Beyond Metaphorical Spectrality:
For New Paranormal Geographies

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Abstract: This paper discusses the progress and potential of spectral geographical research. It evaluates the usefulness of figurative spectrality in work on performance, (non) representation, visual imagery, urban landscapes, remembrance and commemoration. Acknowledging the use of hauntological devices to speak to absence, liminality, excess, uncertainty and iteration, the paper identifies limitations of spectral metaphors, highlighting their tendency to marginalize historical and cultural specificity and embodied human experience. Subverting academic convention by taking seriously reports of possible ghost sightings at a property in the south of England, the paper further explores the space between the metaphorical and the material. It invites suspension of disbelief in order to consider implications of materially haunted spaces i.e. those indwelled or constituted by entities of a spiritual, otherworldly or otherwise anomalous kind. Speaking to debates within the complementary fields of geography and folklore, it proposes an agenda for new cross-disciplinary paranormal geographical research that would move beyond metaphorical constructions of haunting to cultivate radical openness to the ontological possibilities and intellectual challenges of materially haunted space.
In recent years, research from academic disciplines including the social sciences, humanities, arts and literature has become increasingly interested in haunting, spectrality and the uncanny (Maddern and Adey 2008, Roberts 2013). This 'spectral turn' (Luckhurst 2002:527) has seen the deployment of haunting metaphors across a variety of theoretical frameworks, including psychoanalytical, postcolonial, feminist and posthumanist studies, as well as frequent references to ghosts and spectrality within cultural geographical research (Cameron 2008). Maddern and Adey (2008) attribute the growing popularity of haunting at least in part to the ever more explicit coverage in the media of issues of death and vulnerability. More broadly, the spectral turn can be contextualised within well-established social scientific discussions around the limits of representation and the impossibility of witnessing in/to an always-emergent and unfixable world (cf. Dewsbury 2003).

The lineage of contemporary academic interest in haunting is frequently traced to Derrida’s (1994) Specters of Marx, which mobilises the French term ‘hantology’ in place of its near-homonym ‘ontology’ to gesture towards that which is neither present nor absent, nor dead nor alive (Luckhurst 2002, Davis 2005, Roberts 2013). As Roberts (ibid.) explains, Derrida’s hauntology is profoundly deconstructive, recognizing the infinitely inter-referential nature of all concepts; for Derrida, ‘[t]he ghost pushes at the boundaries of language and thought’ (Davis 2005: 379). Less frequently noted is the significant influence of psychoanalytical work, itself concerned with the manifestation of the unconscious/unseen in the realm of the conscious/visible, including that by Freud (1959 [1919]) and Abraham and Torok (1987), the latter of whom explore the disturbing and
ghostly effects of transgenerational communication of traumas, including undisclosed traumas, upon the lives of descendants.

Gordon (2008 [1997]) explores hauntings as absent-presences, devoting a chapter to the centrality of hauntological thought in the development of psychoanalysis. In her view, ‘the uncanny is the return, in psychoanalytic terms, of what the concept of the unconscious represses: the reality of being haunted by worldly contacts’ (ibid. 55). This notion of the hauntological return is evoked by Tisseron (1985) who uses ideas of transgenerational communication to correctly infer illegitimacy in the recent family history of the author Hergé based on psychoanalytic readings of the latter’s Tintin stories. Beyond such focused textual analytical work, the case has been made for the universally haunted nature of all forms of literary narrative, with Wolfreys (2002: 3) asserting that ‘all stories are, more or less, ghost stories’.

One argument we seek to advance in this paper is that geography, concerned as it is with emplaced human experience, and folklore, long engaged in the analysis of vernacular belief, can together contribute meaningfully to discussions of hauntings by re-centering those debates on issues of materiality, the numinous, and embodied/emplaced experience itself. More importantly, we posit that, in seeking to metaphorize the spectral, scholars have tended to ironically strip experience of its immediacy in-place and in-body (as well as out-of-body). Recognizing the importance of metaphorical notions of ghosts/spectrality, we nevertheless suggest that scholarship which takes as its focus the experience of haunted places must also make theoretical space for literal ghosts.
Ghostly geographies

Within the discipline of geography, notions of haunting and the figure of the ghost have been used to theorize a range of material and textual forms. Holloway and Kneale (2008) cite work which speaks to the ghostliness of objects such as houses (Miller 2001) and second-hand clothes (Gregson et al. 2001) which have been previously inhabited by unknown others. Roberts (2013: 386) employs a hauntological approach to explore visual (including artistic, photographic and moving) images, likening them to ghosts for their location between categories of ‘material and immaterial, real and virtual[,]... dead and alive, representation and presentation’ and for their at-once material yet abstracted and disembodied status. Roberts (ibid. 387) draws on Castle (1988), Pile (2005) and Warner (2006) to describe the phantasmagorical qualities of an affective medium haunted by the inescapable ‘rupture of non-signification.’ She highlights the disruptive and enlivening agencies of visual images, identifying their resistance to definitive interpretation and their capacity to challenge, disturb, confound and surprise.

The haunted/haunting spaces between presence and absence and representation and non-representation have also inspired the urban geographical theoretical imagination, with several authors constructing city spaces in spectral terms (Luckhurst 2002, Pile 2005, Holloway and Kneale 2008). In these accounts, and in literary critical work on the depiction of cities in fiction (cf. Wolfreys 1998 on gothic imaginations of London), metaphors of haunting are used to speak to the unsettling effects of absence, obsolescence, indeterminacy and incongruity within the fabric of the built environment. In the context of declining working-class spaces in Manchester, England, Edensor (2008: 313) illustrates how the past ‘lingers in people, spaces, textures and things and is not so rapidly disposed.’
With reference to his routine commute through a landscape of housing estates, old railways and derelict sites, he suggests several ways in which urban space might be understood as haunted. He describes disorienting juxtapositions of historic and modern architectures, jarring discordances between buildings’ intended and actual purposes, and the powerfully evocative and nostalgic qualities of abandoned and decaying sites. Edensor reads the urban landscape as a textual record of the lives, practices, politics and (variously realised and frustrated) aspirations of long-since-left former inhabitants. In disparate work on a single plot of land in Singapore’s Chinatown, Comaroff (2007) describes how perceptions of, and meanings ascribed to, urban sites may continue to be affected by the forms and purposes of their earlier incarnations. He explains how the site – previously occupied by death houses (older people’s residences) and spinster houses (unmarried women’s collectives that also served as burial collectives) – had resisted gentrification by administrative authorities and retained its use as an informal space for practices of spiritual remembrance.

The theme of remembrance recurs throughout work on the spectrality of material and textual forms, wherein the possibility and condition of haunting are widely premised upon embodied processes of memory and (re)cognition. Those forms are rendered ghostly upon their consumption or analysis within broader intertextual referential frameworks, and/or by virtue of the identification – rather than the fact – of their representational limits. Things and places become haunted as a consequence both of our ascription of meaning(fulness) to them and of our embodied capacities to retain, recall and contextualise. As Edensor (2008: 327) explains, ghosts reside in our personal memories: ‘residues’ of distant times and spaces ‘remain in people’s bodies, habits and manners’ and may be called forth, to varying degrees of recognizability, by evocative sensory stimuli such
as ‘sights, sounds, smells and atmospheres.’ This summoning of internalised traces of bygone life resonates with Bergsonian-Deleuzian understandings of the actualization into memory-images of the otherwise immanent, virtual past (McHugh 2009). Following these logics, haunting is made possible by the vital segue of embodied human memory into the ongoing present.

As well as speaking to the particularities of personal embodied memory, metaphors of haunting and spectrality have been used to theorize the performance and staging of public memory at formal sites of remembrance and commemoration, including museums, monuments, heritage tourist attractions and conservation areas (Edensor 2008, Carter-White 2012). Such work emphasises the temporal and/or spatial dislocation (absence) of individuals from remembered or historical events (Gable and Handler 2000) and deploys the ghost to illuminate (although, importantly, not to redress) the impossibility of sufficiently witnessing through representational forms the immanent, excessive and performative nature of life (Agamben 1999, Dewsbury 2000, Heathfield and Quick 2000, Mills 2003). There is critical recognition of the constrictive effects of official commemoration, and optimism concerning the potential of counter-memorial spaces and practices to enable more personally meaningful encounters and remembrance while acknowledging the impermanence and inadequacy of those alternative forms (Crownshaw 2000, Edensor 2008, Carter-White 2012). Roberts (2013) identifies the capacity of ghosts to subvert hegemonic (Western) historical narratives and to give voice to otherwise-marginalised (including indigenous and subaltern) identities and experiences (cf. Lloyd 2005, Cameron 2008, Maddern 2008). The emancipatory potential of the spectral is thus
argued to provide critical purchase to those concerned with questions of social (in)justice and legacies of repression, in particular to postcolonial theorists.

**The politics of ghost-writing**

As the studies discussed above illustrate, the use of spectral metaphors is intensely and inherently political (Cameron 2008). Haunting tropes facilitate engagement with, and tentative articulation of, the amorphous, contested, elusive and barely (or im-)perceptible elements of life which are neglected in less sensitively attuned accounts of the world. They open up ways of attending to uncertainty, strangeness, liminality, iteration and incomprehensibility (Davis 2005, Maddern and Adey 2008, Roberts 2013). The concept of ghostliness speaks to the complex relations between different times and places, confounding narratives of temporal linearity and closure, attending to that which persists or recurs, and recognizing the enfolding of myriad pasts and futures into the present (Gordon [1997] 2008, Wylie 2007, Cameron 2008, Edensor 2008, Maddern 2008, Carter-White 2012). This spectral geographical appreciation of ‘the still, the stubborn and the static geographies of obdurate elements, immobilities and fixities’ in everyday life provides, it is argued, necessary counterbalance to wider disciplinary preoccupations with reanimating and enlivening the world through attention to the performative (Maddern and Adey 2008: 293). Thus Luckhurst (2002: 532) notes the important contribution of haunting to ‘a larger critique of amnesiac modernity’ as a single totalising system.

A significant amount of discussion around the politics of spectral geographical work centres on issues of academic literary presentation and style. There is broad consensus that spectral geographies should be written in ways commensurate with, and sensitive to, those
accounts’ appreciation of uncertainty, unknowability and indeterminacy. Many authors heed Wylie’s (2007: 184) advice that ‘spectral geographies should themselves be spectral’. Holloway and Kneale (2008: 298, 306) conceptualize ghosts as ‘traces of the unknown or unknowable [rather] than as a kind of puzzle, standing in for something else, something more important’; for them, ‘dispelling hesitancy through decidability... is to dispel the particular instants of excessive resonance that orchestrate spectral geographies.’ They caution against trying to decipher, and thereby control, the absent-presences of ghosts, arguing that ‘[g]hosts can never be fully understood, represented or brought into representation’ (ibid. 308, emphasis in original).

Commitment to the avoidance of over-determination is frequently reflected in authors’ careful construction of spectral geographical writing. Matless (2008: 349) structures his work episodically, ‘setting dimensions of ghostly work alongside one another, laying out material carrying resonance for the contemporary if without clear lessons to be learned or instruction to be imbibed.’ This non-directive approach to academic representations of the spectral is applied elsewhere in work by trans-disciplinary artistic and scholarly communities such as Mapping Spectral Traces (mappingspectraltraces.org 2017) which fosters a collaborative commitment to “‘mapping” as a creative and research practice that might honor unacknowledged pasts and presences, and imagine more socially just futures.’

Despite attention to issues of literary presentation and style, broader questions around the representational limits of haunting metaphors are infrequently explored. Of notable exception are authors who caution against reliance on haunting as a ‘cultural-critical shorthand’ and the ascription of excessive explanatory force to the spectral at the
expense of cultural and historical specificity (Luckhurst 2002: 528, Dixon 2007, Maddern and Adey 2008, Matless 2008). The problematic political implications of such indiscriminate recourse are illustrated by Cameron (2008), who critiques the inadvertent re-inscription of colonial power relations by the application of haunting tropes to the study of contemporary settler-Indigenous relations in ways that foreclose recognition of the individual experiences and subjectivities of Indigenous peoples. As Luckhurst (2002: 528) observes with reference to the contemporary London Gothic, and in terms that speak to theorizations of haunting more broadly, ‘the generalized structure of haunting is symptomatically blind to its generative loci’. The commitment of spectral geographies to the avoidance of over-determination thus risks the sacrifice of more nuanced understandings of lived experience and, therefore, opportunities for effective political representation (Cameron 2008).

It is with such concerns that this paper seeks to further engage by evaluating the usefulness of haunting metaphors for understandings of space and practice in the context of a suburban residential space in south England. As mentioned above, discussions of the metaphorically and materially haunted nature of that space defy conventions of mainstream academic research – including, even, research of an explicitly hauntological bent – which typically marginalises testimonial accounts of what might be termed unexplained, paranormal or occult phenomena. It is useful to consider how such accounts are usually represented and received within academic discourse in order to appreciate the magnitude of the challenge entailed in thinking and articulating the ontological possibilities to which this paper speaks. In so doing we draw on spectral-geographic work as well as insights from the discipline of folklore, which has long been concerned with vernacular or
everyday experience, including experience of the supernatural. Importantly, folkloristic studies help to refocus attention onto the literal experience of the supernatural. As Goldstein (1995: 29) argues in work which highlights the insufficiency of performance-theoretical models and metaphors to apprehend the innately spiritual component of divinely-inspired speech, ‘The Gods do what They want, when They want, and our observational methods do not readily account for beliefs about transcendent action’.

Folkloristic approaches

Folklore and related fields have much to say about the processes by which places are created and used to specific social ends. Jones (1976: 111) argues that the process of regionalization – that is, the inclusion of specific local features – in folklore serves as a ‘rhetorical strategy’ by which a person can ‘produce certain effects and responses in his [sic] audience’. Glassie (1995 [1982]: 111) notes the power of the land to connect contemporary people to earlier inhabitants ‘who marked it permanently’. Nicolaisen (1991:13) argues for the close connection between history, place, and story, suggesting that ‘the past does not exist until it has been narrated, has been created through story both as time and as space’. Folklorist Ryden (1993) and anthropologist Basso (1996) similarly explore the place-making and storytelling strategies by which people make sense of contemporary existence, linking past and present through emplaced narrative.

Belief and supernatural experience constitute major areas of folkloristic inquiry, and it is here that folklore can most meaningfully contribute to the paranormal geographies we are attempting to outline. Contemporary folkloristic study of belief tends to emphasize personal experience and interpretation over functional analyses which downplay the
meaning of anomalous encounters to their percipients. As Goldstein et al. (2007: 13-14) note, the move towards contextualization and ethnographic rigor in folklore study began in the 1960s and led eventually to the development of the ethnography of belief. Key to this emerging area was the work of Hufford, whose ground-breaking engagement with the Old Hag phenomenon (1982) shifted folklore’s focus from narrative and tradition to a concern with experience. His now-classic experiential source hypothesis holds that experiences of the type which concern us here may occur regardless of the existence or non-existence of a cultural framework to support them (ibid. 15). Elsewhere, Hufford (1995a) asserts the (potential) rationality of belief in disembodied beings, arguing that traditions about the supernatural may arise from experience (and not necessarily the other way around). He also counsels scholars to acknowledge their own beliefs and scepticism rather than attempting to maintain a kind of religious objectivity when dealing with the beliefs of others (Hufford 1995b). As Goldstein et al. (2007: 15) explain, Hufford’s work has, in short, ‘fought to grant reasonableness to folk belief and folk believers’.

A number of folklorists have followed Hufford’s experiential approach. Researching the Irish tradition of the féar gortach (hungry grass), Davis (1996:40) argues that scholarly perspectives which narrowly interpret percipients’ experiences in relation to their already-held beliefs are ‘fundamentally discordant with the relationship of belief and experience expressed by the narrators themselves,’ and that such views ‘[do] not satisfy their needs to know what happened to them’. With reference to an account by a woman who experienced the féar gortach – she was overcome by crippling hunger while on a walk with her husband – Davis describes how the woman ruled out other possibilities (low blood sugar, high altitude) before concluding that the tradition offered the most logical explanation for her
symptoms (ibid. 48-50). With similar commitment to disrupting the subjugation of lived experience to hegemonic explanatory frameworks, Motz (1998) draws on Derrida’s hauntology to call for the reclamation of the concept of belief by folklorists. Thus she formulates belief as ‘a process of knowing that is not subject to verification or measurement by experimental means within the framework of a modern Western scientific paradigm’ (ibid. 340). Elsewhere, in a critical reading of Hufford’s work which problematizes his romanticist framing of ‘folk’ as spiritually intuitive rather than rational, Mullen (2000: 133) nevertheless acknowledges the respect that the experiential approach affords its subjects. And Goldstein (2007a: 70-71) points out that people often recount anomalous experiences rationally, as if on a ‘narrative witness stand,’ aware of the potential for judgment by their peers and perhaps unwilling to label an event as supernatural.

Although influential, Hufford’s experiential approach has not been universally embraced within the discipline of folklore. Rieti (1991: 91-92) cites the potential for supernatural encounters to reaffirm existing traditions, and suggests that narrative not only provides an interpretive framework for such experience but can, in turn, shape it. Mirska (1995) argues that prior belief enables events to be interpreted as supernatural even in the face of evidence to the contrary, while Toelken (1995: 57) asserts that ‘we see pretty much what we are encouraged to see or, as a student of mine once reshaped an old phrase, “If I hadn't believed it, I would never have seen it”’. Notwithstanding these critical perspectives, the experiential approach nonetheless provides a useful entryway into new cross-disciplinary conceptualizations of the spectral. As Hufford indicates throughout his writings, it is not the case that all belief necessarily derives from experience; rather, the
point is that scholars need to be open to the possibility that a given belief *may* do so. In fostering such receptivity to the empirical basis of belief, Hufford and his adherents offer a partial corrective to the purely metaphorical and highly politicized treatments of ghosts and hauntings considered above, which, again, fail to take full account of the intimacy and immediacy of experience. As we consider in the next section, however, they too fall short when the experience of the supernatural shifts from the second- or third-person to the first – that is, when the percipient of an anomalous event is the scholar her- or himself or themselves.

**Positioning the spectral researcher**

While metaphors of haunting, spectrality and ghostliness abound within academic social scientific discourse, reports of occult or unexplained manifestations are far less readily assimilated. They may be held up as objects for study, but these (typically second-, almost never first-, hand) accounts of uncanny apparitions and encounters are hastily disclaimed by authors who nonetheless recognize and respect the affective effects of the spectral. In these studies, questions of credibility, veracity and ontology are deliberately set aside. In work referencing reports of ghost sightings by hikers in the Stein Valley N’laka-pamux Heritage Park in British Columbia, Canada, Cameron (2008: 390) explicitly ‘bracketed out the possibility’ of the hikers having truly connected with spiritual entities. Goldstein (1983: 106) likewise argues, ‘Once we bracket the question of the ontological status of such experiences, we might then move on to how this reality is expressed by our informants’. Even Hufford (1982, 1995a), the champion of individual experience, is careful to point out that he neither affirms nor denies the literal reality of supernatural
phenomena. Similar distinction is made by Motz (1998), and in a study of nineteenth century spiritualist séances, Holloway (2006: 185, emphasis in original) explains that ‘to ask what ghosts are might be a misguided question’ given that, in an affective sense at least, they ‘touched sitters, possessed and haunted them’ despite not existing as ‘real material thing[s]’. In that paper, Holloway uses Bennett’s (2001) notion of enchantment, understood as the experience of being captivated and inspired by the extraordinary that resides among the mundane, to construct ghostly encounters as insubstantial and unsubstantiated – yet no less personally significant – happenings.

Holloway (2010: 618) elsewhere explores the notion of enchantment in work on the construction and performance of ‘spooky spaces’ within the ghost tourism industry. He illustrates the ways in which events such as urban ghost walks and organised paranormal investigations are scripted and staged using theatricalized costumes, characterization, narration and storytelling to inspire in tourists a sense of ‘delight without delusion’ (ibid. 618). For Holloway, such engineering of affective response is not problematically manipulative; rather, he illustrates how such events facilitate the benign mobilization of participants’ pre-existing beliefs and dispositions to create personally meaningful experiences. Goldstein (2007b) likewise discusses ghost tourism, noting scholars’ tendency to dismiss such commodified forms of supernatural experience, but arguing that participants are rational, intelligent and creative in their efforts to integrate such experience into their own belief systems.

Similarly respectful treatment of others’ beliefs in otherworldly geographies is demonstrated by MacKian (2011) who asserts the irrelevance of her own (unspecified) beliefs (or lack thereof) to her interpretative sociological research with people who engage
with a range of alternative spiritual beliefs and practices including angel healing, a practice in which healers channel energy from angels. MacKian critiques the arrogance with which her academic colleagues dismiss valued elements of people’s meaningful lifeworlds, and urges closer attention to the significance afforded to spiritual belief and practice in order to better understand human experience. Such prioritization of the perceived effects – rather than causality – of supernatural experience is evident in Goodman’s (1988:126) anthropological study of demonic possession which invites us to ‘treat what others experience with respect, and should we encounter the believers as suffering human beings, to confront them on their terms and not on our own.’

Ethical methodological commitment to percipients’ subjectivities aside, the common reluctance of researchers to articulate personal beliefs in the ‘reality’ or otherwise of spectral or otherworldly geographies might be understood in the wider context of popular and/or academic scepticism towards occult or paranormal phenomena. As Holloway and Kneale (2008: 308) note, a belief in ghosts has been since the nineteenth century popularly associated with ‘an over-active imagination, or … mental instability or various neuroses’. Lingering evolutionary views may also be implicated in scholars’ reticence to disclose their own positionality; since the eighteenth century at least, received academic wisdom has assumed a decline in supernatural belief as society advances (Goldstein 2007a: 60-61). Despite popular and academic scepticism, significant levels of supernatural belief nonetheless persist (ibid.): of more than 2,000 people surveyed in a study by the think-tank Theos (2009), 39% reported a belief in ghosts. By contrast, the admission by contemporary academics of belief in spectral entities is relatively rare, although some such disclosures have been made by contributors (see Biscop 2010, Cooper 2010 and Devereux 2012) to the
journal *Paranthropology*, which overtly welcomes ethnographic approaches to anomalous phenomena. Emmons and Emmons (2013) offer a list of researchers in the paranormal whose work was prompted by their own anomalous experiences.

Away from such sympathetic fora, the prevalent academic response to supernatural belief remains one of unease. This is perhaps best illustrated by MacKian’s (2011) recollection of academic conference delegates laughing at and ridiculing Holloway’s video footage of ghost hunts and vigils. That reaction was despite the stated use of the footage to illustrate participants’ enrolment into performing fear and surprise rather than to advance any claim regarding the authenticity of paranormal phenomena. The delegates’ response is surprising given the academic tendency to emphasize respect for others’ beliefs, and calls into question the sincerity of relativistic approaches to different traditions and perspectives. The reasons for such dismissive reactions are opaque. They may perhaps derive from the evolutionary stance described by Goldstein (2007a), and/or the trivialization of belief within popular culture, and/or the perception of ‘induced’ versus ‘spontaneous’ experiences of the supernatural as somehow inauthentic (Goldstein 2007b: 202-203).

In any case, we accept the possibility of a similarly incredulous reception to the present paper, which was written in response to a series of unsettling and unexplained sightings by two people at different times in the same property, and which sets out an agenda for distinctly paranormal geographical enquiry. Before presenting the sightings, it must be emphasised that the intention for so doing is neither to seek or provide explanation of them nor to attempt to convert the reader or authors to any belief in paranormal phenomena such as ghosts. Rather, the three-fold purpose of the paper is to
explore further the limitations of haunting metaphors for understandings of space and practice, to identify possible points of departure and lines of enquiry for a new paranormal geographical research agenda, and to cultivate an openness to what MacKian (2011: 65) terms ‘somewhat unorthodox ways of knowing’ in academic enquiry.

**Reading and writing the haunted home: Vanessa Stevens’ account**

The property where the sightings of interest took place is located in a suburban residential area in the south of England. I rented the property whilst a student at university, several years after Lucy (not her real name; all identifying details have been omitted to protect the privacy of the property’s former and current occupants) had moved out. I first met Lucy shortly before I moved in; we spoke generally about the local area and amenities and the property and the changes it had undergone since she had lived there. Applying the kind of interpretative spectral analytical approaches discussed in the earlier part of this paper, it is possible, with hindsight, to conceptualize the property as metaphorically haunted in several different ways. The layout and construction of the property could be read as a textual record of the imagination, aspirations and professional capabilities of those who designed and built it, and as a record of the regulations which governed its construction and subsequent modification. The property could also be understood as haunted by the various people who had owned it over the years: absent figures whose decorative tastes and budgets (as reflected in the property’s colour schemes, fittings and contents) determined the appearance and condition of the building, and whose terms for occupation (as specified in contractual tenancy agreements) shaped the way in which tenants conducted themselves within the space.
During my tenancy, previous occupants also haunted the property in myriad small ways: the continued delivery of strangers’ mail; the utensils abandoned in kitchen cupboards and drawers; the splashes of hair dye in the bathroom; the scorch marks, apparently caused by hair straighteners, on the floor; the indentations on carpets where furniture had once stood; and the vast collection of door keys handed to me by the letting agent. Layered on top of these tangible traces of others’ lives were the ghostly figures of former tenants animated in Lucy’s and the letting agent’s anecdotes and recollections of the property: the couple who had wrecked the décor by throwing red wine up the walls during a particularly wild party; and the tenant who had illegally sublet a room to a family of four. These stories helped to locate my own residency in the context of the property’s biographical narrative and highlighted how I too would inevitably haunt whomever lived there after me.

Viewing the property through a hauntological lens illustrates how the past persists into, and influences, the present. What such a perspective cannot, however, adequately accommodate are the kinds of unexplained incidents to which we earlier alluded and to which the paper now attends. The incidents began soon after I moved in to the property, at which point I had noticed changes in the pattern and quality of my sleep. Previously a sound sleeper who rarely stirred before sunrise, I had begun waking several times per night, despite living in a quiet area with similar levels of outside noise and light as my previous address. As I described to a friend at the time, the atmosphere in my new bedroom felt somehow agitated or charged, as if a TV had been left silently playing just out of sight. Sometimes I awoke with a feeling that someone had been, or was, watching me, and on several occasions (I thought) I saw the figure of a man dressed in a cloak and a face-
obscuring hood standing in the far corner from the bed, next to the smaller of the room’s
two windows. Unnerved, I would close my eyes and rationalize it away as a trick of the light
or a lingering remnant of a bad dream or the product of short-sightedness plus an
overactive (or, perhaps, given the clichéd Grim Reaper-like appearance of the figure,
underactive) imagination. The sightings recurred less frequently over time and had
stopped altogether by the end of my tenancy.

I had been living at the property for many months when I learned that Lucy had had
similar experiences there. By that time curious about what appeared to be a hooded figure,
but reluctant to invite judgements of craziness, I once asked Lucy in deliberately vague
terms whether she had ‘ever noticed anything odd’ about the property. She straightaway
asked whether I was referring to something next to the small window in the back bedroom,
and when I said yes, she replied in a disingenuously casual tone, ‘That’s the monk’, before
recounting sightings of other ‘spirits’ both at my rented property and her current home
some distance away. That Lucy reported seeing something similar in the same corner of the
bedroom both reassured and unsettled me. While it suggested that I had not been
hallucinating (or, at least, had not been the only one hallucinating), it raised questions
about what we had seen, if indeed anything more than a trick of the light. For the
remainder of my tenancy, I tried to not think about the figure or Lucy’s comments, as the
potential implications (if the figure was not an optical illusion) exceeded rational
understanding and were deeply unnerving. It was some time after the end of my tenancy
that curiosity got the better of me and I invited Lucy to discuss her experiences with a view
to writing this paper.
On meeting again, Lucy told me that she had felt excited, relieved and vindicated to learn that I had also seen what appeared to be a cloaked figure in the corner of the bedroom: ‘I really did see something; it wasn’t me; I wasn’t making it up’. She described the first time she saw the ‘monk’, recalling that she had awoken one night to find a man standing at the foot of her bed. She said it had looked as if he was wearing a cloak; his head had appeared to be covered and she had been unable to see his face. Her first thought had been that she was still asleep and dreaming; on realising that she was in fact awake, she had become very frightened. Lucy said that the figure had at first seemed menacing, not least because his face was hidden from view, although he had neither moved nor made any gesture. She described having seen him regularly thereafter, always hooded and standing motionless in the same corner of the room, throughout her time at the property. Beyond initially scaring her, Lucy’s sightings of the monk had not greatly concerned her, and she had not considered them to be problematic. As far as she knew, no other tenants or friends or neighbours had ever reported seeing anything out of the ordinary at the property.

Talking to Lucy, I was struck by the apparent similarities in our experiences. Neither of us had seen the figure move or heard it talk; it had consistently manifested in one spot in the room, and we had both strongly felt that the figure had been actively watching us. Like Lucy, I had been very frightened initially yet had not subsequently been afraid of being alone in the property, even at night.

Given the strength of academic scepticism towards the paranormal, I anticipate that the incidents presented above may be bracketed out, dismissed as untrue, or explained away even as the words which convey them are consumed. The intellectual challenge entailed in thinking about and articulating the possibility of such events is immense. So
deeply enculturated are beliefs around the nature and conditions of existence that even my own response, now tempered by the intervening years, is to retrospectively reinterpret the sightings as tricks of the light, optical illusions, dreams, nightmares, hallucinations, and/or symptoms of visual or perceptual disturbance. However, the purpose of sharing this account is not to seek any such categorical certainty or closure. Rather, it is to entertain the possibility that, at different times in the same location, Lucy and I might actually have seen a ghostly figure (perhaps a monk) dressed in a cloak and hood. This is not to say that the account is intended to convert the reader or the authors to any firm belief in the reality or otherwise of paranormal phenomena. Instead it simply invites and presumes the suspension of disbelief from this juncture in order to begin thinking through some implications of materially haunted spaces, which are defined here as those indwelled or constituted by entities of a spiritual or otherworldly or otherwise 'irrational' (by Western scientific standards) kind.

Lucy’s and my sightings of the ghostly monk inspire consideration of the ways in which remnants of the past may linger and manifest in material spaces. They suggest possibilities that events and/or entities might somehow reside within, or return to, particular places in ways that exceed explanation in terms of the processes of embodied human memory and/or (sub)conscious intertextual interpretation upon which are commonly predicated notions of metaphorical haunting. Such concepts are not novel: as Holloway and Kneale (2008) explain, the potential for places and objects to hold, store or become imprinted by memories, emotions or even consciousnesses have been previously explored by fiction makers, real-life ghost hunters and parapsychologists. These notions of emplaced or material memory disrupt to a far greater degree than does metaphorical
haunting the boundaries between binary categories of absence/presence, past/present, dead/alive and representation/non-representation. In the (hooded) face of the manifest/materialised specter it becomes difficult to think of the ghost as simply that which is absent or past; concepts of aliveness and deadness are thrown into question in ways which purely symbolic figurative spectrality could never envisage. Sightings such as Lucy’s and mine call for new conceptions of material haunting profoundly antithetical to metaphorical constructions of spectrality – of which they are, of course, the progenitors, as the language of haunting depends on the experiences attested through long and worldwide tradition. In particular – and as far as the blurring of boundaries is able to preserve the meaningfulness of binary categories at all – new conceptions are needed which privilege presence, the present, and the active agency of identified/identifiable ghosts over absence, the past, and the unknowability of the figurative specter. In order to explore the potentialities of such an enlivened material spectrality, the paper now sets out by way of conclusion an agenda for distinct new paranormal geographical work to explore the nature of what might be termed materially haunted space.

For paranormal geographies

In opening up new avenues for exploration, this paper does not seek to definitively circumscribe the scope or remit of the new paranormal geographical enquiry; rather, it aims to initiate discussion around its vision for the project. In broad terms, paranormal geographies might be thought of as addressing the parts of human experience of the supernatural, the occult or the non-existent which are typically exiled outside a culturally constructed ‘cordon sanitaire’ which divides the possible from the impossible and which
determines which parts of our experience we are permitted to claim as authentic or true (Dixon 2007: 206, emphasis in original). Similar calls to openness to anomalous, paranormal or supernatural experience have been made by scholars in other fields, for example religious studies (e.g. Kripal 2010), theology (Astley 2015), transpersonal psychology (Anderson 1998), and anthropology (Hunter 2013). Integrating an open-minded approach to belief and anomalous experience with the spatial-analytic expertise of geography and the situated, ethnographic study of belief common in folklore would enable a form of study which does justice to lived experience. Paranormal geographies would offer a critical response, and a radical alternative, to the delineation identified by Dixon (2007), and would help to interrogate the unexamined assumptions that underpin shared understandings of what can and cannot be in a range of social and cultural contexts. Paranormal geographical work would be characterised by openness to all ontological possibilities and would take seriously accounts of the type of events, manifestations and encounters that exceed rational explanation within hegemonic discourses of the possible, including premonitions, ghostly sightings, spiritualism, occult manifestations, clairvoyance, clairaudience and other psychic abilities.

Given the interest of the new paranormal geographies in otherworldly entities and spaces, there exists great potential for complementarity and productive conversation with geographical research into religion, spirituality, faith and belief. In particular, paranormal geographers might usefully engage with two of the key themes which Kong (2010) identifies as having characterised geographical research on religion in the previous decade. The first of these is the importance of unofficially sacred sites and ‘everyday, informal and often banal practices’ in the domain of religious faith (Brace et al. 2006: 29). Paranormal
geographies could attend to experiences of otherworldly entities and encounters in locations which are not consecrated or otherwise formally demarcated for religious ritual or practice, including built spaces such as the city and the home. Folklore has long engaged in the study of such spaces, and collaborative work with geographers on paranormal geographies would enrich both fields’ understandings of the ways human and non-human actors help to invest spaces with meaning. The second key theme to which paranormal geographies might speak is the importance of embodiment and the role of the body in signifying and making sense of sacred space (Holloway 2003). It could help to answer Kong’s (2010: 757) call for greater attention to the ‘different sensuous ways in which the sacred is experienced and reproduced’ by exploring the various (visual, visceral and other) ways in which the paranormal might be seen, felt, experienced and known.

The potential for collaboration with geographical work on religious and spiritual faith and belief notwithstanding, the paper anticipates that paranormal geographies might become distinguished from those other fields by its agnosticism towards the variously moral, ethical and/or deistic narratives by which many authors of spiritual or religious geographies seek to understand the world. Paranormal geographies could attend to events and encounters not easily positioned within the generative and interpretive frameworks of formal spiritual or religious practice and belief. This is the register of religious life which Primiano (1995: 44) labelled ‘vernacular religion’, which he defines as ‘religion as it is lived’; his model ‘acknowledges the presence of bidirectional influences of environments upon individuals and of individuals upon environments in the process of believing’. Paranormal geographies would be far less interested than is much geographical work on faith and belief in the ways in which religious or spiritual experience, including profound
affective and/or emotional responses, may be generated or constructed through the use of architecture, décor, music, ritual and practice within personal domestic spaces, ordained sacred spaces and designated places of worship (see Holloway 2003, Kong 2001, Finlayson 2012). Rather, it would prioritize exploration of the uninvited and uninitiated eruption of the otherworldly into the interior of the cordon sanitaire in ways that confound traditional doctrine and ritual.

Beyond collaboration with other geographical subdisciplines, folklore, and anthropology, paranormal geographies would also pursue opportunities for shared working with researchers exploring the ontological possibilities and mechanics of material haunting from other disciplinary perspectives, especially the physical sciences. Unlike interpretative readings of paranormal phenomena such as those by MacKian (2011) and Holloway (2003, 2010) reviewed above, paranormal geographical enquiry would welcome engagement with questions of veracity, verifiability and truth. Perhaps most challenging, it would resist routine recourse to notions of subjectivity and affect as a means of sidestepping difficult questions around the reality or otherwise of paranormal phenomena. Paranormal geographies would not, unlike some metaphorical spectral accounts, fetishize uncertainty, unknowability and indeterminacy at the expense of new knowledge or theory; nor would it position the ghost as unassailable symbolic enigma for fear of exorcising it away. Rather it would be committed to understanding the processes through which spaces become and remain materially haunted and exploring the broader implications of such ghostly presences.
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References


