a hole in the ceiling opening up...and I could only see arms and hands kind of reaching through there...And as I looked toward the foot of the

> bed, I, you know--there was a person there. And it was an Indian with a blanket, you know, wrapped over the shoulders, probably both arms crossed in front so that you just saw a blanket hanging down in front. And long hair—definitely very Indian. And it scared me… it wasn't like I was feeling incredibly threatened, but I felt—I was just scared, you know, somebody was in the room….

Then I told Steve about my experience in the first adobe house a decade earlier. That I had seen an Indian man as well was a surprise to him until our pre-interview discussions. My account pretty much duplicated what I had told Libby. I reiterated that in my case I had not been afraid at all. I just said, "Oh my God, leave it to New Mexico," and went back to sleep. Then Steve told me something that was a surprise to me, in fact, I'd call it a bombshell. He told me that my telling him about my experience made him remember that he had also seen an Indian man there in the arroyo. He had been younger, maybe ten, out exploring on his own, which would have made it around the same time I had my encounter. He recalled something about drums, Pueblo drums, hearing them or seeing them being made. He told me that the drums could have been ceremonial ones used in Pueblo religious services or dances. He also said that the hole opening up in the *vigas*, or timbered ceiling rafters, in his second experience reminded him of a *sipapu,* or ritual hole, dug in the floors of *kivas*, houses of Pueblo worship. The sipapu commemorates the place from which the first peoples had emerged and is a transitional point between worlds. Writing now, I think that Steve experienced somehow and on some level the Pueblo Emergence Myth and its commemoration. His double accounts ratcheted up our encounters to the level of the sacred or mystical for me.

Another mutually-surprising exchange in our 2004 interview accentuated that feeling. Our sister Linda did not have the encounters in her Taos homes that Steve, Mike and I spoke of, but when she returned to Colorado, she had taken one picture with her. As I told Libby in 2003, she had just a bit of money, went into a Taos gallery where she saw a picture of a Native American man, and bought it as a memento. When I saw it for the first time, hanging on the wall of her first apartment in Denver in the early 1980s, I said to her, "That really looks like the, the man that I saw sitting on my bed." Linda told me, either then or at some later point, that she had gone to a psychic who told her that she had a spirit guide who was an older Indian man. Steve told me essentially the same story, but this time about Linda and himself. She had moved to a second apartment in Colorado Springs in the mid-1980s by this time. He had gone to visit her, had seen the picture hanging on her wall, and had said to himself, "Wow, that's the Indian I saw at the foot of the bed." He told me that he had then said to her, half joking, half serious, "You know, I saw that Indian." He said that she was pretty quiet. He had continued, "Yeah, you know, I dreamed that I saw that Indian in your old

bedroom down there in Taos." And she was still pretty quiet, he told me, and then she had said, "Well, that's my guardian."

One of the reasons why I haven't remembered or talked about these events often is due, in part, to my feeling that it was not my *ghost* story. When I asked Steve if he had talked about his experiences much, his negative response occasioned this discussion:

> S: I didn't, you know, particularly believe in ghosts or anything at all, so to me—I'm not saying, "Oh, I saw a ghost at the end of the bed," or something. I saw an Indian man at the end of the bed, and that's what I saw.
> J: Well, and I think that's when people ask me if I had seen a ghost, I—the term was wrong.
> S: Right.
> J. And I think that the term probably is too boxed-in for some of the things—
> S: Yes.
> J: —people have happen.
> S: It's like I'm seeing you sitting here right now. I saw that person that night.

Since Steve's and my discussion in 2004, I've recuperated in some ways, rightly or wrongly, the term "ghost," Anglo-Saxon word that it is. I've enlarged it to include terms used here such as "spirit guide," "guardian," and the implied term "revenant" in Steve's last statement. I also include the reviving corpse in my grandmother's story, the deceased loved ones in Libby's and Chris's experiences, and other hauntings, literal or metaphorical, under that rubric.

My unusual reticence was also due, in part, though, to my feeling that it was not *my* ghost story alone to tell, but certainly my brother's and sister's as well. This is clear in what Steve *said* to me as we wound up this part of the interview: "[I]t has just stayed with me over the years as a memory…it's just kind of always been there, you know, in my head…it was sort of a profound experience." It is also clear from what Linda *did* in taking the portrait of the Taos man with her wherever she moved. Well-known Southwest artist Frank Howell's lithograph, "Moments—Feather Traces, 1977," is hanging still on a wall in her present home in the foothills of the Rockies, halfway between Denver and Colorado Springs. When I tell my story, I tell theirs also, and, as Libby told me, some stories remain private for a reason. In both Linda's and Steve's cases, the Taos man is bound up with loss, of her first marriage, of his first love, and I thank them for allowing me to speak their sadness now.

Howell's title of the portrait itself is haunting, and is connected to a final reason why I may not have remembered or spoken earlier of "Feather Traces." The Southwest has remained a backdrop for o*ur* family ghost story up to this point, yet it is not ours alone to tell. I sensed that when saying to Steve in 2004: "I don't know, it seems to me in that story—I haven't figured it out, but it seems to cut across a lot of cultures in the Southwest, you know?

'Anglo,' Native American, and Spanish, so I don't know what's happening." I still don't know for sure, other than our accounts of the Taos man are part of a regional and even national story. Libby introduced me to Renée L. Bergland's *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (2000), a book good to think with. Bergland argues in part that Indian ghosts have appeared in the American imagination ever since first Native-European contact as ambiguous figures, signaling both our guilt at our government's treatment of them and our desire to claim them as our ancestors. Certainly, these are the ambivalent feelings that I share.

Bergland writes that the ghosting of American Indians in literature, especially in the nineteenth century, has been analogous to the infamous 1830 Removal Act. Signed into law and implemented by President Andrew Jackson, the Act sanctioned removal of eastern tribes to west of the Mississippi River with treaties not honored as the continued westward expansion of our Manifest Destiny would prove. Because Taos is west of the Mississippi, its layered ethnic histories remain in place and visible, so that her thesis doesn't seem to work at first glance. I saw the Indian man on the edge of the Taos Pueblo, one of the longest continuously-inhabited communities in what is now the United States, at least a millennium old, dating from 1000 to 1450 A.D. One of the Tiwa-speaking northern Puebloan groups, the Taos were not removed from their ancestral lands, but those lands were appropriated, in part, first by the Spanish and then by the Americans. Both adobe houses where the ghostly encounters occurred date to the Spanish Colonial period. Spanish conquistadors had come to Northern New Mexico in the 16th century, believing that Taos Pueblo was one of the fabled Seven Cities of Gold. By 1615, Taos Village was established as a colony under the Spanish crown, laid out on what had been Pueblo lands in the Taos Valley. Many of the descendants of those first Spanish settlers live in the area four hundred years later. After the United States won the Mexican-American War, New Mexico became a U.S. Territory in 1850, paving the way for statehood. President Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt duly signed New Mexico as the 47th state in 1912, and also approved 48,000 acres of Taos Pueblo mountainous lands taken for the Carson National Forest.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a second American appropriation of another sort was under way, this time by Anglo travelers, artists, art collectors, and writers interested in both the landscape and its indigenous inhabitants. The Taos Society of Artists set the tone for the artistic reputation the city and pueblo share now. Steve reminded me that the second adobe house where he saw the ceiling open up is near the Millicent Rogers Museum, one of the three museums and over eighty art galleries that make the city of Taos and the adjacent Taos Pueblo current tourist attractions. The museum's history shows appropriation in the sense that its initial holdings were based on the extensive multicultural collections of both Standard Oil heiress Millicent Rogers and her mother, Mary B. Rogers. Its history also shows affirmation as it was one of the first museums to exhibit Taos Pueblo painting, pottery, and textiles, as well as Hispanic colonial and contemporary works of

art. Rogers was instrumental in having Native American art classified as "historic" which, according to the Museum's website, "provided both protection and status." Its history also shows cooperation as it supports Anglo, Pueblo, and Hispanic artists through its purchase of their works, exhibits, and programming.

The decades in which my brother, sister, and I had our other-world experiences were a time of this-world resistance and renewal for Native Americans. Whether or not directly related to the civil rights activities of the American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968, President Richard Nixon signed the bill restoring the Blue Lake Lands in New Mexico to the Taos Pueblo Indians in 1970. (Taos Pueblo is the only living American Indian community that has been designated both a National Historic Landmark in 1960 and an UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992.) The revival of Pueblo pottery as a tourist art began in the 1960s, as Barbara A. Babcock and Guy and Doris Monthan show in their *The Pueblo* S*toryteller* (1988). When I told Ilene, my art historian friend, about my memoir writing recently, she told me about a Pueblo artist Roxanne Swentzell's 1988 work in mixed media clay, "The Emergence of the Clowns," now in the Heard Museum in Phoenix. The artist, born in 1963 in the Tewa-speaking Santa Clara Pueblo fifty miles southwest of Taos, fused the pottery tradition of her grandmother, mother, and aunts with the Emergence myth. Coming full circle, Steve, a seasonal park ranger in 2011 at Mesa Verde National Park and World Heritage Site in southern Colorado, told me that he had heard the artist's mother, Rina Swentzell, speak eloquently about Pueblo culture and artistry as part of his NPS training.

A 1997 obituary posted online for Frank Howell (1937-1997) states that the Iowa-born artist, known for his portraits of American Indians, moved to Taos in 1974 "where he created a series of 25 drawings and a catalog of them called *Past Winds.* The works were the foundation of the visual vocabulary he would use for the rest of his career." I believe that the lithograph Linda bought was one of these first drawings, noted in his obituary as showing "the trademark long, flowing hair and expressive, weathered faces of the people he painted." I remember now that the Indian man I saw almost 50 years ago was not as old as the man in Howell's print where his face is "very craggy" with "kind of a stern look" that Steve remembers. Perhaps I saw him like others did, bereaved, in a dream or vision when he was younger. Howell, who only learned as an adult that he was part Lakota Sioux, noted that the feathers depicted in his art, which became more surrealistic than the early portraits, designated a certain spirituality and what he called "magic" that transcended ethnicity. As a folklorist accused of being a romantic, I choose strategic romanticism in order to act in these troubled times. I choose the re-enchantment of the world.[1]

Notes

[1] The principal persons referred to in this essay have given me permission to use their first names for which I thank them. Other names, unless well-known political or artistic figures, are pseudonyms.

References

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