

# GHOSTLY MATTERS

*Haunting and the  
Sociological Imagination*

Avery F. Gordon

With a New Introduction

Foreword by Janice Radway



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## Introduction to the New Edition

It has been enormously rewarding and also surprising that *Ghostly Matters* has found enough readers to warrant republication. What the book has meant to those who have gainfully read it, what it will mean to you coming to it anew, I cannot say and feel sure that I would get it wrong if I presumed. It's difficult and often meddlesome for authors to account for why something they have made touches or instructs or inspires or goads its readers. I remain, nonetheless, honored by the respect and attention the book has received, because while there are indeed some books that are, independent of readers, works of great beauty or import, *Ghostly Matters* is not one of those. It was conceived of and written as a hand held out to those who would take it under protection and in solidarity against that other hand that appears in many guises in our world, one of whose scenes opens Luisa Valenzuela's novel *Como en la guerra (He Who Searches)* about the disappeared in Argentina: *an enormous hand approaches his face, about to explode*. I take here, then, only the opportunity to extend an invitation to read anew or again. And I do so, more than any other reason, because the main themes addressed in *Ghostly Matters* remain unfortunately all too relevant today.

In writing the book, I took on two major problems with which I have, in good company, long grappled. The first was how to understand modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, repression, and their concrete impacts on the people most affected by them and on our shared conditions of living. This meant trying to comprehend the terms of an always already racial capitalism and the determining role of monopolistic and militaristic state violence. In this way, the book reflects the type of Marxian inspired and inflected analysis, my intellectual training, that

nonetheless has had to part company with the orthodoxies, reductions, and aggravating ongoing refusals to accept the incontrovertible facticity of racial capitalism itself.

Haunting was the language and the experiential modality by which I tried to reach an understanding of the meeting of force and meaning, because haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security). Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.

Haunting is a frightening experience. It always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present. But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done. Indeed, it seemed to me that haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done. It is this sociopolitical-psychological state to which haunting referred.

And it is in large measure on behalf and in the interests of the something-to-be-done that I have thought the main value of *Ghostly Matters* lay. To see the something-to-be-done as characteristic of haunting was, on the one hand, no doubt to limit its scope. At the same time it was a way of focusing on the cultural requirements or dimensions of movement and change—individual, social, and political. I was concerned with how to adequately understand the social-subjective material or matter of what Cedric Robinson shorthandedly called “the nastiness,” without either reducing these matters to the epiphenomenal or detaching them from what we conventionally call the political economy, an analytic challenge that remains still unsatisfied today. I was trying to develop a vocabulary that registered and evoked the lived and living meeting, in their historical time, of the organized forces of order and violence and the aggrieved person when consciousness of that meeting was arising, haunting, forcing a confrontation, forking the future and the past. At this meeting point, I thought we might locate a profound and durable practice of thinking and being and acting toward eliminating the conditions that produce the nastiness in the first place. And it was, I thought, one of the most important tasks of social theory, as Herbert Marcuse taught in *One-Dimensional Man*, to be “concerned with the historical alternatives which haunt the established society as subversive tendencies and forces” and to embody the epistemological instruction and reality principle implied in Marcuse’s argument that “the values attached to these alternatives . . . become facts when they are translated into reality by . . . practice” (xi–xii).

*Ghostly Matters* was thus also motivated by my desire to find a method of knowledge production and a way of writing that could represent the damage and the haunting of the historical alternatives and thus richly conjure; describe, narrate, and explain the liens, the costs, the forfeits, and the losses of modern systems of abusive power in their immediacy and worldly significance. It seemed to me that radical scholars and intellectuals knew a great deal about the world capitalist system and repressive states and yet insisted on distinctions—between subject and object of knowledge, between fact and fiction, between presence and absence, between past and present, between present and future, between knowing and not-knowing—whose tenuousness and manipulation seemed precisely to me in need of comprehension and articulation, being themselves modalities of the exercise of unwanted power. To this end, I found my greatest inspiration in the novels of Toni Morrison and

Luisa Valenzuela, and I sought to translate their lessons into a different but sympathetic idiom.

To some, *Ghostly Matters* and the problems it raised about knowledge production appeared as a localized disciplinary critique of sociology. This was never entirely my intention, despite the fact that sociology was the disciplinary location from which professionally and academically I set out to find a way to reveal and to learn from subjugated knowledge. As Michel Foucault famously explained, subjugated knowledge names, on the one hand, what official knowledge represses within its own terms, institutions, and archives. And on the other hand it also refers to “disqualified,” marginalized, fugitive knowledge from below and outside the institutions of official knowledge production. Foucault sought the collaboration and equality of these two types of subjugated knowledge on the grounds that the emergence, whether welcomed or not, of knowledge by subjugated peoples makes advances in scholarly critique possible. But sociology, like all its fellow academic disciplines, has never proved capable of grasping and welcoming as equal the two forms of subjugated knowledge.

When *Ghostly Matters* was conceived and written, there was an optimism in the humanities and social studies that the older institutional edifices were crumbling, that new knowledge and modes of knowledge production were possible, and that these would be led and crafted by the people who had long been excluded from the citadels of the university. It was this specific context, which has yet to achieve its promise, that produced in *Ghostly Matters* the invitation to sociology to find a better purpose. Needless to say, as a whole this invitation was declined, and, like most academic disciplines, sociology is mostly distracted by its own insular professional affairs and doomed to irrelevance or subservient collaborationism. It remained then, as now, a matter of finding a route, access to that which is marginalized, trivialized, denied, disqualified, taxed, and aggrieved and a matter of redistributing respect, authority, and the right to representability or generalizability—the right to theorize, one could say—which among other things entails the capacity to be something other than a local knowledge governed or interpreted by a putative superior. It remained then, as now, a matter of building a shared and practical standpoint for negating dispossessions, disabilities, and dehumanizations.<sup>1</sup>

Among the beliefs held by old-time religion southerners collected by Zora Neale Hurston during her travels and research trips and recorded

in *The Sanctified Church* was that “Ghosts hate new things” (21). The reason why is because ghosts are characteristically attached to the events, things, and places that produced them in the first place; by nature they are haunting reminders of lingering trouble. Ghosts hate new things precisely because once the conditions that call them up and keep them alive have been removed, their reason for being and their power to haunt are severely restricted. When this book was first published, and certainly when I started writing it, security/dirty wars, torture, disappearance and captivity, state repression via the rule of military law, enslavement—these were, in the First World, treated as obsolete practices that required a special brief to be considered a living inheritance, much less as urgent social problems to be addressed. Justification for my attention to them was constantly solicited. Today, no such pleading is necessary in the United States as evidenced by the occupation war in Iraq; the Global War on Terror, with its military authoritarian legalities, culture of manufactured fear, offshore carceral complex, and imperial pretensions; the spectacle of a “public” “democratic” debate on the necessity of torture and permanent captivity without even the benefit of a corrupt legal conviction; the intensifying division between rich and poor; the concomitant forms of enslavement and indenture engendered and then, as if inevitable, managed by new poor laws and by new wars against the poor in the country and in the city and in the stream of migration itself and then in the ever-growing prisons; the reporting of the presence of CIA ghosts—ghost airplanes, ghost prisons, ghost “detainees”—on the front page of the newspapers. War, slavery, captivity, authoritarianism, the theft of culture and of the means for creating autonomous, sustainable life, the attachment to epistemologies of blindness, and the investment in ontologies of disassociation remain the key problems of our time. And though they transform, keeping old and gaining new forms, they are urgent challenges for the politically engaged intellectual, whose task is to “side with the excluded and the repressed: to develop insights gained in confrontation with injustice, to nourish cultures of resistance, and to help define the means with which society can be rendered adequate to the full breadth of its human potentialities.”<sup>2</sup> To help define the means by which society can be rendered adequate to the full breadth of its potentialities is by necessity a collective ambition and undertaking, one that grows alongside the looming degradations and on its polymorphous own. To the extent that this book can still offer a hand to fellow travelers or even to those

who detoured here, I offer it again in the hopes that you find a welcome hospitality.

May 2007

### Notes

1. Michel Foucault, "Society Must be Defended." *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana; trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 1-13. See also Avery F. Gordon, "Exercised," in *Keeping Good Time: Knowledge, Power, and People* (Boulder: Paradigm Press, 2004).

2. Chuck Morse, "Capitalism, Marxism, and the Black Radical Tradition: An Interview with Cedric Robinson," *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1999).

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