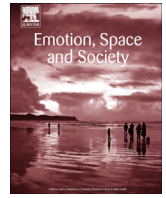




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## Ghost stories

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### ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on the exclusions and invisibilities that haunt academic subjectivities, spaces, and research practices. The exclusion criteria that delimit both scholars and scholarship are not natural or fair; they are the expressions of classed, raced, gendered, and ableist ideals, that privilege separation, order, and certainty. That which is marked as other – the remainder, which must not or cannot be admitted – is not fully excluded, but lurks at or below the waterline of legibility, disrupting academic bodies and departments with its persistent, often affective traces. Rather than trying to explain something that is primarily characterized by its inexplicability, the author brings readers into her department, to try to show them the ghosts that she has (not quite) seen, in order to appeal for more humane, inclusive, ghost-friendly ways of being and working in the academy.

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My department is on the twelfth floor of a 22-storey brick tower. The entire second floor is a glass-walled vestibule, suspended a few steps above the street and below the quad. Its hard, angular surfaces funnel the wind down to tousle your hair and torment the smokers who huddle 10 m from the tall glass doors. This gum-spotted cavern was built to accommodate a steady flow of bodies now diverted underground; they pour through over-heated tunnels, busy as an ant farm, swarming up the tower from the first floor while the wind howls at the doors for the scent of their soft skin.

Inside the vestibule, you press a button and wait – and wait – as the elevators follow their own inscrutable commands. ‘Never use elevator number four,’ a custodian tells you, leaning on her cart. ‘It’s always getting stuck, no matter how often they fix it. Last month it fell three floors and sent a lady to the hospital. I swear it’s haunted.’

Other bodies trickle in; students looking terribly young and faculty looking terribly tired. They stand waiting with their eyes fixed on their cell phones or the red digital displays above each brushed steel door. The game is to guess, based on distance, trajectory, and speed, which door will open first, because proximity trumps order of arrival.

If the elevator is empty, you check for trouble zones in the smoky mirrored wall – hair, teeth, nostrils, pits, pantyines – then pretend you weren’t looking at yourself when the door opens. You

are ascending through worlds; two floors of progressive social work – bing, bing – under several floors of business – bing bing bing bing bing bing.

In the *Transformers* movies, sentient humanoid robots running into battle reassemble themselves as various machines, their skin folding back like elaborate metal origami, insides twisting out and locking armaments into place. The war machines are always bigger and stronger, an awesome secret power cleverly packed inside themselves. The deep breath I take each time I enter this building makes the armoured plates pivot and click into place, as my self automatically reconfigures in a quick ballet of invisible folding.

In my teaching and research, I trouble the way that we perform the self and perceive the other. I push against the trespass of presuming mastery, peer into absences and gaps, and profess the importance of reflexivity. I tell the students in my qualitative research courses that these practices are ethically and practically necessary. But the cards I play in the academic game of credibility-through-citation – Cole (2002), Alldred and Gillies (2002), Fine (1994), Edwards and Mauthner (2002), and others – also call me to turn and look at the version of me who seems to be speaking, and the place that I am speaking from. When I do, they denaturalize, and I start seeing ghosts.

When we write about exclusions and invisibilities, we are telling ghost stories. Ghosts are lurking absences, the shadows of the not-quite-known or not-here-now, things that condense in gaps. In *Spectres of Marx* Derrida tells us that “ghosts haunt places that exist

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without them; they return to where they have been excluded from" (152). If he's right, universities must be exceptionally haunted. Throngs of ghosts are packed into every particle of space, drawn by the professional systems of order and knowledge built primarily to exclude them.

While every institution calls out a customized version of the self, academic subjects are distinguished by their claim to comprehend – and sometimes set – the parameters and practices that form subjects and institutions everywhere. We aspire to be skeleton keys, with our interior bits hollowed out, so that we can open many doors. We name and unlock worlds with defining and limiting features, by smoothing the specificity of our own, and acting as the reliable brokers of reality. Even as we teach that all subject positions are partial, we aim to know better. Despite years of critique, to know better still often means, to know with dispassionate mastery – a mode of being that seems incommensurate with the experience of 'real life' – much of which is thus rendered spectral. The exclusion criteria are not natural or fair; they are expressions of the classed, raced, gendered, and ableist ideologies that many of us can expertly critique.

Much of what collectively and individually shapes and moves us remains unseen, but it is still present and active in the scene. We read, act, and write with our ghosts, even when we go "after the ghosts of the other" (Derrida, 1994, 139). The things that we exclude in order to produce the semblance of order confound our analytic and social separations, and are either reckoned with or displaced in our constructions of facticity (Gordon, 21). This doesn't just apply to the things we purport to be producing knowledge about. "The tricky thing" Avery Gordon (2008) notes, "is that scholars too are subject to these same dynamics of haunting: ghosts get into our matters just as well" (23).

I am worried by how little is left of us, once we are done setting aside the selves that we try not to bring to work; by how much of what matters is excluded, how this reifies oppressive norms and makes us sad. To talk about it, I have to break the academic frame, to find ways of naming things that I cannot grasp and explain.

The first sign that this space is haunted comes as soon as I step out of the elevator on my floor. I never know where I am. Every time, as the doors close behind me, I hesitate, look left, then right. If the lounge is *that* way, my office is *this* way. It is as if the elevator has spun me round blindfolded. The department takes a minute to snap into place. It is the hesitation before a lie, the tug of crossing a line of salt: this place is dislocated, sealed off. The walls are lined with windows that don't open, looking out over a miniature world. There are others softly whooshing by in the elevators. You hear the distant chimes of their arrival on other planes, but they seldom stop in this little kingdom.

I find my office, the key, the lock, and open. Enter, put knapsack on desk and coat on a chair. Exhale and decide: what next? The bathroom. Always the first of three stalls, so I can visit the ghost who lives there, on the floor, in the grout between two tiles. My youngest daughter came to school with me one day, when she was small enough to love poofy sparkly things. One brown sequin fell off her skirt when she went to the bathroom. It stayed there, winking, for weeks. Now its absence speaks more durably. Hello, I answer. The ghost mother in me has come to see you.

She also comes out at the end of departmental buffets, furtively filling a paper plate with leftover brownies or cheese cubes and grapes. My colleagues pretend not to notice. I am embarrassed but take it anyways. 'You want this to go to waste?' the Mother says. 'After you've been away all day, the least you can do is come home with some treats. Besides this food is *free*.' Once in the elevator she pounced on a trolley going back to the kitchen from a higher floor.

'My kids would love those,' she purred, eyeing the fat flavourless muffins and cookies. The food services man shrugged. 'Help yourself. It's all getting thrown out anyways.' The Mother did so, with glee. 'You want any?' he said to the students riding along. They declined, shifting their weight away from the gross impropriety. 'Hey,' the Mother said, calling home as she walked to the car, 'you'll never guess what I scored in the elevator.' We prefer to study poverty in theory, not in the scavenging practices of postdoctoral fellows.

The Mother is unprofessional but refuses containment. She slips out in theories explained through stories of my kids, and the chiding of students who whisper or text. My Mom voice tames and comforts. 'Don't worry,' she says to the undergrad sick with anxiety, 'my daughter has a learning disability, a mental health problem, a chronic illness. I get it. Shit happens.' The Mother has taught me to teach, and offered a hands-on crash-course in something akin to feminist relational ethics of care – notions of mutual intersubjective connection and obligation that are self-evident to her but must be attributed to Gilligan (1982), Noddings (1984) or Tronto (1993) when they appear in my lists of 'works cited.'

My colleagues – male and female – carry similar ghosts more quietly; they are glimpsed in brief gestures toward parental griefs and passions that barely register on the available planes of meaning, stories that brush against adjacent coordinates of legibility, leaving bits of fur stuck against the academic fence. What does not appear is our helplessness: children and partners who are not okay, neurological defects, chronic illnesses, depressions, rejections, unmanageable intensities and shames compressed into a passing grimace, a shrug, a thin glaze of nonchalance on a terrible clipped anecdote. He/she is fine. The department head pops in when a professor's toddler is playing on her office floor. 'Great,' she curses, 'of all the days, he had to come by now.' She always already feels she has to work harder to prove her productivity, even though she already has tenure. A friend sends me an email in her first week back after a year of maternity leave. 'I have broken my daughter,' she says, but there is no space at work for her Mother's grief. She must be punctual and focused and not have spit-up on her shirt even as she teaches feminist community praxis. When I got pregnant half way through my MA, the women's studies professor I worked for said, 'congratulations, but don't expect any support from the faculty, especially the women.'

The Mother in me finds this appalling, and is too sure of herself to be silenced. She knows babies are not discursively produced, and has the stitches to prove it. She knows it is important to bring cupcakes to school on the last day of class and that they are homemade, and chocolate, and iced with vanilla buttercream. She knows that her students are not her kids but falls a little in love with them anyhow – she even uses the L-word in school! – but attributes this to Buddhist feminist pedagogue bell Hooks (2003) rather than her own maternal inclinations. She stops my fingers, mid-sentence, writing this line in my office-in-the sky: Where are my kids now? How are they feeling? What are they up to? All mental traffic pulls over; she is a passing ambulance with cognitive right of way.

The Mother is not the only ghost in there, but she is most readily admitted, so long as she seems benign and minimally demanding. A mass of less socially acceptable ghosts trail after me like vapour, far outnumbering the few that I recognize. Most of them don't speak; they surface as affects. In my department I am allowed to feel collegial, confident, cheerful, serious, curious, critical, indignant, and, to some degree, spent. But other feelings haunt me. There is Guilt, as the shadows of my ex-partners stalk the halls and stare at me accusingly every time I speak about spousal abuse. Depression, hanging like an old bathrobe on the back of my door, one that I

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