



Bruce Owens Grimm

Haunted Memoir

"How do you tell interesting stories? You puncture through reality and you let magic and weird stuff and ghosts bleed back through."

— Carmen Maria Machado

My mother believes that I'm a medium. She thinks this because I saw a ghost in my room when I was seven. I watched the movie *Love at First Bite* late at night when it aired after the news. I had trouble sleeping is what I used to tell people. The truth was that I was afraid to sleep, afraid of what might happen while I was not awake.

The glow of the TV, the only light in my room, intensified the slate blueness of my walls. The movie cut to a commercial and the TV turned off. It was dark. Not even light from the outside seeped in. I moved down to the end of the bed, reached across the void, and groped for the power dial. The screen crackled, bits of static electricity jumped down my arm as my room filled with blue light once more. Like most things in my house, the TV was secondhand, so I figured it was nothing more than a mechanical failure of an old piece of equipment. Maybe it never worked right in the first place. Nothing to worry about, I told myself. I lay back down, adjusted my pillow to see the TV in front of me better, when I saw the man standing by—blocking—the door.

Dressed in a navy pinstripe suit, his broad shoulders hunched, hands clenched, ready for a fight. He was tall, his head reaching above the top of the doorframe. The door had not opened. I had heard no footsteps up the creaky stairs or down the narrow hallway. He had appeared with the flicker of the TV light. The TV light faded in and out. He was closer with each movement of light. The pulse in my chest and head skittered down my back.

I don't remember what happened after that. There is a version in my mind where the thin white blanket floated above for a second as I threw it off me, lunged for the door, and made a run for it. Escape. I know I was able to turn on the overhead light in my room at some point because my mother lectured me the next day about leaving the lights and TV on all night.

In the morning, I described the incident to my mother, the man, the ghost in my room. I described what he wore. To my surprise, she started to cry because I had described her father, what he wore when he was buried. I had never met him or seen a picture of him. He died from a heart attack when my mother was eighteen, years before I was born. The only stories I've ever heard about him have been about his cruelty, his abusiveness. Throughout my life she would periodically ask if I ever saw him again. My answer was always no.

What Do the Shadows Know?

Ghosts stories have been told for centuries, changing shape with what was happening culturally. They have been warnings, they have been fond remembrances of lost loved ones, and they have been vengeful spirits out to terrify the living. Susan Owens writes in her book, *The Ghost: A Cultural History*, that the thing that makes ghosts different from other supernatural beings is that ghosts have human elements. She says, "it is precisely this ingredient—that ghosts are people of sorts, humanity's shadows, but are at the same time utterly remote—that accounts for the enduring fascination they exert" (13). Philip Graham, in his essay "The Shadow Knows," makes the idea of shadows even more relevant to haunted memoir: "I believe that most of the stories of our lives cast shadows. Some shadows are obvious, while others wait for us to notice them. Either way, a shadow is what gives a memory, whether of a person, place, or event, its true life..." (6). They are the things that can haunt nonfiction and, particularly, memoir.

Ghost stories have, for most of literature's history, been kept in the realm of fiction because keeping them fictitious allows for the reader to avoid wrestling with the supernatural in everyday life, what

is beyond scientific certainty. And yet, everyone is haunted in one way or another, which means everyone has a ghost story. As Carmen Maria Machado writes in her haunted memoir, *In the Dream House*, “The memoir is, at its core, an act of resurrection” (5). The key to understanding haunted memoir, and how ghosts can be present in nonfiction, is that a ghost is not limited to the energy left behind by a person who has died. As Steven, the oldest of the Crain children says in the Netflix remake of *The Haunting of Hill House*, ghosts can be “a lot of things: a memory, a daydream, a secret, grief, anger, guilt.” In Paul Lisicky’s *Later*, about his time living in Provincetown during the height of the AIDS crisis, he doesn’t dismiss the idea of ghosts. Rather, he expands the type of things that can be haunted: “I don’t understand the conventional explanations of ghosts, but I do understand boxes of ashes stashed beneath drafting tables, the ugly shirts of the young dead still hanging in closets, the young dead crying, now, get rid of them now...” (18). Yet, a sentence later, Lisicky stretches out of metaphoric territory: “Tom turns on a cheap little lamp, not suspecting the dead live in that lamp. The dead light up the room for an hour” (18). This is a mourning and a celebration. They might be gone but they are still able to provide light for Lisicky. We are more apt to believe that ghosts in nonfiction are metaphorical, because the reality of them feels fantastical and antithetical to the realities of the genre. Judith Barrington in her book, *Writing the Memoir*, argues that “The contemporary memoir includes retrospection as an essential part of the story. Your reader has to be willing to be both entertained by the story itself and interested in how you now, looking back on it, understand it” (21).

This “looking back on it, understand it” is where the writer is able to see the ghosts haunting the text and/or them. It is where the nonfiction writer can create the mood often associated with ghost stories. Dennis James Sweeney, in his essay, “Ghost/Home: A Beginner’s Guide to being Haunted” sets a haunted mood when he talks about how his father claimed to see a ghost “drift past the doorway of our TV room” (3). Right before this, Sweeney tells a story about him and his friend hearing “...a scratch in or through the wall” (2) during a sleepover. What he understands now as the writer, as the adult reflecting on these

moments are that they are “illusions of harm” rather than actual harm. As he writes, “nothing *happened*. It’s not that the ghosts become visible or, that they observably terrorized” (3). What you can’t see can be as terrifying as what you can see, especially when you don’t realize the ghost was there until after the moment has passed.

Rethinking the Real

How can ghosts exist in nonfiction, a genre based in the “real”? As Susanne Paola Antonetta says, “But facts have consequences built into them: ‘unrealized’ still occurs under the sign of the real” (56).

Speculative nonfiction wishes and dreams, imagines other possibilities, and this does not make it any less true. Amy Benson in the same speculative nonfiction article considers that

the act of invention within nonfiction is transformed by the continual presence of the narrator and the nonfiction I or we or you. So that even while you might turn the ordinary fantastically absurd or invent alternate futures, if you keep a few tethers in the actual, you get both worlds at once, a double exposure. (58)

Haunted memoir is a more specific double exposure where the living (the real), overlap with the dead or the other haunted things present in the narrative. Including a ghost or the idea of one in nonfiction doesn’t destroy the contract made with the reader, it enhances it because it allows the writer another mode of expressing their grief or desire for other possibilities. However, it is impossible to discuss haunted memoir without discussing the ultimate ghost story, *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson. While it is fiction, there is something the haunted memoirist can learn from it. In the introduction of the Penguin Classics edition, Laura Miller writes:

The literary effect we call horror turns on the dissolution of boundaries, between the living and the dead, but also, at the crudest level, between the outside of the body and everything that ought

to stay *inside*. In the psychological ghost story, the dissolving boundary is the one between the mind and the exterior world. (x)

This dissolution of boundaries, a rethinking of what is real, is essential to haunted memoir. Miller goes on to say: “The psychological ghost story is as much about the puzzle of identity as it is about madness” (x). Madness is not an essential component to haunted memoir. Haunted memoir, as I’ll discuss in a moment, can explore mental health, but it, is not a requirement. However, identity is a major concern for nonfiction and especially memoir and certainly for haunted memoir. As Graham writes, “The task of a nonfiction writer or a memoirist is, it seems, not only to reveal a shadow in isolation but to find the hidden, larger structure, and to slowly, carefully chart the memories of one’s life in a developing canvas of light and dark.” Owens observes:

The question of whether or not ghosts can be said to ‘exist’ I leave to others to debate. I am fascinated by ghosts while not being quite sure what they are, and I confess to maintaining a precarious balance of skepticism and credulity that would probably not stand up to rigorous scrutiny. Ghosts remain one of the most profound enigmas of human life. (8)

Machado writes in the “Dream House as Prologue” section of *In the Dream House*: “Memoirists re-create the past, reconstruct dialogue...they manipulate time; resuscitate the dead. They put themselves, and others, into necessary context” (5). While the haunted memoirist is doing this resurrection, the question of “truth” in memoir must always be considered. In an interview, T. Kira Madden, author of *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls*, makes a very important point about truth in nonfiction: “With nonfiction, I am thinking about ethics, how to fully develop a person even if I don’t particularly like that person, if I have a right to a certain person’s story” (11). The role of imagination in nonfiction is also a consideration in speculative nonfiction because as Susanne Paola Antonetta, Amy Benson, Sabrina Orah Mark & Elissa Washuta state in their introduction to “Speculative Nonfiction: A Composite Interpretation,” the purpose of speculative nonfiction is to, “bridge what we what we know or think to be true with all of the other

places our minds hangout: supposition, dream, fantasy, future, invention, historical revision, cultural, political, and spiritual wish-fulfillment or prophesying” (56).

Of course, imagination does not mean fabrication. Imagination plays a role in memoir when, as Barrington points out, we must muse upon the story we are telling. How do we set the scene for our readers? What are the different ways we could have imagined an event turning out? How do we imagine a dead friend or relative may have reacted to a movie or an important life event? Imagination allows the writer to question: Why are we haunted? What is a ghost? What would a ghost say or do in a particular scene where their presence was unknown at the time of it happening? “The mind boggles” at all the possibilities as Antonetta, et al. state. And, as they continue, “That’s the point. Layers of boggling life on the margins of what is verifiable, layers that, if written with care, do not violate the nonfiction agreement with the reader...” (56). Ultimately, like speculative nonfiction, haunted memoir allows for the nonfiction writer to look at the what-ifs of life while maintaining the responsibility of nonfiction.

On the first page of her memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost*, Hilary Mantel speaks frankly about a ghost she sees: “About eleven o’clock, I see a flickering on the staircase. The air is still; then it moves. The air is still again. I know it is my stepfather’s ghost coming down.” The plain phrasing gives the moment more power because she treats it as any other event happening in a day. Then Mantel acknowledges the potential skepticism of the reader as well as her own. Perhaps the ghost sighting is just the side effect of the migraines she is prone to. After pursuing that idea and giving us some backstory about her father, she transitions back to the present of the story with, “Today, the day I see the ghost...” (3). The narrative moves on and the ghost is left to linger as an actual entity. She does not undercut with skepticism again. She has considered both side of belief and chosen to believe that it is a ghost on her staircase.

In her section of “Speculative Nonfiction: A Composite Interpretation,” Elissa Washuta, a member of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, says, “For many of us, subscribing to a variety of belief systems, the supernatural is, in fact, natural. We speak to the dead. We receive cures from supernatural sickness and

protection from harm through developing relationships to non-human beings” (60). Ghosts are personal and ghosts are very real, not metaphorical. Ghosts are everywhere and nowhere all at the same time because they can make their presence known without being visible. They can lurk within us or in the white space between sentences or stand right in front of the narrator on the page or all of these. Ultimately, it is the writers’ relationship to the ghost and what they make of what haunts them that matters most.

Philip Graham writes, “Powerful memories of course reveal something significant about other people, but a powerful memory really only belongs to the person who remembers it, the one who chose that a particular piece of his or her life would enter the internal archive” (12). In my own essay, “Goodbye, No. 2,” I recount a time during junior high that I had to break up a fight between my parents. After the essay published, my mother was upset about this scene and said she didn’t remember it happening. It’s not one of her ghosts, but that doesn’t mean it’s not one of mine. She does fully believe that I saw a ghost in my room when I was seven years old. I do too, even if the reason and meaning for that ghost has changed for me.

Ghosts and the Haunted Body

Dennis James Sweeney takes the haunted house beyond brick and mortar and makes the body the haunted house. His sister’s anxiety, a very common medical condition, is the manifestation of the haunting. His chapbook-essay, “Ghost/Home: A Beginner’s Guide to Being Haunted,” begins with telling the reader about how an empath tells his sister that she is possessed by a confederate soldier and this possession is the cause of her anxiety: “...we had lived among ghosts; we slept in rooms that were as thick with them as with air. When she was a child, one of the ghosts split off and got in her” (1). His sister’s possession is the result of growing up in a haunted house. The empath and Sweeney’s sister do not approach her ghost as a metaphor. It shows being haunted has very real mental health consequences. My own anxiety can make it feel like the ghost of my father stands behind me. I cannot look in mirrors because I’m afraid to see him

behind me in the reflection. The empath is able to remove the sister's ghost and her anxiety exits with it. I think of the three pills I take daily to help manage my anxiety. Perhaps they are an exorcism, an incomplete one, as the anxiety is not banished, only controlled. That ghost still haunts my body even if it is not always visible.

According to the empath, Sweeney also has "a ghost living in him" (1). His ghosts are not as easily removed as his sister's. The difference between their two ghostly situations is that his sister's ghost is a separate entity, a person who lived and died, and then possessed her and thus can be banished. Sweeney's ghosts are woven into his body, "instead of haunting they did the work that science claimed it could make sense of: an overactive sympathetic nervous system, the body's attack on its own intestines. His ghost is Crohn's, a physical diagnosis, a ghost he resists: "Millions of people had Crohn's. They accepted the ghost. I had been presented with it, but I would not take it into me" (2). Sweeney continues, "I wanted to live in a home that was not haunted. I wanted not to be haunted myself" (10).

Both a body and a house can be haunted, clearly. One can influence the other as Sweeney and his girlfriend, Thirii, move into a new apartment and immediately discover, "an unsayable presence resided there. It was not my ghost, but unsayability recognizes its own kind" (5). Thirii has a very bodily reaction, a sneezing fit, to the presence in the apartment. They leave immediately and never return. Whenever they pass the building, they hold their breaths, "as if it were a cemetery" (5). How did they know the apartment was haunted? They felt it. Thirii's sneezing is her body reacting to a ghostly presence. She can also sense ghosts as she describes to Sweeney, "I'll feel scared of a place for no reason, and a desire to get away from it for no reason and then I'll learn after the fact that maybe there was a ghost there" (22). The "unsayability" that Sweeney mentions can be read as another word for ghost, and he has been haunted for so long that he can, without any concrete evidence, sense it. Antonetta's part of "Speculative Nonfiction: A Composite Interpretation," is helpful here: "At all times in nonfiction, readers must list, too, on that perch where the subjective and objective pull together. And choose which way is the safest to lean" (57).

Sweeney leans into the haunted and his own hauntedness. He is living between the subjective and the objective.

Lisicky talks about how death invaded Provincetown, which he calls Town. He writes, “Town was a ghost town haunted not so much by the past as by the losses to come” (20). He does mention ghosts directly at times, but for the most part, those ghosts live between the sentences, through the heartbreak and loss that he depicts. He builds the characters so beautifully that we can’t avoid having our hearts broken too when they are lost. The trauma of loss is how it haunts the writer and readers.

Sasha LaPointe’s essay, “Fairy Tales, Trauma, Writing into Dissociation” from *Shapes of Native Nonfiction Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers*, discusses how fairy tales, fables, and mythology can be used to address trauma, saying, “this realm of storytelling may be based in fantasy and magic, but it can also be examined as metaphor for what often occurs in many survivors during the experience of trauma: the act of dissociation” (64). I had not considered the idea of dissociation in my own life, my own writing until I read this. The ghost I had seen in my room as a child, a defining moment in my life could have very well been my brain covering the trauma of my father invading my room at night to sexually abuse me. Even if it’s still scary, better to think a ghost is approaching you rather than your father heading towards your bed to molest you. LaPointe goes on to say:

Our bodies are incredible and intelligent things. Of course they've wired in some sort of security system that allows us to check out when things get too scary. It's daydreaming. It's detachment. It's a way to go someplace else, away from the originating trauma. Fairy tales, located outside of our reality, takes us to another world. What's interesting about the joining of these worlds, both fairy tale and trauma, is that the intersection resembles the very core of the experience of trauma itself: that daydreaming, that survival, those coping mechanisms can be manifested on the page or the screen. (64)

Ghost stories have the same capability. Ghosts can be a coping mechanism. It's how I was able to live through my trauma. This is one reason they are present in my work. This is what I say when someone asks why I write about ghosts.

Piper J. Daniels's *Ladies Lazarus* uses occult language but locates that language in the body, such as when she fantasizes about a woman she met at a bar, "When I touched myself and was close to coming, I whispered her name, evoking her: a séance" (36). By doing this throughout the memoir, Daniels is able to set and keep the mood of a haunted space that can allow the reader to feel how trauma and mental illness have impacted her life. Throughout the book she shows how the body can be like a haunted house, how a mind can be haunted. What's important here is that while she is delving into mental illness, she is locating the ghosts in her physical body, not her mind. She writes, "And so the body becomes a pale coin, depressed or manic, depending upon how the mind lays claim" (11). Her manic depression is the ghost haunting her brain and the rest of her body.

That ghost plus childhood trauma cause her to start cutting when she is thirteen. She writes, "I believed then the blood was the language of god, the surest way to catch his ear," which leads to an attempted suicide. She takes 312 pills. "I coded that night. Coded again. Died and was resurrected, but only because my mother saved me" (16). In many ways, Daniels becomes the ghost. She is placed on life support, she loses her memory of the event, and is given lithium 3 times a day. One of the lithium's side effects is her eye lashes falling out, "I told myself they were an offering. That they were black boughs placed upon the graves of everything that ever haunted me" (16). She is very clearly using haunted language, even using the word haunted, yet, there is more to suggest she occupies a ghostly space in the narrative. She is lost in a fog. It takes two years "before I could focus long enough to read and write again" (16). In so many ways she cannot communicate, but she is a presence in the room, just like a ghost. The haunted language she uses puts the reader in that ghost space with her, helps make those connections between the seen and unseen.

At one point, Daniels writes, “Some people believe ghosts roam the Earth because of unfinished business. Others believe they remain because we are unable to let them go” (82). Again, we have direct references to ghosts and not metaphoric ones. Daniels reaches out to Sylvia Plath’s ghost in a couple ways. She writes a letter to Plath that says, “think of my body as your favorite haunt, and enter” (93). This passage contains so much. Body as haunted house returns. There is the idea of possession. Queerness is present here too as Daniels is asking Plath to merge with her in some way, the “and enter” implies sex. Daniels identifies as queer and identifies very much with Sylvia Plath. She wants to be with her and be her and give her a place to live once again. Daniels also reaches out to Plath via Ouija board and has “more than once taken the train from London to Heptonstall to leave my lipstick on your grave” (93). Not only is she reaching out via letter to Plath, Daniels is truly trying to conjure a connection with her via the Ouija board. Leaving the lipstick brings to mind the idea of an intimate relationship, but also more so that Daniels wants to leave a piece of herself with Plath. More so, Daniels feels such a strong connection to Plath because they are both mentally ill writers with suicidal ideation. Plath succeeded in her attempt where Daniels did not. There’s a dark, unsettled longing in Daniels leaving that lipstick on Plath’s grave. A bit of witchcraft.

Witchcraft also factors into Elissa Washuta’s essay “White Witchery,” which discusses how the cultural appropriation and mass marketing of witchcraft and Indigenous practices are the latest ways White people are plundering and erasing Indigenous people. An example she gives early on is about when “Sephora was going to sell a ‘starter witch kit’—tarot cards, sage, rose quartz, perfume—and the witches thought it was wrong for the makeup store to peddle spiritual tools alongside pore refiners. As a Native woman and an occult enthusiast, I had an opinion” (6). However, she decides to keep her opinion to herself because she has bought occult items from non-Native stores. The essay begins with her recounting buying a mood ring at the mall because another girl at school had one and this marked the beginning of her foray into wanting to be a witch, “A witch brings change to the seen world using unseen forces; a witch

gestures through the veil between worlds. Wearing the ring, I saw my thoughts on my hand. This is how I learned I wanted witchcraft: by paying for something cheap” (2). As the essay goes on, she shows that she is both a believer and a skeptic of the supernatural. The paying for something cheap line sets the duality up at the beginning so that the reader has that in mind during the rest of the essay. Another duality is that typically witches are part of covens, but she decides to go it alone. These dualities make her part of two worlds in many ways much like ghosts are part of two worlds. At one point she says, “The truth is I’m not a witch, exactly: I’m a person with prayers, a person who believes in spirits and plays with fire” (13). This is a choice she making to be someone who calls upon the spiritual instead of more occult practices. She is directly saying spirits are what will help her and be there for her. Washuta fully embraces haunted memoir.

Like Daniels, Washuta uses haunted memoir to explore trauma and the body. The cause of which stems from, as Washuta states, “I am still alive and ambulatory after having been raped more times than I can recall, threatened with a knife and a gun, smothered, choked, held down, and stalked, over the course of several years and at the hands of more than several men” (14). Also, she is Cowlitz, so she also carries the trauma of colonization and the continued pillaging of Native land and people: “I Google spells to take the PTSD out of me. But is that what I want? To stop my brain from thrashing against the wickedness America stuffed inside” (34). To remove the PTSD from her body would be to remove the memories that caused it, the connection to her ancestors, thus putting her in danger of not knowing how to protect herself. “White Witchery” shows how complex identity can be and the forces, both external and internal, normal and paranormal, that can shape it.

Spectral Streets

“Southwest Missouri is perhaps a land of ghosts,” Steffan Triplett writes in his essay, “The Real Danger on the Promenade.” Triplett sets the haunted tone immediately: “The place that held us together is dying” (1). When Triplett returns to where he grew up in Joplin, MO, which he left to attend college, to visit friends,

he notes that seeing one of those friends, Sara, “is liking seeing a ghost” (2). Triplett’s friendship with Sara ended when he came out to her and, “she was not okay with it. She believed that being gay was a sin” (27). The friends have gathered to search for the Spooklight, “an urban legend that persists in the area. The light lives in the outskirts of Joplin, where country and night collide, and a series of disused roads leads you to its home” (5). The group is leaving the town for country roads in search of the mysterious light. It is a classic horror story set-up. They even see a “black and red pentagram spray painted onto the pavement” (3).

The Promenade, which is called the Devil’s Promenade, is, as a place, unpredictable as to what might happen there: “stories of God and ghosts were not extraordinary here” (8). Early in the essay as he and his friends travel to the Promenade, about fifteen miles west of Joplin, Missouri, in search of the Spooklight:

the light is the manifestation of two Quapaw spirits meeting up each night in their tragic love, dancing in elation after being reunited. The story goes that the two lovers fled to be together, and, knowing they would face capture and torture, the young couple killed themselves by leaping off a nearby cliff. Another explanation for the ghost lights centers a white man and drips with racism as the story says his “family was killed by an unspecified local nation. In those versions the light comes from the miner’s lantern, his ghost doomed to search for his dead loved ones each night.

(11)

Making the legend about a White family that has been murdered by unspecified other makes anyone not White into a potential menace for White people. When they reach the Promenade, they see no sign of the Spooklight, and the group agrees they need to travel further up the Promenade. Triplett wants to drive so that they have the protection of being in the car. However, his friends, who are all White, want to walk. As a Black queer man, he is acutely aware of his surroundings in a way the others are not. He sees a truck approaching and thinks,

“Drive by, drive by, don’t stop, don’t stop.” The truck stops in the middle of the road making a “blockade, keeping anyone from passing it from either direction. My heart dropped into my stomach.” The white men wield “revved up weed-whackers” and shout the n-word. “*Oh, God* I thought *This is for me*. I couldn’t move.” (42)

A possibly supernatural light may have been the occasion for the essay, but Triplett shows the monstrosity of racism is the horror present here. Sara runs away, disappears into the night during the altercation. His other two White friends stand by him, one of them saying something to make the racists leave. However, their privilege, their inability to understand the trauma of what has just happened is obvious when they tell Triplett that they want to stay on the Promenade and keep searching for the Spooklight.

Ghosts and racism are, of course, not limited to Missouri or the South as Saleah Blancaflor details in her essay, “Project Poltergeist.” Ghosts are not up for debate in Blancaflor’s essay as it tells the story of thirteen-year-old, Ernie Rivers, who, in the 1960s, is the center of “the first haunting documented by parapsychologists in a housing project in the United States” (4). On the night of his birthday, Mabelle, his grandmother, with whom he lived, is doing housework when “a glass jar on top of a dresser on the opposite end of the room crashed to the floor...the jar seemed to have moved by itself” (1). This first sign of a poltergeist, “German for noisy spirits” (30), is easily dismissed by Ernie and Mabelle. However, things keep falling, breaking, flying across rooms with no explanation. Mabelle doesn’t reach out for help at first and tries to keep what is happening from reaching the housing authority “for fear that she and her grandson would be labeled unruly, kicked out of the apartment, and probably accused of lying” (4).

Mabelle and Ernie are vulnerable not only to the poltergeist but to systems, the housing authority, racism, monetary privilege, that would further traumatize them. Despite Mabelle’s attempts to keep stories about the poltergeist incidents from spreading, word does get out. A reporter from the *Newark News* knocks on Mabelle’s door and witnesses the poltergeist activity firsthand when “a cup sitting on a sturdy bookshelf” (19) falls when no one is near it. “The reporter turned pale – it was impossible for the cup to

have fallen on its own without some sort of push” (19). Whereas Triplett used ghosts as a metaphor for homophobia and racism, Blancaflor repeatedly shows evidence for an actual haunting while investigating the racism Ernie and Mabelle are subjected to.

The housing development starts an investigation into the poltergeist activity, which concerns Mabelle because, “In the eyes of many African American residents, Newark authorities often looked for excuses to kick tenants out of public housing, at which point they would be at the mercy of predatory landlords who charged as much as triple the market value for rents” (22). The poltergeist presents a threat beyond broken dishes and the general unease its presence causes as it also threatens Ernie and Mabelle’s housing. The investigation concludes with the NHA finding “no evidence of trickery or any physical cause for a seemingly invisible force...The NHA had to acknowledge that a strange unexplainable phenomenon hung over the apartment” (25). Dr. William Roll is brought in to consult on the case. Of importance here too, is that Roll also worked with the Herrmanns, the White family whose poltergeist story would eventually inspire the film *Poltergeist*.

While the Herrmann’s reached out to Ernie and Mabelle to offer kindness in dealing with the poltergeist, the difference in how the press treats a White family versus a Black family is staggering:

The Herrmanns had been on the cover of *Life* magazine...While receiving their share of press, Ernie and Mabelle had turned into subjects of rumor and innuendo. Looking back, it becomes difficult not to sense racial bias in the way the compassion for the Herrmanns, who were white and middle class, contrasted with the suspicion and distrust of Ernie and his family. (50)

All the attention around what is happening in Ernie and Mabelle’s home leads to Ernie being removed from Mabelle’s custody and him being placed in a group home. This did not happen to the Herrmann children. Roll is able to make arrangements to bring Ernie to the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University, where his team subjects Ernie to a battery of tests and probing into his childhood and home life. Once the tests are complete “the team examining Ernie came to the conclusion that the poltergeist

experiences were connected to family turmoil as well as psychological distress and trauma” (74). Ernie’s mother had killed his abusive father and was sent to prison. Shortly after his grandfather, with whom he was close, died. This brings to mind Philip Graham’s essay “Shadow Work,” where he discusses the intergenerational similarities with a fight between his parents, a fight between him and his wife, and a fight between him and his, at the time, three-year-old child, “...each of them, strangely enough, taking place in a kitchen—share shadows of hidden correspondence, creating a narrative circle spanning three generations that I’d never before suspected” (22).

At one point during his observations, Ernie is kept in a room that has a one-way mirror so that the researchers can observe him without him knowing they are there. Not only does this bring to mind a police investigation, which puts the researchers in the role of police and Ernie in the role of criminal thus reinforcing the racist tones of their work, Blancaflor mentions that mirrors present an interesting problem with a poltergeist case, “Supernaturalists believe mirrors reflecting mirrors...could open paranormal pathways” (74). Ernie is the conduit for intergenerational trauma in his family. Perhaps it is this trauma, the pain he endured, and his longing for a place where he felt safe, loved, that acted like a mirror for the poltergeist to enter his space.

Ernie does go to live with family after his time at Duke, the spirit activity eventually subsiding as he grows older, he marries and has children of his own, “the violent incidents receding into family lore” (85). However, one night his wife wakes up to see a ghost that looks like a man sitting on their windowsill. Concerned, she wakes up Ernie to tell him. “Just go back to sleep,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry about it” (87).

What Never Ends

How do you end a ghost essay when a ghost is timeless? As Machado writes in one of the last chapters of *In the Dream House*, “that there’s a real ending to anything is, I’m pretty sure, the lie of all autobiographical writing. You have to choose to stop somewhere. You have to let the reader go” (239). The ending of my

Haunted Memoir workshops was dictated by the clock. We would run out of time. I had to let the participants go. Yet, there was so much more we wanted to discuss. The door on the possibilities of haunted memoir had just opened and both me and the participants wanted to go further into the room, see what else we could find there. Ultimately, pushing the door open further, using storytelling techniques traditionally associated with fiction, is how haunted memoir allows us to tell our own story. As Sweeney says towards the end of his essay “Ghost/Home: A Beginner’s Guide to being Haunted,” “Sometimes it is writing that gives birth to a ghost” (23). While this is true in many cases and as we’ve seen here that writing can be used to call upon a ghost, in my case I write about them to gain some sense of control over them, to banish them. My hope is that I will also banish the pain and trauma with them.

A participant in one of the workshops asked me if haunted memoir could ever tell a happy story. My focus had so much been on trauma and loss that I had never considered it. This says a lot about me and my writing, but also shows how many more stories are waiting to be explored in haunted memoir.

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