Ghosts, Haunting, and Intergenerational Transmission of Affect: From Cryptonymy to Hauntology

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Abstract

This paper addresses the need for a conceptualization of subjectivity capable of releasing subjective experience from its temporal moorings. Emerging theories of ghosts and haunting are discussed as significant developments towards such conceptualization. Two ways of thinking about ghosts and haunting are examined: one that recognizes haunting as a foundational process at the root of human selfhood, and another that recognizes in haunting a pathology and silent suffering in need of healing. As a point of entry to this problematic I compare Derrida’s notion of hauntology with Abraham and Torok’s cryptonymy. In Abraham and Torok’s perspective the ghost is a “liar” whose message needs to be unpacked, decrypted, disassembled and ultimately neutralized. For Derrida, however, the specter’s secret is an opening to the core of the psychic apparatus as such, tied to the processes of creativity and imagination that hold the symbolic system together. This paper addresses the basic difference in the stances of Derrida vs. Abraham and Torok, and examines the implications of such differences concerning the issues of intergenerational transmission of affect and political subjectivity.

Fantômes, hantises, et la transmission intergénérationnelle de l'affect: de la cryptonymie à l’hantologie

Cet article traite de la nécessité d'une conceptualisation de la subjectivité capable de libérer l'expérience subjective de ses amarres temporelles. Les nouvelles théories de revenants et de hantise sont considérées comme des développements significatifs vers telle conceptualisation. Deux façons de penser des fantômes et des hantises sont examinées: celle qui reconnaît la hantise comme un processus fondamental à la racine de l'individualité humaine, et un autre qui reconnaît dans la hantise une pathologie et une souffrance silencieuse en besoin de guérison. Comme un point d'entrée à cette problématique, je compare la notion de «hantologie» suggérée par Jacques Derrida et la notion de «cryptonymie» développée par Abraham et Torok. Du point de vue d'Abraham et Torok, le fantôme est un «menteur» dont le message doit être déballé, décrypté, démonté et neutralisé. Pour Derrida, cependant, le secret du spectre est une ouverture à la base de l'appareil psychique en tant que telle, liée aux processus de créativité et d'imagination qui maintiennent intacte le système symbolique. Cet article met en évidence la différence fondamentale entre la position de Derrida et celle d’Abraham et Torok, et examine les implications de cette différence pour les questions de la transmission intergénérationnelle de l’affect et la subjectivité politique.
Many media outlets recently covered the story about a group of researchers at Clarkson University who are suggesting that haunted places are simply buildings with too much mold. “Toxic mold,” they say, triggers “psychosis”, which will then “cause you to see and hear things that go bump in the night” (Wolf, 2015, para. 2). “The more sensitive you are to mold,” explains the Huffington Post writer, “the more likely you may think you're up against a poltergeist.” (ibid, para. 3).

I do not subscribe to the fungus theory of ghosts, and I do not consider hauntings and ghost viewings psychotic reactions triggered by chemical overdose. But what I do in fact agree with is that, just like psychotic experiences, seeing ghosts and incidents of hauntings are experiences very much and very deeply embedded in the fabric of their local cultural, political and historical contexts. In other words, what these experiences have in common with psychotic experiences such as hallucinations caused by schizophrenia is what they also have in common with the process of subjectivity as such: the fact of being fundamentally embedded in, and inseparable from the cultural, political and historical contexts in which they take place.

Various indicators seem to point out that we, academics and clinicians alike, have reached a point in our theories of the subject that requires us to develop a model for dislodging our understanding of the subject from its temporal moorings. Furthermore, it seems to have become evident to many across disciplines that a robust body of research and theory on ghosts and haunting could offer a strong building block for a theory capable of incorporating a model of temporally dislodged subjectivity. Examples are numerous, and as that will not add much to the central discussion here, I will avoid detailing authors and theories here, though for those interested, some of the immediately relevant authors could include Abraham and Torok (1994), Barthin (2010), Blackman (2012), Davis (2007), Derrida (1986, 1994, 2001), Fisher (2012, 2014), Laclau (1995), Peeren, 2014, Walkerdine (2013, 2014), Wolfreys (2002), and so on. My own recent research and writing has been dedicated to working towards an account of the ways in which subjective experience and psychological perceptions of the world and its meanings are deeply and almost immediately shaped by the cultural, historical and political systems of signification in which subjectivity takes place (e.g. Author, 2015 a, b, c).

One of the major achievements of psychoanalytic and cultural theories of subjectivity over the last few decades can be outlined in terms of the development of new frameworks that understand the subject as collectively constituted. Such frameworks have allowed clinicians and researchers to recognize subjective experience as fundamentally embedded in the cultural and the collective, and to discard atomistic models of the person. These theories have of course spread well beyond philosophy, psychoanalysis or anthropology now, informing social sciences and humanities across the board. While theories that dislodge the subject and subjective experience from the biological body have greatly proliferated, however, we seem to be only beginning to recognize the need for theories capable of temporal dislodgment of subjective experience. In parallel to our growing awareness of the gap or need for temporally dislodged subjectivity, we have also realized the relevance of thinking about haunting and ghosts as instances of pan temporal experience par excellence.
Theorizing ghosts and haunting seems to be showing us the way towards conceptualizations of subjectivity as “the experience of the lived multiplicity of positioning” and “historically contingent” (Blackman et al., 2008, p. 6), produced through the plays of power and meaning, and held together by desire and fantasy. Lest we should forget, one of the main reasons why the notion of “subjectivity” has become a significant area of theoretical and clinical attention is that traditional models of the self, personhood and experience have consistently failed to explain certain aspects of the person, specifically political and intergenerationally transmitted affect (Blackman et al., 2008). Needless to say, the failure of those traditional models can be traced first and foremost to their inability to recognize and incorporate the collective and the temporal in their conceptualizations of human subjectivity, experience, desire and affect (Author, 2015c).

A theory of subjective pan temporality can offer a much needed answer to the two major questions of intergenerational transmission of trauma and political affect, and, as I indicated earlier, fills an important gap in our models of subjectivity and subjective experience as temporally and politically embedded in systems of meaning. On the other hand, the need for a basic model capable of anchoring otherwise exotic experiences such as ghosts and haunting within a general theory of subjectivity and subjective experience has become more and more clear, to the extent that we are witnessing a great proliferation of literature, research and conferences dedicated to the theme. It is in heeding the need for clarification of the contours of a theory of haunting and ghosts, and in the context of the proliferating theories of political subjectivity and intergenerational transmission of (political) affect, that the following paper will briefly examine two basic approaches to the understanding of the experience in question: one that identifies haunting as a foundational and inevitable process at the root of human selfhood, and another that recognizes in haunting a pathology, an abnormality in need of intervention and healing. As a point of entry into this problematic one could compare for instance Jacques Derrida’s notions of “hauntology” and “specter” (e.g. Derrida 1994) with the notions of “cryptonymy” and “phantom” as developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (e.g. Abraham and Torok, 1994).

From Abraham and Torok’s point of view the ghost (or the phantom, as they prefer to call it) is a problem, and worse yet, a “liar” whose message needs to be interpreted and decrypted against its wish, whose “crypt” needs to be exposed to light and disassembled, and whose agency should ultimately be neutralized. “A ghost returns to haunt with the intent of lying,” they assert, “its would-be ‘revelations’ are false by nature” (Abrahm and Torok, 1994, p. 188). For them the phantom’s “message” is a capsule of poisonous secrets, associated with death in the most frightening sense of destruction, so much so that dismantling and neutralizing the poisonous content amounts to “une petite victoire de l’Amour sur la Mort,” or “a small victory for love over death” (ibid, p. 190). Derrida’s conceptualization, on the other hand, stands in clear contrast to Abrahm and Torok’s. For Derrida the specter’s secret is an opening to the core of creation as such, tied to the processes of creativity and imagination that hold the symbolic system together, and related to the otherness within the self that creates the possibility of self-

In order to enter this discussion, it would be productive to start with the broader topic of the uncanny—hardly a tendentious move, given that ghosts and haunting are commonly included somewhere near the top in the lists of things uncanny. In his famous paper, “The Uncanny,” Freud examines the notion of “the double”, connecting it, along with ghosts and haunting, to an animistic past “which caused us to see copies of our own consciousness all around us” (1919, p. 171). I have discussed elsewhere in some detail the inextricable relationship between “the uncanny” and the fundamental processes of ego development, specifically the early moment of ego emerging as an object within the symbolic register (Author, 2013).

One important point that has not received sufficient attention by Freud or since, however, is the basic difference that, unlike the double (and its various manifestations such as mirror images, déjà vu, doppelgangers, out of body experiences, etc.), the ghost neither claims to be nor is experienced as a replica or a representation of the self. The ghost does not disturb by producing an uncanny version of the self, it disturbs by producing an uncanny version of the other. It stands, in other words, for another person, another time and another place. Even when the ghost occupies the ego, it is perceived as coming from the outside, and more often it simply haunts external and public representations of the ego, such as houses and buildings, specifically more collective structures such as hotels, hospitals, schools, bathhouses, etc. Whereas the double is the figuration of individual, internal and intra-psychic processes, the ghost is associated with collective, external and inter-psychic processes, and bridges intersubjective processes such as culture, politics and history with private processes such as affect, psychology and subjectivity.

When Abraham and Torok teach us how the phantom can work its way across generations through crypts that remain unnoticed and unspoken unless discovered and opened up, they offer to give us a method of making readable that which would otherwise remain unreadable within the text of a literary work or a person’s life narrative. In the sense that it is generally understood, however, cryptonymy is only “useful” in contexts where we are dealing with a situation of collapsed meaning, it is not something applicable to all meaning. From this point of view texts and narratives may or may not carry crypts. According to Abraham and Torok, the crypt forms as the result of the traumatic insertion of a “secret” into the flow of an otherwise consistent symbolic system in time, because of which, “the topography is fragmented by the secret. The cryptic enclave...forms inside the general space of the self” (Derrida, 1986, p. xix). The self thus constitutes “within itself the crypt as an outer safe,” and the crypt will then function as an “artificial unconscious” (Abraham and Torok, 1994, p. 159). The crypt works through linguistic mechanisms to hide the footprints of an event in the past. A crypt represents a specific case of suffering unspoken, and a phantom guards a specific case of injustice from being spoken.
For Derrida, on the other hand, a text, a life narrative, an identity, is always already haunted, with no hope for a final interpretation or decryption. This is the sense in which hauntology is a theory of text as such, a theory of reading rather than one of readability. For Derrida the ghost is “the hidden figure of all figures” (1994, p. 150). Or as he elaborates elsewhere, “spectral logic is de facto a deconstructive logic. It is the element of haunting in which deconstruction finds its most hospitable place, at the heart of the living present, in the liveliest pulsation of the philosophical.” (2002, p. 131). “To tell a story,” writes Wolfreys, tracing Derrida’s logic, “is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns [and as such] all stories are, more or less, ghost stories” (Wolfreys, 2002, p. 3). Compare that to Esther Rashkin, on the other hand, who insists, following Abraham and Torok, “not all texts have phantoms” (1992, p. 12).

Furthermore, if the right/ethical move for Abraham and Torok is to try to uncover the phantom and expose its secrets, and to bring it back into the order of knowledge, for Derrida in fact the ethical injunction is not to attempt to impose a final interpretation on the specter. The secret of the ghost, says Davis (2013), “is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not-yet formulated possibilities of the future” (p. 58). Jacques Lacan’s wisdom may offer us useful insight in addressing this ethical and theoretical dilemma. “Post-Freudian analysis” says Lacan, “had come to focus on the imaginary and, as a result, psychoanalytic practice had failed to grasp the fundamental principles of psychoanalysis, which lay in the symbolic” (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 190).

This argument works well in addressing the difference between a Derrida’s reading of ghosts and Abraham and Torok’s: in the latter the analysis remains at the level of the imaginary, fails to seek and recover the concept in the symbolic register –and hence the ghost remains limited to an individual realm, existing and acting in some sense unrelated to the broader, political system of power and meaning that is the symbolic realm. While Abraham and Torok’s formulation of the phantom may work perfectly well in individual therapy, it offers little help in understanding broader collective processes such as sociopolitical and historical realities. Put in other words, an important advantage of formulating the ghost at the collective level of the symbolic register is that such an understanding releases the phantom from a position of being silent by nature and an inherent tendency toward deception, to a political position of having been silenced by the structures of meaning and power. Needless to say, such an approach will also fundamentally open the discussion of ghosts and haunting to a much more prolific line of social and historical inquiry in theory, in research and in clinical encounters.

As mentioned earlier, it is in heeding the need for clarification of the contours of a theory of haunting and ghosts within the recent proliferation of theories of political subjectivity and intergenerational transmission of affect that this paper set out to examine the two basic approaches to ghosts and haunting. While one approach identifies haunting as a foundational and inevitable process at the root of human selfhood, the other recognizes in haunting a pathology, an abnormality in need of intervention and exorcism. Despite the apparent conflict, however, it is possible and in fact preferable to recognize the ways in which the two models are
not necessarily incommensurable, even if in terms of direct applicability they might fit different bills. The two theories are not referring to different processes, and the terms of normalcy and pathology used here to highlight the differences do not necessarily establish mutual exclusion. Think of the basic psychoanalytic notion of neuroses and their formative role in human development and psychic processes for instance, as opposed to the lay conception of neuroses as pathologies that one needs to recover from. If a similar frame of reference is applied to Abraham and Torok’s pathological model of ghosts and haunting, the conflict between the two models would disappear in many important ways. What remains specifically unchanged is the need for understanding the fundamental ways in which ghosts and haunting are associated with the very fabric of selfhood, at both the experiential and the social domains of subjectivity.

To return the questions of political subjectivity or intergenerational transmission of affective patterns and pathologies then, consider the significant implication of locating ghosts and haunting in the most basic layers of production of meaning and experience, where a hauntological theory of meaning and experience offers broader and much more general applicability. Rather than remaining limited on the one hand to high-impact personal or collective events (as clinical or anthropological theories of intergenerational transmission traditionally have), and on the other to severely negative/destructive outcomes and processes (as theories of trauma have typically done), this model provides the means of addressing the full gamut of human experiences, individual or social, and positive or negative. The notion of intergenerational transmission in this sense can be used for example to examine such issues as mechanisms of class continuity and cross-generational reproduction of behavioral and affective patterns that sustain poverty/wealth, education/illiteracy, or health and disease across time (see e.g. Walkerdine, 2013, 2015). At the same time, in this way the notion of intergenerational transmission can also be applied to examining the transmission of psychological and affective patterns in a much broader sense than the narrow investigation of transmission of traumatic or pathological patterns, for instance in terms of intergenerational transmission of political affect and socio-cultural patterns (see e.g. Peeren, 2014; Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013; Author, 2015c). We have clearly arrived at a point in our understanding of the human subject and subjective experience where the need for theories capable of dislodging the temporal moorings of subjectivity can no longer be ignored. Specifically, such theories are ineluctable if we have any interest in understanding the apparently invisible ways in which patterns of thought, behavior, and even affective experience traverse generational boundaries. We have clearly arrived at a point where the need for a hauntological theory of subjective experience can no longer be ignored.

References


