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# *Haunting experiences: Ghosts in contemporary folklore*, by Diane E. Goldstein et al.

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Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas. *Haunting experiences: Ghosts in contemporary folklore*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2007. Paperback, \$24.95 (272p) ISBN 978-0-87421-636-3.

[1] In *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*, folklorists Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas raise questions about the role of ghost stories in a media-saturated culture. Is our knowledge of the supernatural drawn from oral traditions, or from television and film? Does the mediation of the paranormal have an effect on traditional stories? Although folklore is transmitted orally and intimately while popular culture is transmitted in mediated contexts, the two are constantly intertwined. Furthermore, popular culture circulates both in intimate conversations and in public discourse among fans, critics, and audiences. Taking this into account, *Haunting Experiences* considers different encounters with and perspectives on the paranormal that result from varied means of transmission. The authors argue that although new technologies and media create and perpetuate ideas of the supernatural, the ghosts of the digital age are not terribly different from the ghost stories transmitted orally over many generations. The book addresses audiences from both threads of the discussion, folklore and popular culture. Other than the introduction and conclusion, which are coauthored by Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas, each single-authored chapter highlights the research interests and expertise of its author.

[2] In chapter 1, "The Usefulness of Ghosts," Thomas looks at ghost stories in folklore, arguing that such stories can enhance understanding of both the natural and the supernatural worlds, as well as our cultures and worldviews. For example, ghost stories can create a sense of place for visitors and residents that may not otherwise be manifest. In discussing her visit to Cape Breton, where she collected ghost stories from local residents, Thomas notes that the ghosts in a particular narrative "helped change my attitude toward place; they reminded me of its mystery and power" (45). Thomas also argues that supernatural entertainment trivializes the significance and gravity of ghost stories (30). From *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) to *Ghost Hunters* (2004–), there is a resurgence of interest in the supernatural drawn largely from popular culture. If we are exposed to the paranormal primarily as a means of entertainment, Thomas asserts, it is more difficult to take seriously first-person accounts of haunted encounters, whether contemporary or historical. The narrative complexity and elaborate visual representation of the paranormal on a TV series

like *Supernatural* (2005–) makes a straightforward recounting of a ghostly encounter seem quaint and unimpressive, potentially diminishing folklore's cultural significance.

[3] Chapter 2, "Scientific Rationalism and Supernatural Experience Narratives," posits that one would expect rationalism to stand in the way of belief in the supernatural: academics in folklore and other fields have dismissed ghost stories as mere folly and may see traditional stories as superstitious or ignorant. Yet Goldstein uses first-person narratives to demonstrate that when individuals tell stories of their own paranormal experience, they are constituted within a rationalist frame. Thus, to disregard ghost stories is, as Thomas also notes in the preceding chapter, to miss an opportunity for a point of access into a particular culture, its history, and its beliefs. To support her arguments and those that follow in subsequent chapters, Goldstein cites a 2005 Gallup poll showing that three out of four people surveyed in the United States believe in at least one aspect of paranormal activity (65).

[4] Chapter 3, "Gender and Ghosts," argues that most ghosts encountered in folklore and in popular culture are gendered, and that our cultural expectations for men and women extend to the supernatural world as well. Thomas specifically details two gendered stereotypes of ghosts, which she calls the Extreme Guy and the Deviant Femme. Extreme Guy is hypermasculine, while the Deviant Femme defies stereotypical expectations of a nurturing, passive woman. Rather, female ghosts often act violently in response to harm previously done to them. These two types are compared to what Thomas calls the Genderless Presence, arguing that the amorphous presence of a spirit "repudiates culture by offering the possibilities of a realm where gender does not matter" (109). One might counter that the Genderless Presence could also be indicative of a paranormal sensation not well formed enough to mark as gendered, or an experience of the supernatural for which there is no ready link to a narrative in which a ghost would be tagged as male or female.

[5] In addition to an engaging series of excerpts from spectral narratives, this chapter includes a lengthy discussion of the Winchester Mystery House, recounting the author's visit to the extraordinary home of Sarah Winchester, heiress to her husband's family fortune from the manufacture of guns. Thomas notes that "the house generates its small bit of spooky capital these days by playing up Sarah Winchester as a Deviant Femme" (100), although Winchester's deviance is merely in her belief in ghosts and in her endless construction on her house, intended to ward off spirits. Along with the discussions of haunted houses and the commodification of the paranormal that appear in later chapters, the section on the Winchester Mystery House ties together the book's themes of gender, architecture, and tourism in a single site.

[6] Sylvia Ann Grider examines children's ghost stories in chapter 4, tracing a tradition in which these stories are used as means of acculturation for young listeners and storytellers alike. She recounts several commonly told ghost stories, highlighting and explicating variations to the stories. In the telling of such stories, Grider notes, elementary-age children "attempt to keep their terror of the supernatural and the perverse under control by humor and parody" (117), implying that storytelling sessions can disarm some of the horror and fear children experience with regard to the paranormal.

[7] The discussion of haunted houses in chapter 5 shows the commingling of folklore and popular culture, in that the visual characteristics of the haunted house are iconic and taken for granted across literature, film, folktales, children's drawings, and mass-market Halloween merchandise. Grider points out that in each of these instances, the haunted house serves as both a setting and a character. Yet from these similarities in depiction and use across the culture, Grider argues, "the traditional ghost story overall is not nearly as dramatic as the tales presented in contemporary popular fiction" (147). She notes that those who encounter ghosts in stories from popular culture typically experience negative consequences, which is not the case in the oral tradition (157).

[8] Chapter 6, "The Commodification of Belief," argues that gaining profit from the supernatural, whether through selling haunted real estate, promoting haunted hotels, or hosting ghost tours, does not diminish the seriousness of the paranormal, nor is it a new phenomenon: ghost tours date back to the late 18th century. The argument that consumer culture turns experiences and objects into commodities is complicated by the ways in which those who participate in ghost tours or stay at haunted hotels find personal value in their experiences.

[9] After an examination of specific appearances of the supernatural in popular culture and folklore, the authors revisit the significance and ubiquity of popular culture, asking, "Do the 'mass' and the 'popular' quality of popular culture carry a voice of credibility and expertise that exerts a new kind of authority over folklore and belief?" (210). This is a lingering question that *Haunted Experiences* addresses but does not resolve, as the scope of the question far exceeds the discussion of the supernatural. With regard to the supernatural, however, the authors express concerns

shared among folklorists that "media discourse will replace or dominate folklore," particularly because of the recent prevalence of the paranormal topics in literature, television, and film (212).

[10] Because the products of popular culture are widely dispersed to a broad audience, shared knowledge of a particular cultural product lends it credibility. Unlike the ghost stories of folklore that exist in many similar versions, film, television, and books are static and fixed; a particular episode of a television series always plays out the same way whenever one watches it, and every viewer sees the same episode, although their interpretations and understandings may vary wildly. As such, fans discussing a television series can lend that series a kind of authority that folklore generally lacks. An example would be the way in which urban legends from folklore are carried to media presentations, becoming fixed stories proven true or false online or in various books and television series like *Urban Legends* (2007–) and *MythBusters* (2003–). *Supernatural* also incorporates these legends from folklore into its plot, including 1.05 "Bloody Mary" and 1.07 "Hookman." The series, then, transforms the colloquial ghost stories into plotlines tied to the fictional world of Sam and Dean Winchester rather than moving freely in public discourse.

[11] *Haunted Experiences* is primarily of interest to scholars and fans of the paranormal, with a secondary audience of folklorists and media scholars. The authors are not focused on the practices of fandom, yet the comparisons of the supernatural in oral traditions, lived experience, and mediated experiences can model ways to study a particular thread of fandom across the cultural landscape. A final nod to fandom appears in one of the last paragraphs of the book, where the authors conclude that "regardless of the narrative-based work of ghost hunters, it would be foolish to maintain that they are in any way average contemporary tradition bearers. They are over-the-top professionals and enthusiasts, more a part of a fan community than the average tale teller" (226).