

Haunting: Plant Ghosts and Chrono-Gardening

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In Chris Marker's seminal film *Sans Soleil* (1983), the off-screen narrator relates the words of the unseen voyager-correspondent: "He said that in the nineteenth century mankind had come to terms with space, and that the great question of the twentieth was the coexistence of different concepts of time." In his essay "Time and the Other," Jean Laplanche describes four levels of time: "Level I: cosmological time, the time of the world. Level II: perceptual time, the time of our immediate consciousness. Level III: the time of memory, the process of temporalisation of our individual project. Level IV: the time of history, the time of human societies."¹

The psychoanalytical case study that Laplanche goes on to discuss in his essay is described as a historical process of recapitulation (level IV) applied to the temporalization of the individual (level III). On a more macroscopic scale a similar mechanism is at work in natural history, where historical chronology (e.g., of evolutionary theory) is applied to nature and matter. What is striking in this model, beyond its combinatorial permutations, is the spatial metaphor underlying its organization—its topography, as it were. The stratification of temporality—if only for the purpose of categorization—not only spatializes time by separating different kinds of temporality from each other but also creates an implicit Hegelian hierarchy where history, the time of humanity, towers high above the time of the world, looking down on matter, perception, and memory. Henri Bergson's potent critique of the spatialization of time is well-known, including his repeated attacks on the misuse of spatial metaphors when talking about temporal phenomena favoring the false image of homogeneous time over that of heterogeneous and indivisible *durée*.² But what about the separation of memory from history and history from the world itself, rendering matter ahistorical, silencing nature? Perhaps instead of being a constructive model

of time, what we encounter here is a mirror of the disintegration of time, of time being out of joint, to quote Hamlet after his encounter with his father's ghost.

The separation of time into time of the world, of consciousness, of individual memory, and of social history betrays the classificatory drive of the Enlightenment and testifies to a larger movement of fragmentation in Western modernity. While the breakdown of linear notions of time as chronology (that is, a fractured overlapping of past, present, and future) can be attributed to advancing technologies of travel, data storage, and instant transmission, it is also, more importantly, the result of a chain of violent irruptions of and in time that cannot and will not stay in the moments where they occurred, producing an excess of memory and history that has been termed *traumatic*. However, the grammar of trauma, and in particular the temporality of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardsness), does not suffice to understand this fracture in time. The repetition inherent in trauma cannot only be understood as an a posteriori symptom but is also a haunting, namely an insistence that the past is not over but rather coexists, in a ghostly manner, with the present. We have many spirit guides helping us understand and navigate hauntings and the ghostly, including Jacques Derrida, Avery Gordon, Mark Fischer, Saidiya Hartman, and many more who have given us tools to understand and, more importantly, reckon with ghosts. In the following I will focus on a small number of select aspects of the ghostly for the purpose of circumscribing a critical more-than-human notion of haunting.

Haunting takes place somewhere. The unhinging of time affects how and where memory and history reappear. Mapping a general breakdown of memory and history in the twentieth century—in spite or perhaps paradoxically because of the exponential growth of recording and storage that has resulted in an archival heap in front of us so big that it blocks our vision—the French historian Pierre Nora proposed a cartography of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). He imagines not historical locations anchored in the continuity of memory but sites and instances of memory cast in the discontinuity of history: “These *lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it.”³ There is a fundamental paradox at the heart of *lieux de mémoire*, namely that it is precisely because history besieges memory,

undermining its spontaneity and deforming and petrifying its living nature, that *lieux de mémoire* exist: “It is this very push and pull that produces *lieux de mémoire*—moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death. . . . Only in a regime of discontinuity are such hallucinations of the past conceivable.”⁴ *Lieux de mémoire* are places populated by ghosts, personed. Places imbued with former social relations, historical spirits, and personified experiences.

Haunting is timely. Haunting alters the experience of time but it is not outside of it. “Haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents.”⁵ This differentiation is crucial: specters belong neither to the past nor to the present; they are neither absent nor present and thus defy chronology and ontology. Their appearance is always a reappearance. Phantoms can be likened to Benjamin’s dialectical images “in which the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash or lightning.”⁶ The historicity of haunting is, like that of the dialectical image, addressed to the future: “What distinguishes images from ‘essences’ of phenomenology is their historical index. . . . For the historical index of images does not simply say that they belong to a specific time, it says above all that they only arrive at readability at a specific time. Every present is determined by those images that are synchronic with it: every Now is the Now of a specific cognisability (*das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit*).”⁷ The return of the ghost is a demand for recognition of historical wrongs that remain unacknowledged and unhealed. The phantoms’ recognizability thus depends on us.

Haunting is a demand. Ghosts are not just disrupting representation, ontology, and chronology; they are not simply an ineffable presence. Haunting is cajoling, raising specters that demand our attention, that insist that the past is not over and done with but must be reckoned with. The revenant has a real presence that demands its due and calls for action. The specter beckons us to address the past in the present for the future, that is, acknowledge the injustices that led to the haunting and find ways of repair. As Avery Gordon keenly observed, ghosts are essentially unfinished business: “[Haunting] 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.”⁸ If haunting is understood as an unsettling of the boundaries between life and death and between what has been and what is, ghosts stop us in our tracks and prevent us from going on as usual. Haunting is a form of witnessing that turns ghostly testimony into a demand for justice and responsibility, into the need to find answers, into something-to-be-done.

Haunting is more-than-human. To be haunted is not just to be exposed to the invisible yet felt effects of human history, politics, or power but also to their very embeddedness in the world: in beings, buildings, landscape, and matter. Even though popular culture often turns the ghost into a spectral version of ourselves (a human silhouette), the experience of haunting is also clearly an encounter with an animated presence *beyond us*. The revenant might be immaterial but it is clearly spirited and animated; it is in some way *animistic*. And as Michael Marder has pointed out, “at its most intense spectrality is vegetal. . . . Every kind of life is haunted by vegetal death. Receiving nourishment from animal or plant flesh, we metabolize the rot that fed plants that fed animals . . . in a shorter or longer chain of ghostly transformations. It is due to this excess, something over and above (or below) life *in* vegetal life, that plants spook us and are represented as zombie-like in horror films and fiction.”⁹ It is not just the excess of the vegetal at the heart of all life and death that haunts us, but also plants’ existence in time. With their longer-than-human life spans (centuries long, in the case of some trees), many plants, perhaps more than other living beings, are rooted at once in the present and the past. While, as we saw earlier, natural history can be seen as an imposing of Laplanche’s time of history onto the time of the world, the opposite movement, in the form of botanical haunting, is the irruption of the time of the world or cosmos into the time of history, destabilizing the very separateness of history from matter or nature. Vegetal still-being-here is a persistent presence across time, a haunting, a form of witnessing time and history in the world. How to acknowledge vegetal testimony without making plants ventriloquize human speech? How to allow botanical ghosts to be silent witnesses without

speaking for them? And, perhaps most importantly, how to heed their calls, their demands for action?



Figure 40.1 Uriel Orlow, *Tori Bari* (Kathmandu), 2022, garden of Oriental Mustard in the shape of a traditional mustard mill from Khokana, commissioned by Kathmandu Triennial.

Some plant ghosts are more-than-human witnesses of colonial violence. A remnant of an enormous wild almond tree hedge in contemporary Cape Town is a ghostly testimony to its planting in 1660 by the first Dutch settlers as a barrier to keep out the indigenous Khoikhoi and their grazing cattle from the Dutch East India Company's fruit and vegetable orchards, which were established to resupply its ships. Other trees across the colonial world are haunting witnesses of the hangings of slaves from their branches. The radiation level and the mutations of the plants in Anais Tondeur's Tchernobyl Herbarium are spectral reminders of the nuclear catastrophe and its long aftermath.¹⁰ Crucially, these plant hauntings are also calls for repair. Plants are sensitive seismographs of environmental stress and shock. The entirely absent ghost forest haunting Easter Island is not simply a reminder of one of the most extreme examples of deforestation but is also an unheeded call to the future.



Figure 40.2 Uriel Orlow, *Wild Almond (Cape Town)*, 2016, from the series *The Memory of Trees*, black-and-white photograph, 150 × 100 cm.

Chrono-gardening, the practice of planting across time, the vegetal reconnecting of past and present, might then be one response to vegetal haunting, this most basic form of the ghostly. Crucially, the practice of chrono-gardening is not the same as simple reforestation or rewilding; it's not a romantic return to a previous natural state of wholeness or a simple fix for a guilty ecological conscience. Instead, it involves listening to ancestral knowledge, acknowledging the violence of destruction, and finding ways forward together with plants.

Notes

1. Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, trans. John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999), 238.
2. See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* [*Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889)], trans. F. L. Pogson (London: Dover, 2001).
3. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 12.

4. Nora, "Memory and History," 12, 17.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* [*Spectres de Marx* (1993)], trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.
6. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 14 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), vol. 5, 578.
7. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 577–578.
8. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.
9. Michael Marder, "This Plant Who Is a Ghost," *Grand re Union* (November 2020), <http://www.grandreunion.net/this-plant-who-is-a-ghost/>. Accessed 25 September 2022.
10. See Michael Marder, *Tchernobyl Herbarium* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016).