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ONE

THE USEFULNESS OF GHOST STORIES

JEANNIE BANKS THOMAS

When I discuss supernatural narratives with my students, they inevitably ask me, “Do you believe in ghosts?” They’re looking for some kind of vindication or refutation of the numinous. Nothing I can say will do either definitively. Sometimes I give them a poetic answer; I say that the DNA each of us carries in our bodies makes us all ghosts. This is the reverse of how we usually think about ghosts. That is, we imagine them as ethereal forms and as those who’ve died before us—and not as those of us who are alive today. However, our DNA makes us, in part, the ghosts of our ancestors. We embody scraps, fragments, and glimmers of our forebears. We are shadows of who they were.

This is *not* the answer that my students want to hear.

They want me to tell them unequivocally whether or not ghosts exist. Also, they secretly (or not so secretly) want me to support with tidy, scholarly facts *their* belief in either the existence or the nonexistence of ghosts. They want me, as the voice of authority, to take up and confirm the merit of their own views. But because of my training as a folklorist, making such arguments about the existence of ghosts does not interest me (see Dégh 1971). Instead, my focus is the *stories* about ghosts.¹ These stories range from funny to powerful to mundane, but all are evocative. They communicate culturally or personally significant information to their audiences. It’s true that belief is powerful in some of these

narratives, and regardless of what scholars assert people will go on narrating anomalous experiences and choosing to believe in scientific or supernatural explanations—or some mixture of both. In fact, it is a deep cultural desire to mix both the scientific and the supernatural. To have scientific evidence for the supernatural, the existence of ghosts, and life beyond death would answer some of the most enduring questions of human existence. Folklore research, like other forms of scholarship, cannot sate that desire. From my folklorist's perspective, providing the answer to the question "Do you believe?" belongs to the people narrating or listening to a haunting experience. They decide what to believe or even if they want to engage with the narrative in terms of belief at all. What folklorists do is take supernatural narratives and belief traditions seriously; we pay attention to them and treat them analytically (see also Houran 2004).

In this chapter, I emphasize that there is much more to the realm of the supernatural than questions of belief, and I argue that ghost stories are a useful way to come to a better understanding of the worlds we inhabit. I present several ghost stories and describe a range of ways in which the narratives help us look more closely and analytically at culture, the environment, and the personal. This approach to ghost stories can help believers, skeptics, and those anywhere in between learn more from ghost stories than they might imagine possible.² In making this kind of an argument, I am not attempting to explain *away* ghost stories—that is, to move from culture, nature, and the personal back into the stories to give some indication of their descriptive accuracy and credibility. Rather, I move in the opposite direction: I'm demonstrating how the stories—whatever their level of believability—can point us outward and take us into realms of interest and significance

For purposes of clarity, I separate the realms of culture, nature, and the personal from each other. I do so recognizing that ghost stories, thanks to their varying content, often differ in what they communicate. For example, some stories reveal the personal; others say more about the cultural. However, I realize that the three realms are often deeply intertwined, shape

each other in lived experience, and can all be present in a given supernatural narrative. I also do not mean to imply that ghost stories tell us about only these realms. My focus on them is only meant to be suggestive, to provide a starting point for taking ghost stories seriously.

Like the other chapters in this book, this one also draws the stories from a range of contexts, including both the oral tradition and popular culture, to highlight the way ghosts materialize in contemporary times. So I present several different genres of ghost narratives—ranging from literary fiction to film to narrative (or memorate) to legend—and discuss the larger issues to which the stories direct us. I end this first section of this chapter with a ghost story from the contemporary oral tradition in order to establish some common characteristics of a story from the folk tradition. Gina, one of my students from Indiana, tells this story:

This . . . had occurred just after we had moved into our new home. It was an old two-story home. It was dated back in the late 1800s. Our next-door neighbor was quite old and lived in her home since it was built in 1907. She said our house was there for a long time before hers was built. She remembered that, at one time, the owners had buried a horse out in the backyard. She showed us where, and from the looks of the ground, my Dad said, it was sunk in and in a perfect square-shaped hole. “Big enough to put a horse in,” he said.

She also told us that the owner’s wife had died in that house. They only heated the house with the living room fireplace, and she froze to death one night sitting in her rocking chair.

Well, we didn’t pay much attention to if what she said was true or not. We went on about our business, until one night my sister and I noticed that as we went up the stairway, the attic doors that were on both sides of the stairs on the landing were wide open.

I asked my sister if she had been up there; she said no, and I didn’t do it [either]. We asked my brother

later on that night, and he didn't do it either. Mom and Dad were not at home that day, so we knew they didn't do it.

The next day, the same thing happened. This time Mom was home, so we asked if she had been upstairs; she hadn't. But she told us to make sure we kept those attic doors closed because all that cold air would make it colder upstairs if we didn't. Weeks and weeks went by, and every day we would find those doors opened some part of the day. We closed them; then they would be open again. Dad finally came up to see if the latches were working. Maybe the doors weren't latching, and the draft caused them to come open. The only problem is that the old carpet that was on the floor would not allow the doors to come all the way open. You had to pull hard to get them to come all the way back.

One night, while my sister and I were in our room, I was doing my homework, and she was talking on the phone; I thought I heard those doors being pulled open. I told Sue, my sister, to shut up for a minute and listen. I walked to our bedroom door, which was open, to get a better look. That's when I saw the other attic door on the opposite hall wall open. I looked back to see if Sue saw it, and she was sitting there with her mouth wide open. She couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. We both didn't want to run past those doors to get downstairs, so we started screaming for Mom or Dad.

Dad came stomping up the stairs, hollering for us to quit screaming. I think he scared us worse with his yelling. He told us that we were seeing things, and there was no ghost in the house. He said it was just the wind. Well, it took both of us a long time before we didn't have to run past those doors. We'd run past them and hurry into our room and shut our door. I'll never forget the feeling I had when I watched those doors being pulled open before my eyes. It did seem that after a couple of months, the doors quit opening. Maybe the lady who died was just

trying to see if we would leave her house, and after she found out we wouldn't, she left us alone. Who knows? (ISUFA 1995a)

Gina's story is notable because it's a good example of the manner in which ghost stories from contemporary oral tradition are frequently only *slightly* dramatic. The drama comes from the subject matter and the manner in which people tell the stories rather than from the extraordinary behavior of the supernatural beings. In the oral tradition, people commonly report merely feeling some type of "presence," a cold feeling in the room, or strange noises and nothing more (Guiley 1992, 13). The supernatural presence often does little beyond making itself known in some manner, such as opening the doors in Gina's story. These mild numinous experiences stand in contrast to most Hollywood presentations of the supernatural, as I discuss later in this chapter.

The oral accounts often reveal the importance of "rational explanations"; in Gina's story, her family speculates about faulty latches and the wind as potential causes of the disturbing and anomalous occurrences. However, for Gina and other narrators of haunting experiences, either the rational explanations are not satisfying enough or the possibility of an encounter with the supernatural is just too intriguing not to narrate. In either case, telling a ghost story marks events that do not square with a narrator's knowledge of the ordinary. Categorization and understanding of lived experience are important and expected components of everyday life. When events evade such analysis, they haunt us, and we try to give them some sort of conceptual frame. In some cases, we class them as ghost stories. To draw on the metaphor used in the introduction of this volume, just as some Southerners trap spirits in bottles, we all use a variety of cultural materials—from commodified forms (such as popular fiction, movies, and the ghost tours mentioned in chapter 6) to oral narratives—both to contain these anomalous experiences and also to keep them tantalizingly before us in hopes they'll impart glimmers of meaning. That ghost stories are still

frequently told indicates that understanding all the events of everyday life can be difficult, elusive, indefinite, and sometimes impossible. As a type of narrative, the ghost story reminds us how much is awfully and deliciously indeterminate in life. Just as Gina says at the end of her memorate, metaphorically ghost stories also say, “Who knows?”

GHOSTS AND CULTURE: BATHROOMS AND DEBTS

One of the most common ways that the public encounters ghost stories is in the form of a movie or a trade paperback book; these modes of presentation frequently emphasize the entertainment value of the supernatural. Along with the prevalence of science as a means to explain away ghost stories, the packaging of the supernatural as entertainment has helped perpetuate the notion that ghost stories are trivial—that is, all they’re primarily good for is generating a few goose bumps. This idea is so ubiquitous that it overshadows ghost stories’ other significant functions and uses. However, one of the useful things that ghost stories do is communicate to us about culture. Like any form of folklore, supernatural narratives directly or indirectly tell us about culture. However, one of the characteristics that distinguishes supernatural narratives is that they emphasize mystery and the indeterminate, which overtly invites interpretation of various kinds. Unlike other folk narrative forms—such as a folktale that is recognized as a fiction—ghost narratives are more slippery. For instance, one person hears a ghost story as truth, and a different person hears the same narrative as fiction. Ghost stories reveal how culture manifests itself in a twilight world that makes copious room for uncertainty and possibility. Thus, supernatural narratives often encourage debate about issues such as reality, fiction, and perception, which are often assumed to be a given in other forms of narrative folklore. That is, the claims to truth or fiction in other types of folk narrative are seemingly clearer.

The veracity of a ghost story is not a prerequisite in order for cultural meaning to be apparent in the narrative. Scholars, including Gillian Bennett (1999) and Jean-Claude Schmitt (1998), have

provided historical views of ghost stories, which also illuminate the culture of particular eras. Believers and nonbelievers alike tell ghost stories because the narratives contain cultural issues relevant to their audience. If the content of a narrative ceases to be interesting to its audiences, it ceases to be told. What ghost stories indicate about the culture of the living can be discerned through attention to narrative detail and storytelling context. When seeking the cultural “truths” revealed by a ghost story, the following are useful questions with which to start:

1. *Cultural Values*: What cultures does the story reflect? What cultural values or “truths” (historical or contemporary) can be discerned in the narrative? Does it reveal or reinforce cultural values?
2. *Cultural Stresses and Conflicts*: Does the story present issues about which there is fear, stress, or conflict in the culture? How are these issues handled in the narrative? What views of trauma, death, and the body emerge from the story?

To demonstrate what can be learned about culture from spectral narratives, this section discusses two types of ghost stories: narratives about haunted bathrooms and stories about ghosts and unpaid debts. Haunted bathroom narratives are ubiquitous, although there is little scholarly discussion of this type of story. That this kind of ghost story is common indicates that even a ghost story that seems especially trivial and easy to dismiss still functions for people, and therefore can yield cultural insight.

Many of my students relate accounts of haunted bathrooms; some of them focus specifically on a haunted toilet. These stories, like other ghost stories from the oral tradition, are deceptively simple albeit memorable. Sometimes told as a memorate, the stories focus on either the bathroom hosting a supernatural presence or on a toilet that is haunted. Narrators of the latter stories describe anomalous toilet-flushing sounds. The home’s occupants go to the source of the nocturnal noise only to find that no one is in the bathroom and that it would have been impossible for any of the occupants to flush and leave without

detection. In short, an unseen hand seems to have flushed the toilet. A discussion of such narratives with my college students in Indiana prompted one male, Scott, to describe an anomalous experience he had while trying to use the toilet at a party he was attending in an older home. His account was a bit more unusual than the run-of-the-mill metaphysical flushing experience: this time the haunting appeared to be located specifically in the toilet paper itself. Apparently, the roll of toilet paper took it upon itself to unroll without assistance, which startled Scott.

Scott's toilet paper memorate led to a lively, classwide discussion on the physics of toilet paper (How many squares of tissue hanging down will generate the momentum needed for the roll to start to unroll?); toilet paper holders (Was the holder level? Was it mounted in a way that could prompt its unrolling?); and the veracity of the narrator (Was drinking involved?). Scott said that he'd been drinking at the party but was not impaired. He speculated on the role of gravity in the situation, but he concluded by maintaining that nothing fully explained what he had seen in that bathroom. His narrative again follows the pattern that I outlined in response to Gina's story: the account acknowledges the importance of rational or scientific explanations while simultaneously finding such approaches inadequate in fully accounting for the events experienced by the narrator.

Looking at Scott's story from a cultural perspective is suggestive in a variety of ways. For example, stories like Scott's detail unseen forces at work in the bathroom, a room where we confront unseen forces at work on our bodies. Some bathroom ghost stories may dramatize this human reality. Another cultural issue that is closely associated with the human body as the subject of unseen forces is the feeling of vulnerability that being in this room can generate. In bathrooms, people are literally caught with their pants down. Some stories about haunted bathrooms suggest this vulnerability.

Haunted bathroom stories are widespread enough that it is easy to find them in other narrative venues. For example, the book and movie versions of the successful Harry Potter children's stories draw on this motif from the oral tradition in the form of

Moaning Mrytle, a ghost who is described as unhappily inhabiting the girls' restroom at Hogwarts School of Magic (Rowling 1999a, 155). Other films and books with haunted toilet motifs are successfully marketed to teen and adult audiences. For example, the book *The Amityville Horror* depicts dodgy, spooky toilets. Supposedly based on a "true story," the toilets in the house of an Amityville, New York, family ooze black goo of indeterminate origin (Anson 1977, 36–38). The story of the Amityville horror is worth considering because it is exemplary of how Hollywood depicts hauntings in horror movies.

In 1975, the Lutz family moved into a house in Amityville, New York, with their three children. The family purchased the house for a modest price because twenty-four-old Ronnie DeFeo murdered six members of his family in the home in 1974 (see chapter 6 for a discussion of haunted real estate and chapter 5 for a cultural history of the haunted house). After living in the house for twenty-eight days, the family alleged that troublesome toilets and a variety of supernatural manifestations terrorized them, including

ghostly apparitions of demonic hooded figures
clouds of flies in the sewing room
windowpanes that broke simultaneously
cloven hoofprints in the snow outside the house
extreme cold alternating with suffocating heat
spirit marching bands playing music
strange phone difficulties, especially when talking to the
priest
levitations
green slime appearing in the rooms
putrid smells
objects moving of their own accord
communication with a devilish pig spirit named Jodie
the family dog becoming unusually sleepy
a spectral voice that ordered a priest out of the house.
(Anson 1977; Morris 1981)

Although it contains motifs recognizable from the oral tradition, such as cold places and apparitions, this story is strikingly

different from most oral accounts. It includes a great number of varied supernatural manifestations and is so overly dramatic that it's as if it were intended to be a best-selling book or movie—which, in fact, it was. It turns out that the Lutzes and William Weber, Ronnie DeFeo's attorney, dreamed the whole thing up to make money. They concocted the hoax over several bottles of wine shared in the Lutz kitchen (Guiley 1992, 8). However, the Lutzes embarked on the plan without involving the lawyer, so he sued for a share of their profits from the book and movie (which appeared in 1977 and 1979, respectively). The Lutzes countersued.

The Lutzes moved out of the house, and the next occupants were not troubled by supernatural occurrences, but they did experience disturbances of the tourist kind (some of the locals called the sightseers "Amityville horrors"). They sued the Lutzes; the publisher of the book, Prentice-Hall; and its author, Jay Anson. Anson had worked on the screenplay for *The Exorcist* (1973), an experience he drew heavily on when he cranked out the book version of *The Amityville Horror* (Anson 1977) in less than four months (Morris 1981, 172). *The Amityville Horror* turned out to be a case of litigious horror rather than supernatural terror.

Litigation aside, the Amityville haunting is instructive regarding how the mass media presents the supernatural as opposed to how folk tradition narrates it. Hollywood's supernatural is often hyperbolic; the folk supernatural is understated in comparison. Simply hearing the number and dramatic nature of incidents at the Amityville haunted house should raise questions of veracity for anyone familiar with the more muted accounts of haunted houses from everyday life.

Other less sensational bathroom ghosts with both oral and literary connections include the specter that loiters in the restrooms at the House of the Seven Gables. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* drew its inspiration from the Turner house in Salem, Massachusetts (figure 1). Both the historical and contemporary oral tradition maintain that the house is haunted. William O. Thompson says, "Nathaniel Hawthorne, who made the house famous, thought the property was haunted and so

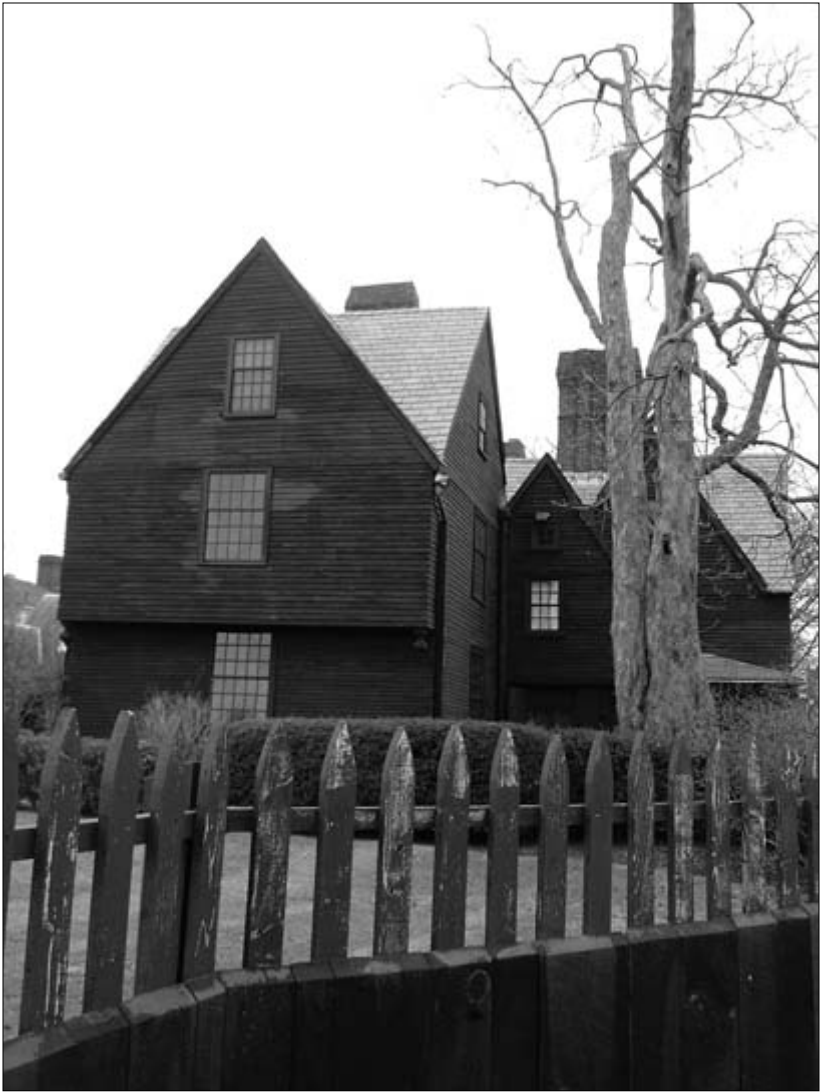


FIGURE 1: The august House of Seven Gables, which also boasts a bathroom ghost. Salem, Massachusetts. (Photo by Jeannie Banks Thomas)

do many of the guides who work there today. . . . The house not only sends out strange sounds, but guides have reported strange events. *Toilets flush when no one has been near a bathroom.* Door latches have been lifted up, (not down). . . . Faucets have been known to go on when again no one was near a sink” (n.d.; emphasis mine). During a visit to the house, a guide I talked with confirmed that such experiences and stories are part of the site’s ongoing oral tradition.

Bathroom ghosts are a common part of haunted house narratives, such as the House of the Seven Gables or the Amityville hoax. Bathroom ghost stories may be the most marginalized type of narrative in a genre that is already trivialized. We tend to overlook haunted bathroom stories because we don’t see them in the iconography associated with the haunted house, which tends to focus on attics and basements (see chapter 5). Also, bathrooms and what is done in them are not for discussion in polite conversation. This room and its associations may also evoke a sense of shame for some. We also can’t escape confronting bodily processes and issues of health in the bathroom. A child who hasn’t yet mastered basic bodily functions can find being in the bathroom frightening and surprising. Adults confront illness, aging, and mortality in bathrooms, which may generate fear, sadness, or despair. Given the vulnerability, shame, and fear that are experienced in the bathroom, it makes cultural sense that such an emotionally charged space could become a common locale for hauntings.³

Stories from Asia also reflect both adults’ and children’s fears of anomalous or threatening experiences in the bathroom. In Hong Kong, the staff of the *South China Morning Post*, an English-language daily newspaper, brought in two Buddhist monks to exorcise a ghost from the women’s bathroom (Hendricks 2001). In Japan Hanako, the toilet ghost, is a feared ghost among elementary-age children, according to Linda Spetter (2004). Hanako wears red clothes, and kids can contact her by knocking a specified number of times on her stall. She murders children, and her hands reach up from the toilet to grab her vulnerable victims. At other times, she appears when a kid runs out of toilet

paper and says, “Which do you want—red paper or blue paper?” If the hapless victim chooses red, that person will bleed; blue calls for Hanako to suck the victim’s blood until the person turns blue. Hanako’s boyfriend, Taro, inhabits the boy’s bathroom but socializes with Hanako at night (Spetter 2004).

Such ghost stories about haunted bathrooms cause bathrooms to become a common site of legend tripping. For example, teens and preteens tell legends about a spectral woman known as Bloody Mary who inhabits the bathroom mirror.⁴ The legend trip involves going into a darkened bathroom, reciting “Bloody Mary” the appropriate (and variable) number of times into the mirror, sometimes flushing the toilet, and then running out of the room in terror at the apparition in the mirror—or at the thought of it (see chapter 3; Dégh 2001; Dundes 2002; Langlois 1980; Tucker 2005b). Scholars such as Elizabeth Kenny (quoted in Spetter 2004) with *Hanako* and Alan Dundes with Bloody Mary (2002, 84, 54) argue that these supernatural legends express a specific fear for girls: their concerns about menstruation. Marc Armitage says that the stories are widespread in the Midlands and the north of England. He hypothesizes that the stories are about dealing with irrational fears that come from within the child (2002).

Perhaps all of this lore is a contemporary updating of the common supernatural motif of hauntings occurring near water—in this case it’s plumbing instead of a stream or lake. However, culturally speaking, considering the importance of the developmental task of mastering bodily functions and the proper use of toilets in the lives of children, it’s not surprising that these kinds of legends exist. Given the toilet’s manner of operation and attendant loud noises, it’s easy to see why children worry that something frightening might emerge from toilets (Doyle 1998). In light of the toilet’s main function—to dispose of what is unwanted (flushing dead goldfish, for example)—these stories present a frustrating twist: one can’t get rid of an unwanted toilet ghost by flushing; instead, flushing signals the spectral presence. Also, public restrooms constitute a liminal space where people do private things in public places. Ghost stories are frequently

set in liminal spaces, spaces that are “betwixt and between,” such as bridges, so it makes sense that a public restroom, which is not quite private or public, is a site for hauntings.

In a private home, the bathroom also maintains some of this liminal status. It’s part of the house, yet it’s the part where we perform some of our most ritually impure acts. It is simultaneously the unclean room and the room where we clean our bodies. As such, it is a place we feel ambivalent about, and it is associated with significant cultural issues: body functions that are seen as unclean, disease, sexuality, dirt, health, and intimacy.⁵ For example, health issues—the body bleeding while on the toilet—can be seen in the Hanako stories. Health, the body, maintaining private physical boundaries, and intimate contact with the body can generate tension and are often beyond easy control. Given the nature of the site, the bathroom seems a likely haunt for a ghost, since spectral narratives are ultimately stories about ambiguities and that which escapes surety, control, and the known.

Sometimes my students think the cause of these toilet anomalies is paranormal, and sometimes they think it’s cantankerous plumbing. Regardless of issues of belief—or whether the story is a memorate (such as Scott’s account), a hoax (such as *The Amityville Horror*), or literary fiction (such as the story of Moaning Myrtle)—the stories address, obliquely or directly, significant cultural issues. The anomalous is a part of everyday life; people commonly have experiences that they cannot readily explain—and some of them happen in the bathroom. Because of the issues that the haunted bathroom stories address and the lowly venue in which the hauntings take place, these stories can also be humorous. However, even though haunted toilet stories are sometimes funny, looking at such tales analytically reveals the reality of common cultural concerns about our own embodiment.

Ghost stories often reflect specific cultural orientations that differ from culture to culture and also change over time. For example, a ghost returning to complete unfinished business is a common and widespread motif. Such stories have been told in the United States, although I rarely hear them currently in the United States. Ghost stories emphasizing an unpaid debt

are still told in Cape Breton, Canada. For instance, Father John Angus Rankin, a respected Cape Bretoner well-known for his role in stimulating the resurgence of the Cape Breton fiddling tradition in the 1970s, tells the following story about a visit from his father's ghost. Rankin describes how, shortly after his father's death, he carefully pays his father's taxes and all his unpaid bills at the local stores. Then, a few months later, Father Rankin sees a ghost:

I snapped on the light, and my father was standing on the other side of the bed. I could see him from the knees up. And the only difference was, when he was in the casket, the undertaker, who knew him, combed his hair the way he used to comb it when he was younger, parted on the side here and all pulled over. As my father got older, the hair got thinner here, so he used to part it down the center and put it this way. That's the way his hair was combed when I saw him standing at the bed. So I got a shock.

And I said, "What do you want? What's the matter?" And then before he would have said anything, I said, "Are you saved?"

He said, "Yes, you know I'd be saved."

And then I said again, "What do you want?"

He said, "A bill."

"Oh," I said, "no, there isn't."

He said, "Yes, there is."

I said, "Where?"

He said, "Malcolm Dan MacLellan's. \$16.25. And," he said, "the bill is 25 years old."

By this time, I had lost my fear. And I turned my eyes off him because I was getting ready to ask questions about the other world. I put the book down on the table and turned. There was nothing there. . . . As soon as he got the message across, he disappeared.

Well, I didn't sleep all night. I just sat there and smoked cigarettes. Dawn came, I went out and said Mass. So then I went to see MacLellan, and I told MacLellan. And I said,

“I had an awful experience last night.” I said, “I don’t believe in this.” I said . . . “I’m going to go to Inverness and,” I said, “if there’s a bill in Inverness, then I’ve got to believe it. If not,” I said, “I’m going to Halifax to see a psychiatrist”. . . .

“Well,” I said, “if I don’t get that bill, I’m going to go to Halifax. Because you told me the bills were paid, and I have no way of knowing.”

So we were arguing back and forth, and going through bills, and the son came along. And he said, “What’s going on?”

So his father [said], “Well, Father John here . . . is looking for an old bill. And he figures his father owes some money to the stores. And there’s no—”

“Oh, Dad,” he says, “remember the boxes you gave me the other day?” He said, “There were old bills in there—you told me to burn them.” He said, “I didn’t get a chance to burn them. There’s old bills in there—they go back a long time.” (Caplan 2002, 31–35)

The son quickly finds an old bill for \$16.25 for hay, and Father Rankin pays the money and destroys the bill. Father Rankin also says, “There’s an expression in scripture that says you won’t get to heaven til the last farthing is paid” (Chisholm 2000, 67). His ghost story about his father’s debt is expressive of this religious view. The local culture and economy are also reflected in his account. Some of these stories are indicative of economic stresses. In a history of Inverness, the town where MacLellan’s store was located, Malcolm Dan MacLellan and his business practices are described: “Malcolm rarely took a holiday, enjoyed his chew of gum and chatted with everyone who came into the store. He ran his business on a credit basis, and every one of his customers ran a tab. If the mines were working steady, his Saturday payday would be considerable; if the mines were idle, poor Malcolm invariably took a hit. It was reasoned by many that he never turned his back on a customer, and when he turned the business over to son Freddie, tens of thousands of



FIGURE 2: MacLellan's store, where a Cape Breton ghost owed a debt, is typical of the mundane spaces associated with traditional ghosts. Inverness, Nova Scotia. (Photo by Jeannie Banks Thomas)

dollars remained on his books, never to be collected" (Gillis and MacDonald 2004, 232).

Apparently not all the local residents were as conscientious as the ghost, or they lacked the means to pay their debts back. In a poor economy where credit is important, it's not surprising that paying one's debts is a cultural concern, even if, and especially *because*, it's a difficult goal to realize. The story also reinforces the cultural value that debts should be paid. This kind of a story makes particular sense in tightly connected communities where business owners are neighbors and not some large corporate entity located outside of the community. MacLellan's store was in business through 2006 and still owned by the family (figure 2). If a local customer wanted to continue do business in the store and get credit when necessary—and maintain a comfort-

able relationship with the family who ran the store and lived in the same small town—paying off at least some debt would be an important part of keeping this relationship going.

In these ghost stories, paying debts doesn't always involve money. In a poignant story told by Dan Angus Beaton, a woman who died in childbirth comes back from the dead because she cannot rest until the two blankets she had borrowed "for the purpose of the baby's birth" were returned to their owners (Chisholm 2000, 136–39). That the woman had to borrow blankets for childbirth indicates her stark poverty—and the fact that she feels so strongly that the neighbors need them back, after being used for childbirth no less, suggests that the neighbors might also be poor. Thus, this story presents a vivid picture of a life of hardship and extreme deprivation—the woman is so destitute as to have no blankets. The existing blankets are rare and valued enough that they continue to be used even when employed, and presumably marked by, a childbirth that caused the death of a woman. The blankets tell us about something larger than the story itself. They symbolize the extreme poverty and hardship that has often been a part of the real Cape Breton experience in the last two centuries. Conditions in Cape Breton today are not as draconian as in the past, but it remains a poor region, plagued by unemployment and "remarkable" levels of outward migration due to lack of economic opportunity (Terrain Group, Inc., 2004).

The theme of a ghost returning to settle a debt is familiar enough in contemporary Cape Breton that it has entered regional popular culture. Howie MacDonald, a Cape Breton fiddler and comedian, included a humorous version of such a story on *Celtic Brew* (2002), a live recording of traditional music and comedy. In this story, the narrator encounters a ghostly woman in a house he's entered to escape a rainstorm, and he converses with her:

I asked her, "Are you of this world?"

She says, "I was once, but I'm not now."

I said, "What happened to you?"

She said, "I died. What do you think happened to me?"

I decided to ask her, "What do you want of me?"

... Then she beckoned for me to follow her downstairs and into the kitchen. Now, I walked down; she kind of floated down the stairs. We arrive into the kitchen, and she said, "Looooook into the reddydydy box."

I said, "The bread box?"

She said, "No, the reddydydy box."

I says, "I'm not getting you."

She says, "Geez, are you stoned?"

Well, I looked into the box; in the box there was a prescription, and two dollars and ninety-five cents. I started to put things together after that.

I said, "Would you like me to take that money down to the pharmacy and pay that bill so that you can rest in peace?"

She said, "Well, it's a little late for a refill."

Pretty sarcastic for a dead woman, I thought.

The story is funny because the ghost expects the narrator to know the ghost-returns-to-pay-debt storyline better, and she mocks the narrator when he is slow in recognizing the situation. The audience laughter that accompanies the story reflects their recognition of the playful humor and creativity in the creation of a ghost who is more sardonic than scary. Finally, some of the humor arises because of the juxtaposition of the contemporary ("Geez, are you stoned?") with a traditional motif of a ghost returning to pay a debt. The story exemplifies the manner in which old, traditional motifs meet the new (and even the sarcastic) in today's supernatural narratives.

While, the stories' content and meanings are different, both haunted bathrooms and debt-paying ghosts reveal information about the cultures in which they are told. In addition to these types of ghost tales being communicated orally, all sorts of media also disseminate them, literally creating more "ghostly" images in contemporary venues such as the Internet or in movies, popular literature, tourist guidebooks, and compact discs. To return to language from the introduction, these are old spirits

in new bottles. We consume ghosts in these contemporary forms as readily as we continue to tell ghost stories. We like ghosts because they simultaneously transport us to other worlds and possibilities *and* also because they point us back toward issues of interest in our cultures.

GHOSTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: PIRATES AND SPOOK LIGHTS

I find the study of folklore particularly engaging because it draws my attention to aspects of the world around me that I might otherwise miss. An awareness of folklore makes seeing and taking in the world a more intense and richer experience. Ghost stories, as a form of folklore, can also assist in expanding our knowledge of the landscapes in which we find ourselves. In some ghost stories, the natural world is a crucial element and a central focus. In these cases, the supernatural can be used to contemplate nature and place. One way to do this is by paying attention to the environment in which the story is set. Another is to attempt to discern the attitudes toward the natural world that the ghost story reveals. These questions can be useful for starting this kind of analysis:

1. *Aspects of the environment:* What does the story reveal about the landscape in which the story takes place? What physical realities does the account describe? Of what natural conditions (such as atmospheric) might the narrative make us aware? Does the story describe unusual or little-known natural phenomena?
2. *Attitudes toward the environment:* How does the story describe the landscape in which the events take place? How tied to the landscape are the events? Do any details in the narrative indicate attitudes toward nature and the environment? Does the story change how those who tell and hear it see the physical setting of the story?

For example, during a softly stormy July evening on Cape Breton Island, Alistair MacLeod and his brother John from

Massachusetts told me a story and showed me a version of it in a slim book of Nova Scotia folklore written by Mary Fraser. In the story, ghosts of pirates angrily chase treasure hunters away from buried treasure on a Broad Cove—area beach, not far from where I was staying and near present-day MacLeod family homes and businesses. Nova Scotian stories about buried treasure often include tales of murders committed with the notion that the resultant ghosts would guard the treasure, which could be the case with the narrative the MacLeods told (Creighton 1994, 46–48). In their story, the treasure hunters seek safety by running into a house, and the ghosts surround the house and glare menacingly at them through the windows. The MacLeod brothers told me that the safe haven referred to in the story was in all likelihood their family home.

They narrated the story, told me about their personal connection to it, and loaned me the book because they knew of my interest in ghosts. That evening all of us experienced the satisfaction of a story shared in good company; theirs was the pleasure of telling, mine of listening. Also, for me, the story in the context of the quiet depth of their kindness and interest in all things Cape Breton—John collects all the publications about the island that he can find—transformed my feeling for the place I was visiting. It made that specific part of Cape Breton more known to me. I realized that particular ground meant something significant to thoughtful people. I felt a connection to that generously treed bit of Cape Breton earth that stretched into the ocean within my gaze. I hadn't felt a bond with that particular place until the MacLeods shared the story. The ghosts in this story helped change my attitude toward place; they reminded me of its mystery and power.

These particular ghosts changed how I looked at the landscape; I was more interested in it and more connected to it because of the story. Other forms of folklore, such as the traditional music in Cape Breton, can also tie people to place. However, the bonds to place that come through supernatural narratives can be stronger, more personal, and more powerful because they deal with the metaphysical. For instance, while the traditional music

in Cape Breton helps me connect to the place, it links me to a larger place. The ghost story connected me to a very specific home place in a way the music hadn't. Because supernatural narratives flirt with significant ontological and spiritual questions (such as whether life exists after death), they can be felt in an intimate and intensely individual fashion. Therefore, some supernatural tales invite metaphysical linkages to place. As a type of folklore, ghost stories can offer a connection to place that is less discriminating than are some other folklore forms. For example, the pirate ghost stories didn't require that I appreciate traditional music, know how to play an instrument, or be a native in order to feel a significant bond with the place.

The supernatural is democratic; it will take those who want to come to it. It opens the door to the otherworldly and spiritual; it proffers communion, which is often felt and understood in idiosyncratic ways. Because ghost stories deal with profound metaphysical issues and possibilities, they offer—should one choose it—an enticing, personal, and intense experience. Religious narratives and experiences can offer similar experiences, but ghost legends come with fewer strings attached—one does not have to accept religious principles, participate in an organized group, donate tithes, or even believe in order to feel the pleasant rush of possibility offered by a good ghost story. Supernatural legends invite their listeners into metaphysical mystery in a simple, come-as-you-are and do-it-yourself fashion.

Sometimes the actual physical qualities of place come directly into play in supernatural narratives. For example, many legends exist about what are sometimes called “ghost” or “spook lights.” These stories have been told in many cultures throughout history. David Hufford's experience-centered hypothesis could be applied to some of these accounts. He argues, “Some significant portion of traditional supernatural belief is associated with accurate observations interpreted rationally. This does not suggest that *all* such belief has this association. Nor is this association taken as proof that the beliefs are true. This point must be stressed because much of the investigation of supernatural belief, especially since the Enlightenment, has been implicitly governed by

a desire to show that the beliefs under investigation are false” (1982b, xviii). The latter type of supernatural exploration leads to the dismissal of the story, which forecloses the possibility of using the story to come to a deeper understanding of culture or the natural world. Here I’m following the argument of folklorist Donald Ward (1977, 216) who asserts that the folklorist need not concern herself with the “question of the existence or non-existence of paranormal phenomena.” Also, regardless of where one comes down on issues of belief, one can still find much to take seriously—and to learn from—supernatural narratives. In this framework, even disbelief in a story is not cause for its dismissal.

Hufford’s groundbreaking, and now classic, work (1982b, xviii) presents a good model for approaching memorates that detail the supernatural. However, it is not this chapter’s intent to do the kind of analysis Hufford does (primarily in relation to memorates). This chapter presents narratives that range from literary fiction to legend, and instead of a Huffordian emphasis (1982b) that elucidates the stories’ “descriptive accuracy” (“accurate observation”) my focus is on *described or revealed attitudes*. So I discuss what these narratives indicate about the environment and the attitudes toward it.

For example, thinking about the environment and the attitudes toward it depicted in “spook light” stories is informative. Light is a naturally occurring phenomenon, but in these stories it works in unusual or paranormal ways. Like other types of ghost stories from the oral tradition, the narratives are often *slightly* dramatic; the spook light is merely a presence—“Look, there’s an unusual light there.” However, sometimes they’re more dramatic; folklorist Lynwood Montell collected one such legend in Kentucky:

My grandmother’s name was Belle Brizendine. When she was a child, they lived in an old house built in 1867 in Muhlenberg County, not far from Greenville. I remember her telling about the Union soldiers that were in the neighborhood when she was eight or nine years old. And she used to tell me a ghost story about that old house.

She said that when she was a little girl, they used to sit on the front porch in the evening. There was a dirt road that passed in front of their old house, and there was a cemetery just a short distance down the road from the house.

Grandmother said that one night when she was out on the porch, she saw a very large ball of light rise slowly from the cemetery and come very slowly down the road in the direction of the house. She always told how scared she got when it got closer and closer.

One time, when this light was directly in front of their house, the front gate opened and the ball of fire passed through the gate and came up the sidewalk directly toward my grandmother. She said that she was simply paralyzed as she watched it. As it passed by her, the front door of the house opened and the big ball of fire went into the house. It then proceeded to go up the long flight of steps to the upstairs area; then it disappeared. (2000, 178)

The details in this story indicate certain attitudes toward the natural world and its manifestations: wonder, puzzlement, respect, and fear. In the story, the light rises from the cemetery and moves into the human space of the house. It shows the human and the natural intersecting in a surprising fashion—a subtle but nice dramatization of the fact that although humans live surrounded by nature, those moments when it intersects with their lives in unusual ways are stunning, awe-inspiring, frightening, or enrapturing.

In the oral tradition, these anomalous lights are sometimes called jack o' lanterns, will o' the wisps, or ball lightning. There is a vivid and varied story tradition associated with these lights. Shakespeare's character Puck, from *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, is a will o' wisp, a trickster figure, a light in the woods that leads you astray (Briggs 1976, 336; 1978, 122). Scottish folklore holds that these lights are the souls of unbaptized infants; they're sometimes called "short hoggies," which is a dialect term for baby booties (Eberly 1991, 234). In Cape Breton, the lights are

referred to as “forerunners” and are often seen to be a sign of impending death. In a 1956 interview, Ellis Ogle of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, describes the lights—or “minerals,” as he called them: “The old man, Bob, said, ‘In rainy weather,’ he said, ‘that mineral exploded and threw these here lights.’ Some of them looked like moons, and some of them looked like babies, and some of them looked like fish. . . . This one special light that I saw, looked exactly and fine like a baby, tapered off like a fish’s tail. It look like it was flying with its tail, and it absolutely shined brighter than the sun or moon either. For I seen my shadow way on the back mountain, and it look brighter and stronger by that than the sun ever give it” (Lindahl 2004, 417).

The stories point to many realities, including the possibility of getting lost in the woods at night. They can serve to remind listeners that nature is not easily mastered and that a person should have her wits about her when in the natural world. The lights are also linked with death, which can be understood metaphorically as the expression of an awareness that death is part of the natural order of things and that nature can mete out death. In addition, these stories manifest an attitude of wonder and a recognition of the mysterious. The light’s connection with death and the supernatural also leads to thoughts of other worlds and the afterlife.

Beyond analyzing the stories for indications about attitudes toward the environment, the stories can reveal what people think about the liminal aspects of the physical world. Too often in the past, as Hufford says, this kind of analysis served to dismiss the stories. Here I’m looking at the narratives to show how much they can offer and how they can be used to make us more aware of the world around us. Some ghost stories can also lead us to more knowledge of science and the physical world. They can also direct us to lesser-known natural phenomena or phenomena whose existence is not well understood or debated (Corliss 1994).

Spook lights correlate with several possible natural events. For example, when folklorist Carl Lindahl contextualizes Ellis Ogle’s stories, he says, “The old women [Ellis’s neighbors] argued about the nature of the ghostly lights . . . that stalked their mountains

after dark. Granny Shields always found rational explanations for the hauntings: the lights were caused by ‘minerals’ (probably methane gas released from the ground in the form of luminous shapes)” (2004, 413). Because ghost stories invite interpretation, such exploration, debate, and discussion are a traditional part of their telling.

In 2004 Rufus S. Morgan, a doctor from Signal Mountain, Tennessee, described a spook light encounter. He was sitting in front of his house, not far from the site where a moonshiner was murdered one hundred years earlier. As he sat in the dark, he noticed that the frogs and the whip-poor-wills suddenly stopped singing, and then he saw a green light. The light moved around for several minutes, stopping at times as if it were “watching” him. He turned on a light and the spook light disappeared. In relation to this experience, he notes that whip-poor-wills eat the larvae of fireflies, which exude a thick, glowing liquid. He speculates this could be an explanation of the light, especially after he later sees the “small, shining face of a raccoon” that had apparently been eating the larvae. His daughter, however, says that she prefers to think of the light as the ghost of the moonshiner (Morgan, 74–75).

As is apparent in this section, some ghost narratives lend themselves to thinking about the properties of the natural world. Whatever the focus of the story, an analytical discussion of the story after its telling is a common part of the tradition of relating supernatural narratives. In addition to thinking about glowworms and methane gas, some people ponder ghost light accounts in relation to known states of matter. Could the spook light be an example of one of the known states of matter (such as solid, liquid, or gas)? Could it be a plasma? Plasma is similar to gas, except that it is a good electrical conductor and reacts to magnetic fields. Plasmas can occur naturally, and high voltages ionizing the air around power lines can create them (George 1995, 226). If the spook light is a plasma, what aspects of the area where the light appeared are conducive to this phenomenon? Why is it in this particular environment?

Other questions that draw attention to the natural world and the environment where the narrative takes place include: Is the

light caused by the refractions and reflections of town and car lights? Is it St. Elmo's fire, a slow discharge of electricity from earth into air (Corliss 1982)? Could the light be caused by the combustion of naturally occurring gases such as methane (as in Granny Shields's theory above) or phosphine (emitted by decaying vegetable matter)? Could it be the gleaming of phosphorescent fungi, sometimes known as "foxfire" (George 1995, 107)? Could it be "corpse light" or "cemetery light"? These terms refer to the luminous products of body decay attributed to phosphorated hydrogen (George 1995, 112). Could it be a manifestation of ball lightning, and does such a phenomenon really exist (Stenhoff 1999)?⁶ Beyond being fascinating in its own right, this approach to ghost stories can help us see aspects of the natural world that we previously did not notice. Whether we choose to believe in shining whip-poor-wills or ghostly moonshiners, thinking on such ghost stories *in situ* leaves us with the rich possibilities offered by both the natural and the supernatural.

Paranormal narratives sometimes prompt legend trips to sites in the stories, where the participants directly encounter nature. Being in a more natural environment is part of the pleasure of the trip. Bob Pyle (1995) describes the extended legend trip he took in the Dark Divide region of the Pacific Northwest while researching his book about a legendary creature, *Where Bigfoot Walks: Crossing the Dark Divide*. Pyle frequently details the natural environs he sees while searching for Bigfoot: "After breakfast I hiked to nearby Middle Falls, where the sound was the river's. Water ouzels danced on the rim of the broad water slide. These slate-gray relatives of wrens, also known as dippers, are synonymous with pure mountain waters. As I watched, one dipper repeatedly plunged its head into the oncoming water, making great fountains over its head at metronomic intervals. Another, closest to me at fifty feet, picked up and stabbed more gingerly in shallower water, point downstream as often as up. . . . The lead-pellet birds maintained their individual behaviors for the quarter-hour I watched" (1995, 60–61).

Looking for legends prompts Pyle's close attention to the natural environment, which in turn rewards him with the wonders

of the visible world, such as the ouzels' behavior. Wondering whether there is enough habitat to sustain Bigfoot in the region encourages Pyle to focus sharply on its inhabitants and how they survive. While Bigfoot is a central focus of his book, the *where* in his title—*Where Bigfoot Walks*—is equally important. His words remind us how much there is to see in nature when looking for legends. Additionally, his naturalist's careful attention to and accounting of detail is also a good model for a folkloristic approach to the cultural landscape. That is, a folklorist closely chronicles the folk aspects of the cultural landscape just as a naturalist such as Pyle documents the fauna of the forested one.

GHOSTS AND THE INDIVIDUAL: AMANDA'S GRANDMA AND SPECTRAL HAUNDRINGS

While specters communicate with us about realms outside of ourselves, such as the natural world, ghosts also get personal. That is, supernatural narratives can be examined in terms of their reflection of and impact on individual lives. Sometimes ghost stories have the ability to transform the individual worlds of those who tell and hear them. The following questions can provide a way of starting to explore the relationships between ghosts and the individual:

1. *Transforming Individual Thought.* In what specific ways does the story work to transform the thinking of the listener or teller? Why? How is this change made manifest? And following the seminal work of David Hufford, does the experiential (what the person actually experienced) form a basis for the response to the numinous?
2. *Transforming Individual Behavior.* What specific parts of the narrative function to transform behavior? What actions does the story call forth? What is the impact of these actions? How lasting is the transformation wrought by the numinous? Here it is also helpful to recall the folkloric literature on ostension, the acting out of some part of a

legend or supernatural narrative, which reminds us that ostensive behavior can be positive, harmless, or negative (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983; Ellis 1989, 1991).

A memorate collected at home in California from her forty-eight-year-old mother, Jo Ann, by one of my students, Amanda, illustrates how first an experience with the supernatural, and then an account of it, impacts the thinking and lives of Jo Ann and her daughter:

It was in July 1986. I woke up out of a dead sleep at about 5 a.m. My grandmother was very sick and was dying; my mother and father were back in Pennsylvania with her at the time. Anyway, I woke up and when I looked to the side of my bed, I saw my grandmother. She looked so peaceful and happy to finally be out of pain. Her image wasn't solid, it was white and looked kind of like she was in a fog, and the lower part of her body was swirling. It's hard for me to describe it to you. When I looked at her, she said, "Goodbye, Jo Ann, I love you."

No sooner did she say that and she was gone; she just vanished. I laid in bed and began to cry; I knew that she had died. I didn't wake up your father because I was afraid that he'd think I was nuts. So I laid in bed and about twenty minutes later the phone rang. I knew it was my mother, so when I answered I just said, "I know, Mom; she's gone." After a few days went by, I talked to my mom about what had happened, and she told me that my cousin also had the same experience but that we were the only ones. (USUFA 1995b)

In response to her mother's narrative, Amanda says, "This incident happened when I was about eleven years old. I can remember it because I woke up that morning because I heard my mother crying. I believe that what my mother saw was real. My mother isn't the type of person who believes in the unknown, but when this happened to her, her views on the subject changed. Since then, she has had other experiences with her grandmother

like smelling her or just feeling her presence” (emphasis mine). Jo Ann’s narrative shares the same theme as Father Rankin’s account: a visitation from a deceased family member (see also Bennett 1999). This type of haunting experience is so common historically that the oral tradition recognizes this type of ghost with its own name: the wraith. While frequently used in contemporary parlance as merely a synonym for “ghost,” historically “wraith” referred to someone who had just died or was about to do so; it’s a term for the apparition of a person seen at the moment of their death (Guiley 1992, 95).

Obviously, this incident changes Jo Ann’s views about “the unknown,” and Jo Ann’s experience and account of it shapes her daughter’s views as well. However, generating *belief* in the supernatural is not the only kind of personal impact tales of the supernatural have. My own experience on a legend trip provides another example of the possibilities of personal meaning generated by out-of-the ordinary experiences. This trip changed my personal awareness and behavior without involving belief or disbelief. In the early summer of 2001, I went legend tripping to a railroad crossing with a group of scholars who were attending the meetings of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research in San Antonio, Texas. Carl Lindahl gave a paper focusing on Latino culture and the importance of children as they are manifest in the stories and legend tripping traditions associated with this particular site (Lindahl 2005). Later he led several folklorists to the actual tracks.

The legend associated with the site maintains that a train crashed into and killed a busload of school children at the railroad crossing. The children haunt the railroad crossing. Specifically, the legend has it that when a car is placed in neutral at the bottom of the embankment before the crossing, it will miraculously roll uphill and onto and over the railroad crossing. The spirits of the children who died in the school bus crash are supposedly pushing the car. They do not want anyone else harmed at the site, so they move the cars to safety. To obtain evidence of this spectral assist, legend trippers dust the trunks of their cars with baby powder before putting their cars in neutral at the crossing.

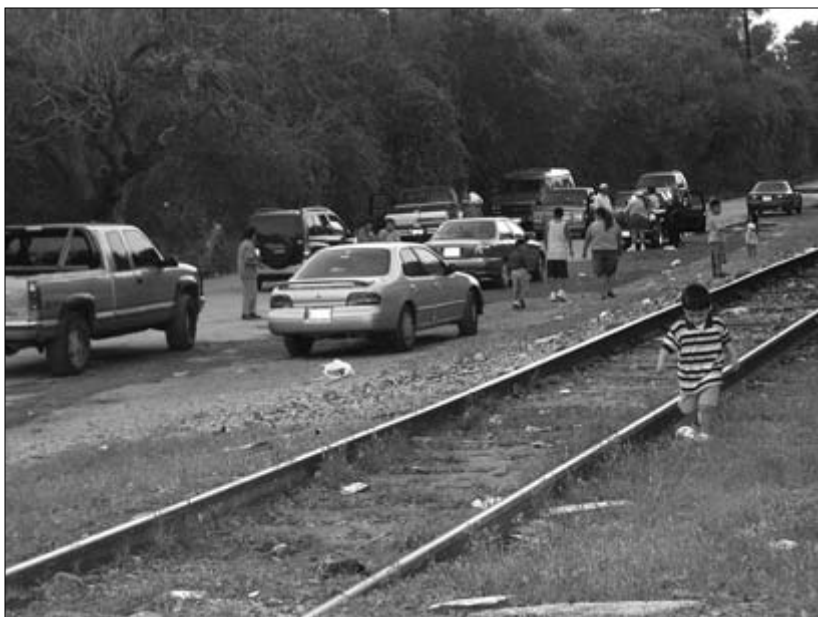


FIGURE 3: On Todos Santos 2003, as night falls, carloads of adults and children gather on the downhill side of the railroad tracks to compare their experiences. San Antonio, Texas. (Photo by Carl Lindahl)

Once a car has been “pushed” over to the other side (figure 3), the driver pulls off the road and all the occupants get out to inspect the trunk lid to see if the ghostly children left their fingerprints in the powder (figure 4).

Our car, driven by Carl Lindahl, was adorned with a heavy dusting of powder and did appear to move uphill. Barbara Mikkelsen (2003) identifies the San Antonio site as a “gravity hill,” an optical illusion where one appears to be moving uphill when one is really moving downhill. Still, it was visually convincing and impressive. It occurred to me that the powder could highlight any preexisting prints, but we pulled over, and at first glance there were no fingerprints on the trunk. Later, a little boy came over to look at our car, and we noticed a sole fingerprint not long after he disappeared. The actions of this little boy and several



FIGURE 4: Todos Santos 2003: Seeking palm prints and fingerprints from the ghostly children, five children inspect the dusted trunk of a car that has just gone over the tracks. San Antonio, Texas. (Photo by Carl Lindahl)

others brought me into different kinds of human interactions than I had previously experienced in the San Antonio area.

Everyone who was at the tracks was “testing” the site or looking for evidence in the same way we did. This was also accomplished by interacting with all the other strangers at the tracks. We all got out, looked at each other’s cars, and talked to each other. This meant that among others, I talked to (and shared baby powder with) a busload of shy Latino school girls in uniform from Brownsville, Texas; a couple of male African American teenagers, and a family from Texas with two children and a mom who had the tallest and biggest blonde, bouffant hairdo I’d ever seen.

I’d seen people representing these different demographics on the street and in the restaurants and shops of San Antonio, but nothing had caused us to stop and have a real exchange—until

we engaged with the legend. This speaks to the power of story. Sometimes, at least for a moment, a story can help us reach across boundaries that we don't normally traverse. The ghost story briefly changed my habitual pattern of social interaction. On the train tracks on that humid San Antonio night, people connected with each other through attention to and enjoyment of an anomalous place and its story. It was a moment of demographic transcendence through legend tripping. Then we drove back to our hotel, and the next day Carl drove out of the parking garage and headed toward Chicago with a ghostly reminder of the small ways in which stories mark the material world: wisps of baby powder occasionally kited off the trunk of the car as he made his way north.

These two examples illustrate some positive ways in which ghost stories affect personal lives; however, it is only fair to acknowledge that their personal impact can also be negative. Unfortunately, charlatans employ the metaphysical to swindle money from people. Sometimes tales of the supernatural generate unnecessary fear in their audiences. For example, both my colleagues and students have commented that movies such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Poltergeist* (1982), and *The Ring* (2002) traumatized them. Some of this fear is conditioned by Hollywood's frequent presentation of a more highly dramatic, gory, and threatening supernatural than the one depicted in the oral tradition.⁷ An awareness of the difference between what is depicted in Hollywood horror films versus the oral tradition can sometimes lessen the fright associated with such films. In other words, if you encounter the anomalous in everyday life, it's not going to be as dramatic (and therefore not as frightening) as the Amityville haunting, for example.

Some people also experience fright when they hear a story from the oral tradition, especially when they are children. One group of students told me that they were the most frightened by paranormal events that were reported to be true. In this case, a large number of them were especially frightened by a television series, *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987–1999), which purported to depict actual events and happenings—several of them based in

urban legends—that could not be easily explained. In response to frightening narratives, people develop folk strategies to deal with the fears that the supernatural and inexplicable raise. Along with the folk analysis of ghost stories mentioned earlier in this chapter, folk strategies for defusing fear are another common, but understudied, component of the supernatural tradition.

Over the years, my students have related various methods for defanging fear. Strategies that introduce comforting *companionship* are popular. Examples I've heard include sleeping with a loved one—parent, sibling, friend, partner, or dog—when afraid. Other tactics include using a cell phone if companionship is not immediately available. The use of some sort of *magical action or substance* is also frequent, especially with children. These practices range from leaving a light on to giving a child a spray bottle of “monster juice” that she can shoot under the bed to dissipate fears (and monsters). The mass market recognizes this folk process and has actually commodified it through items such as monster-abatement sprays. Other variants of magic action include *isolation* and *neutralization*. For instance, one of my students told me that she found Hufford's *The Terror That Comes in the Night* (1982b) fascinating but also very, very scary. So when she wasn't reading the book, she stored it in her freezer. In order to contain and literally “put on ice” unnerving aspects of the supernatural, she reported that she employed a contemporary appliance, the freezer, in much the same way that Southerners historically used bottle trees.

Distraction is another method people employ to reduce fear. For example, a student told me of having to help a scared friend in college. First, the friend requested that my student read scriptures aloud to distract her. The frightened woman didn't find reading aloud diverting enough until my student switched to reading political satire. The woman threw the scriptures over for P. J. O'Rourke, who proved more effective in this case. Other students said they've tried to divest themselves of fear by singing songs.

Finally, *eradication* or *displacement* are two other creative folk strategies used to address fright. One student confessed to me that the notion of Bloody Mary so frightened him as a child that

his mother felt she had to do more than just talk to him about it. She rented the musical *South Pacific* (1958) and had him watch the scenes focusing on Bloody Mary to impress on him that Bloody Mary was really just a woman in a musical and not some demonic being who lived in a bathroom mirror.⁸ Author Edith Wharton, “a life-long book lover,” confessed that she could not sleep if she knew a volume of ghost stories was in the house, and she would even burn such volumes on occasion to eradicate the threat they posed (Crow 2004, 157). Students also report that thinking about supernatural stories in terms of culture, nature, or the personal also helps move their focus and emotional energy away from fear and into analysis. In these ways, supernatural stories in all their various manifestations both generate fear *and* prompt people to develop methods that help them learn how to cope with and, hopefully, overcome their fear.

All of these examples demonstrate that ghost stories and beliefs can be a positive or negative force—and sometimes both—in individual lives. Ghosts can lead us on a merry, and sometimes scary, chase. We try to capture, contain, and understand them; sometimes we’re successful. At other times—just like spook lights in wetlands—they elude us, reminding us of how much in life we cannot control. However, ghost stories are useful forms, and we can harness their supernatural energy in a variety of ways. In this chapter, I’ve discussed three of those ways. And whether they focus on a child’s spectral handprint in Texas, a haunted toilet in New York, or an old debt left by a Canadian ghost, ghost stories awaken us to the skin-crawling pleasure and wonder to be found in all the worlds around us.