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CULTURE REVIEW

Ghosts

Sara Knox

Western Sydney University

Corresponding author: Sara Knox: S.Knox@westernsydney.edu.au

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To answer the call of Schlunke and Healy for a ‘utopic politics that might bind species in new ways precisely because we are together in a time of multiplying extinctions’,¹ let us consider the usefulness of ghosts—not metaphorical ghosts, nor even metaphorically useful ghosts, but the ghosts described in accounts of ‘visitations’.² Folklorist Gillian Bennet suggests that while ‘ghosts’ are a strange, threatening intrusion on the domestic,³ visitation describes the return home of something lost: a keeping by, and being with, of the dead with their living.⁴ The other term for this is witness encounter. Contrary to expectations in parsing that phrase, the stress falls not on the living percipient: ‘it is the living who are the object of a witnessing’ by the dead, that ‘great cloud of witnesses encompassing us’ (Hebrews 12:1).

I have lately been studying that great cloud, and what looms out of it—in the shape of the exchange of post and comment on the reddit subsite r/paranormal. Many of the first-person accounts of paranormal experience there tell of visitations, although the familiar presences encountered in bedrooms and kitchens and living rooms aren’t necessarily human family members.⁵ This data is vital for undoing the overwhelming anthropocentrism of studies of ghosts and visitation. Postings to r/paranormal about the return home of the dead pet show the persistence and potency of the human-animal domestic bond. The postmortem return of a pet has a consolatory function, but the account goes beyond consolation when it is narrated or construed as the pet reassuring its person that it’s ok that its dead—that, in those final weeks or days of its suffering, the decisions made on its behalf were the right decisions, made at the right time—up to and including euthanasia.⁶ The story of a pet’s revenant return signals postmortem absolution by the animal of its owner for the circumstances of its dying. In the exchange of post and comment what is performed is a tense dialectic about guilt and responsibility and the affective complexities of the human-animal domestic relationship.

According to historian Kathleen Grier, the complexity of that relationship derives from the rise since the later 19th century of a ‘domestic ethic of kindness’ that ‘encouraged people to think more deeply...about animals as individuals’,⁷ and an attendant ‘proxemics of pet-keeping’

defined by close co-habitation, intimate affection, and a ‘neofamilist’ folding in of the animal into the domestic routines of home.⁸ While the domestic ethic of kindness originated within the home it also extended beyond it, underpinning activism about kindness to animals more broadly—including the lost, strayed, feral and mistreated animals that routinely outnumber their luckier brethren. As an ethical project, ‘the domestic ethic of kindness to animals was grounded in a broader set of cultural concerns about defining good relations within families, between men and woman, and between the powerful and the powerless’.⁹

There is a lesson to be learned from this genealogy, and from the witness encounters described in accounts of the visitation of the familiar human dead, and of the return home of a beloved pet. I use the term genealogy pointedly, both in its Foucauldian sense, and alluding to the ‘hobbyist’ pursuit of genealogy: when people seek their dead, actively forging bonds by doing so.¹⁰ That we, the living, might be the object of a witnessing by the dead is a useful way of thinking at this particular juncture—and even more so if we see among that great, encompassing cloud all of our animal witnesses. The planet is a home we share; and the losses that we suffer here are intimate ones, of grievable lives. Accordingly, we should practice in this home of ours a domestic ethic of kindness: in the hopes of grace, and of a forgiveness that’s not divine but personal.

It’s often said that the dead greatly outnumber us—and so they do. The air—emptier than ever before of insects¹¹ and of birds¹²—is thick with ghosts. We are together in a time of multiplying extinctions. The dead are here, right by us. And they are watching to see what we do.

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Endnotes

1. Katrina Schlunke and Chris Healy, ‘Extinction’. *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 25 no. 1, 2019.

2. The metaphorical is the favored mode when cultural theory looks to haunting, where it 'stands for all manner of social lacks, silences, absences and inequalities'. See Esther Preen, *The spectral metaphor: living ghosts and the agency of invisibility*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 6; 9-11.
3. And, more often than not, an unwanted reminder of the consequences of a bad death. See Gillian Bennett. *Alas, poor ghost: traditions of belief in story and discourse*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2009, p. 42-44
4. Bennett. p. 49-51; and Douglas Davies, *Death, ritual and belief: the rhetoric of funerary rites*. London: Cassell, 1997, p.154. For a contra view of specifically domestic presences as anti-domestic, see Carol Lipman, *Co-habiting with ghosts: knowledge, experience, belief and the domestic uncanny*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2014, p. 36-38
5. Sara Knox, 'The Cat Came back: Revenant Pets and the Paranormal Everyday', *The Routledge Handbook of Death and the Afterlife*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018.
6. See Knox, pp. 265; 272.
7. Kathleen Grier, *Pets in America: a history*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006, p. 154.
8. Grier, pp. 58-62. Also see Barbara Ambrose on neofamilism in *Bones of contention: animals and religion in contemporary Japan*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2012, p. 5; p. 166-170
9. Grier, p. 153.
10. As Cannell argues, 'one central aspect of the appeal of genealogy is the opportunity it offers to re make kinship relations with the departed, and to care for the related dead.' See Fenella Cannell, 'English ancestors: the moral possibilities of popular genealogy', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* vol. 17, no. 3 (Sept 2011), p. 462.
11. Dominique Mosbergen, 'Insects Are Dying *En Masse*, Risking Catastrophic Collapse Of Earth's Ecosystems'. *Huffington Post* (12 Feb 2019)
12. John Fitzpatrick and Peter Marra, 'The Crisis for birds is a crisis for us all', *NYTimes* (19 Sept 2019)