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SUR LES PAYS DU COMMONWEALTH

Postcolonial Ghosts
Fantômes post-coloniaux

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Thomas Watling. 'A Direct North General View of Sydney Cove. 1794'.
Canvas, 36 × 51 in. Dixon Galleries, State Library of New South Wales.
DOP Norman Cohn discusses a shot with Sylvia Ivalu and Madeline Ivalu.
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DEADLY SPACES: GHOSTS, HISTORIES AND COLONIAL ANXIETIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BENGAL

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In his autobiography *ApanKatha* [my own words/stories] (1946), the renowned artist and writer Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) imputes an amazing historicity to space. An ancestral home, writes Tagore, 'lives' only through the 'company of people'. In his characteristic lyrical style Tagore further elaborates this connection between history and location:

As long as there are people in the house, who make the stream of the past present and future flow, the house continues to change its appearance, its history. It fills itself up with memories and the house-memories constitute the being of the house. All objects in the house get tied to *ekal* (the present, or the modern) through the sinews of memory. In this way ages pass, and then one day when people leave the house, the cobwebs of memory fly away in the wind; it is then that the house truly dies.¹

1. TAGORE, Abanindranath, *Abanindra Rachanabali*. Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Prakash Bhawan, 1973): 57.

What can we make of this beautiful connection between location and history or space and time? In particular, what do we make of his transposing the organicity of living and dying onto space in this evocative manner? In this paper I am going to advance Tagore's claim about this relationship between history and spatiality in the context of Calcutta as a colonial city. I am going to argue that spaces acquired a certain kind of past-ness or the patina of antiquity through a very specific rhetoric related to death and dying, that of haunting. We are going to look at haunted spaces as locations of history from two separate perspectives: British and Indian; this dual perspective is necessary because each side was invested in sets of very different arguments about Calcutta's status as a city with a past, or its respectability as an old city. Ghosts, both Bengali and British, we will argue, determined and/or disputed the antiquity of the city and in turn questioned or consolidated the future of British rule.

Early British accounts of the city never fail to relate the story of the city's most prominent ghost: that of the first Governor-General Warren Hastings. In terms of social standing one could not hope for a more exalted spirit. Cotton's history of Calcutta (pub. 1909) recounts the legend in vivid terms. 'It is said', writes Cotton 'that the great Governor-General drives up the avenue every evening in a coach and four and upon alighting walks through the house in evident search of something by which he lays considerable store'.¹ 'Hastings House' as it was popularly known, was indeed more famous for its dead Governor General than for its live ones. Located in fashionable Alipore, a very white part of Calcutta in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the house was a palatial building with sprawling grounds. High vaulted ceilings, clustered columns and pointed arches gave the building the required gothic air. A contemporary Indian account further embroiders on the existent legend by adding yet another essential gothic element to it: the love of a

1. COTTON, H. E. A., *Calcutta, Old and New: a Historical and Descriptive Handbook to the City* (Calcutta: General Printers and Publishers, 1980): 894.

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1. MUKHERJI, S., *India*
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2. FREUD, Sigmund, *Th*

woman. In his volume *Indian Ghosts Stories* (1917), S. C. Mukherji describes the haunting thus:

While living in this house Warren Hastings married Baroness Imhoff sometime during the first fortnight of August about 140 years ago. 'The event was celebrated by great festivities'; and, as expected, the bride came home in a splendid equipage. It is said that this scene is re-enacted on the anniversary of the wedding by supernatural agency and a ghostly carriage duly enters the gate in the evening once every year. The clatter of hoofs and the rattle of iron-tired wheels are distinctly heard advancing up to the portico; then there is the sound of the opening and closing of the carriage door, and lastly the carriage proceeds onwards, but it does not come out from under the porch. It vanishes mysteriously.¹

The only other haunted house mentioned by Mukherji to be in the city was famous for 'its windows in the first floor bedrooms [which] open[ed] at night spontaneously' (Mukherji 1917: 111). Unfortunately besides hair-raising accounts of what transpired within when mortals chose to defy the powers of the dead, Mukherji fails to provide for us any further details about the house itself such as, its exact location.

What is worth noting is that most of the British accounts of haunting place the ghosts, naturally, in British or colonial towns. British ghosts also tend to reside, visit and prefer the indoors. Rattling windows, rustling curtains, spectral carriages—all underscore the dead's great liking for the home, the greatest haven of safety for the modern bourgeois self. If one recalls Freud's reflections on the uncanny it is precisely the spectralization of the *heimlich* that creates profound unease in the modern.² Neither of these two features, given the generalization of the attributes of what constitutes a modern ghost story, would seem so odd if not for the radically different spatiality of the Bengali ghosts.

1. MUKHERJI, S., *Indian Ghost Stories* (Allahabad: A.H. Wheeler & Co, 1917): 111–112.

2. FREUD, Sigmund, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

The chief feature of a traditional Bengali ghost is most certainly his/her out of the home location. Trees are a great favorite as are marshes, ponds and forests. Locations and domiciles, however, are not arbitrary. Like the rigid hierarchies of premodern societies, there exists a clear classificatory universe for the dwelling of the premodern ghost. Particular trees, for instance, are associated with particular species. The saintly Brahmin ghost, the *Brahmadaitya*, prefers as his abode the *Bel* tree, a plant of ritual significance as its leaves are traditional offerings to Siva. One variety of female ghosts, the *petni*, prefers the *Sheora* tree.

Autobiographies of the great and the good of nineteenth-century Calcutta are filled with accounts of childhood experiences of the ghostly. The famous Brahmo reformer, Shibnath Shastri, recalls in his autobiography the tales that his childhood nurse Chinta-dasi told him about a particular coconut tree in their yard which was the abode of a *dakini*. According to Chinta, this creature rode on the tree to travel to far off places. Shastri and his friends were thoroughly alarmed not only because there was fearsome *dakini* in their midst, but also of the possibility that the Dakini might lose their tree in her travels (Jana 1987: 21). Rabindranath Tagore's account of his childhood, *Chelebela*, begins with the tale of the *Brahmadaitya*. This saintly Brahmin ghost resided peaceably in a nut tree in the western part of the Jorasanko mansion. He would often stretch his legs between the tree and the third floor terrace and observe the everyday life of humanity with appropriate philosophical distance. Similar denizens of the ghostly world inhabit marshes, heaths, cremation-grounds, forests, caves, or even wells.¹ The place

1. In 1903 Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay published an entire collection of ghost stories titled *Bhut Petni*. This collection of established fables about 'traditional' ghosts proved to be immensely successful. Originally intended for children, the book was approved by the Director of Public Instructions as a suitable book for school-wards and libraries in 1939 and it earned several 'gold and silver medals and First Class Certificates' from various exhibitions and nationalist enterprises. It had not lost its popularity even by the 1950s, its impressive twelfth edition being published in 1955. Almost all of the ghosts in Mukhopadhyay's collected fables reside in the wild.

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1. SAMANTA, Suchitra, ed.
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The first change to this pattern in the world of the Bengali ghosts comes with the creation of the modern gothic as a literary genre. I have dealt elsewhere with the characteristic differences between the new gothic apparition and the more traditional ghosts of folk-lore and oral culture. Here I will simply point to difference in location.

Rabindranath Tagore was the first to create a string of extremely successful and atmospheric gothic short stories. The most famous of them *Manihara* (1898) and *Kshudita Pashan* (1895) were translated immediately and anthologized several times. Both of them embody almost all the classical features of a Victorian Gothic tale: large, brooding, almost sentient mansions, simmering and displaced eroticism, a deliberate psychologisation of fear and of course the requisite unquiet, restless souls. The remarkable point of unity of all these stories, however, which set them scrupulously apart from the premodern ghost-stories, is that the location of fear had shifted from the trees, heaths and marshes and was now the home.

Manihara is the story of an unrequited, lonely wife, Manimalika, whose childless life is filled with a pathological attachment to her jewelry: 'Like a thick-leaved and fast growing vine, Manimalika, by divine decree, remained without fruit, unable to have a child. In other words God did not give her that which she could understand and feel for more than the jewels in her iron safe . . .'¹ It should be clear, given where the narrator's sympathies lay regarding ornaments and breeding, that Manimalika's life was not going to end well. It does not. She dies a lonely violent death at the hands of a distant cousin who murders her on a stormy night for her jewels. We will not go into the details of the haunting that begin after this murder, it is an exquisite delineation of unfulfillment both as a material condition and an ontological state. What is important for us here is the role domestic space plays in this haunting.

1. SAMANTA, Suchitra, ed., *Hauntings: Bangla Ghost Stories* (New Delhi: Katha, 2000): 52.

The climatic point of the story is reached as Manimalika's dejected widower husband enters their 'deserted bedroom' and proceeds to wait for his dead beloved. The passage of waiting describes the bedroom in its minutest detail, carefully outlining and emphasizing the quotidian materiality of clothes racks, tea tables, empty soap-boxes and lamps. It is a purposive description because space plays a central part in the subsequent paragraph:

Even she who departs, leaving everything bare behind her, leaves so many signs, so much history, so much of her lively self, her careful touch! Come Manimalika, come and light your lamp, light up your room, stand in front of the mirror and put on your *saree* with careful pleats. All your possessions are waiting for you . . . spread your glory on all these scattered things and with your life yoke them together and infuse them with life in turn. These inanimate things cry out mutely, making this very house a cremation ground!

(Samanta 2000: 61)

It is not merely the house, but the *home*, the bastion of modern safety, the heart of bourgeois selfhood that is rendered unstable here. The narrative moves even further to shatter the peace of domesticity as the bereaved husband, Phanibhushan, hears an eerie sound of 'jangling . . . jewel[ry]'. The domestic space is not offered any possible respite from this deep unsettling fear:

The sound crossed the guardless gates and entering the inner chambers of the house began to climb, round and round the circular staircase, across the wide veranda, stopping for a while as it came to the door of the bedroom.

. . . The sound crossed the threshold and entered the room. Where the *saree* lay pleated on the rack, where the lamp stood in its niche, where the box with dry *paan* lay upon the tea table, and near the cupboard with its strange collection of things—the sound paused at every step, finally stopping by Phanibhushan.

(Samanta 2000: 65)

Why does fear need ening the circle of the spectre need to meticulous descri inner? The answer as a cremation gro the 'petni' of folkl ern ghosts that in dead Manimalika into a space of con the home, associa ground. There is keep the outside c inate the safety of

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Why does fear need to caress every familiar object in the room tightening the circle of dread around the hapless husband? Why does the spectre need to underscore its intrusiveness as evidenced in the meticulous description of its passage from the outer world to the inner? The answer lies in Tagore's prescient metaphor of the house as a cremation ground. Manimalika's restless spirit is definitely not the 'petni' of folklore nor does she behave like any of the premodern ghosts that inhabited the trees and marshes. What makes the dead Manimalika fearsome in the above passages is that she brings into a space of comfort the dark wildness of the outdoors. She turns the home, associative of life, into the dead space of the cremation ground. There is no longer any assurance that closed doors will keep the outside out, the dead will cross the threshold and contaminate the safety of the living.

The modern domestic space, then, is extremely particularized. This is not unexpected as under modernity the domestic sphere, for the first time, is evacuated entirely of production and becomes solely a site of residence, leisure or consumption. The scrupulous separation of home and work, private and public, transforms the home into a non-productive zone and turns it into a space of 'phantom objectivity', where the real relationship between people is obscured by a relationship between things.¹ This object-filled home is primarily self-referential wherein each 'thing' merely accentuates the relationship of each object or each part (tea-table) to the whole (well appointed home). The reason the modern ghost creates such fear is not simply because s/he is crossing into a sacred space where only the bourgeois family is allowed, but also because the new presence lays bare all that is wrong with the home. When safety is

1. The reference here is to Georg Lukacs's concept of reification whereby he defines it as a process where 'a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and . . . acquires a 'phantom-objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature—the relation between people'. See, Georg LUKACS, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971): 83.

revealed simply to be an ideology, the objects that were previously markers of security themselves turn threatening. Manimalika's presence not only invades the home pulling down revered partitions between private and public, it actually negates the home as an adequate habitat for the bourgeois self, which knows no other.

The relationship of modern ghosts to modern homes is, however, not entirely antagonistic. A comparison between British and Bengali ghost stories of the nineteenth century reveals a very consistent pattern in the location of haunting. As mentioned earlier, all of the British stories are set either in Calcutta or in similar company towns, while all of the Bengali stories are set outside of these new settlements, in houses, mansions and old buildings which are almost always in pre-colonial towns or villages. Of the British part, Kipling assures us

Nearly every other Station owns a ghost. There are said to be two at Simla, not counting the woman who blows the bellows at Syreedâk-bungalow on the Old Road; Mussoorie has a house haunted of a very lively Thing; a White Lady is supposed to do night-watchman round a house in Lahore; Dalhousie says that one of her houses 'repeats' on autumn evenings all the incidents of a horrible horse-and-precipice accident . . .¹

Both *Manihara* and *KshuditaPashan* are set outside of an urban locale. *Manihara* is explicitly set in an unnamed 'village', while *KshuditaPashan* is set in imaginary Barich. The mansion where the story of *KshuditaPashan* unfolds is described as 'a marble palace in solitary grandeur amidst the foothills. There is no habitation nearby. Barich village and its cotton market are quite some distance from there'. It is not enough to say that these locations are non-urban, what clearly sets them apart from urbanity is their age. Manimalika's house is set by a 'crumbling decayed embankment by the river'. The house itself

1. BEECROFT, John and Richard M. POWERS eds, *Kipling: A Selection of his Stories and Poems* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965): 47.

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1. See for instance *Kalikata Kalpalata*, Bish
2. For details see Su
3. BUSTEED, H. E., *I of Warren Hastings*, Fra

is described as an 'enormous mansion with broken windows, and a veranda that hung precariously from its supports'; as though this description was not enough it is twice referred to in the same page as 'decrepit' and 'dilapidated'. In *KshuditaPashan* we are told more explicitly that the mansion is specifically pre-British, it was built 'nearly two hundred and fifty years ago' by the Mughal emperor Shah Mahmood the second. Time and more specifically age, give the narratives an authenticity that can only be called by one name: history. It is a past that bears a deep resonant connection to the present, a past that can be narrativised, that transposes itself onto the space of haunting giving it a validation and a rootedness.

One can now see why none of the Bengali stories are set in Calcutta. The city does not count to the Bengali mind as a valid city, let alone an old one till the mid-twentieth century. Most of the middle class retained their ancestral homes in their villages of origin as the venues for major family ceremonies for most of the nineteenth century, using their Calcutta home as a temporary abode.¹ Most early accounts of the city by the Bengali middle class are extremely unflattering. Calcutta is seen to be godless, unhealthy, and relentlessly modern and anxious.² History did not get made there and hence neither did ghosts.

British accounts of the city, on the other hand, are very different. The eighteenth century is referred to in a late nineteenth century account as 'a period when we had opulent merchants . . . days when gold was plenty . . . and not an indigent European in all Calcutta'.³ The determination with which Calcutta was deemed a 'city of palaces' by the English, in the face of malaria, cholera, small pox epidemics, open sewers, and alarmingly high mortality is astonishing.

1. See for instance Bhabanicharan BANDYOPADHYAY, *Kalikata Kamalalaya and Kalikata Kalpalata*, Bishnu Basu ed. (Calcutta, 1986).

2. For details see Sumit SARKAR, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi, 1998): 177.

3. BUSTEED, H. E., *Echoes from Old Calcutta, being chiefly reminiscences of the days of Warren Hastings, Francis and Impey* (London: W. Thacker, 1908): 23.

The remarks of an early Governor General, the Marquis of Wellesley, are relevant in this context. He considered that 'India should be governed from a palace, not from a counting house' and 'with the ideas of a prince, not with those of a retail dealer in muslin and indigo' (Busteed 1908: 25). In other words the city had to be turned from an upstart town with no history to a city endowed with a past and a tradition. British ghosts hence almost never stray out of British towns. Englishmen encounter indigenous ghosts in the wild but the true Englishman never haunts anything less than an English town/city. Haunted houses lent to new insignificant towns the validation of a past and the glory of history.

In determining the historicity of haunting it would be remiss to ignore the material contours of governmental policy that attempted to mark the spatiality of death. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards there was a concerted effort on the part of the British government to 'cleanse' the urban limits of Calcutta from any unsavoury associations with the actual physicality of death. In the words of the contemporary municipal authorities, appropriate means had to be devised 'for making the burning of human bodies . . . as unobjectionable as possible' (Judicial Department, November, 1864). Consequent to this new ideological imperative a bye-law was passed by the Calcutta Justices of Peace in June 1864 stating that, 'no person' was allowed to 'throw, or cause to be thrown, any corpse or carcass, into any River or Nullah, or Canal . . . within the limits of the Town of Calcutta'. As part of the new strictures, even deaths of animals had to be reported to the Conservancy Overseer of that particular municipal division. Any lapse on the part of the citizens would result in fines up to 20 rupees and for continuing offences 'Rupees 10 for every day after such notice during which such offence is continued' (Judicial Department, June 1864).

In keeping with the new spirit of disassociating the materiality of death from the civic life of the living, new equipments were proposed to dispose of corpses in such a manner that their corporeality

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1. OLDENBURG, Veena Oxford University Press

2. Scholars such as An (1991) have shown how such as Bombay and De the imperial agenda of t

could be both minimized and sanitized. The Burning Ghat Committee of the Justices of Peace for Calcutta, for instance, experimented with a new apparatus in 1865 which was 'found to consume completely, the body placed, therein . . . [and] burnt without any offensive odour . . .' and the smoke was conveyed by an underground flue and up through a chimney (Judicial Department, March 1865).

Sanitation reform, particularly after the revolt of 1857, was one of the major concerns of the new British Raj. Veena Oldenburg in her study of urban Lucknow has argued that post-mutiny urban reconstruction had three main prerogatives: safety, sanitation and loyalty.¹ These processes of urban transformation in India from the mid-nineteenth century have been amply catalogued by scholars as acutely politicized processes through which the British colonial regime restructured the physical and social environments of cities and established their domination there.²

In our specific argument about the sanitization of death it is important to note two parallel, if apparently contradictory developments. First, that legislating against the corporeal excesses of dying created an ahistorical register for death. While the effort was to barricade civil society from any visual reminders of dying as a physical reality the effect was that discourses of physicality grew de-linked from issues of mortality. Death thus became invisible to the public gaze turning exclusively into either a matter of civic concern or an issue limited to the sphere of sentiments and emotions. So insistent was the demand to hide the 'remains' of the dead, that according to certain medical opinion it was better to cremate than bury the dead as in cremation 'man 'ceases to do evil' and learns to do well. The gases evolved go to build up vegetable life; while his ashes

1. OLDENBURG, Veena *The Making of Colonial Lucknow: 1856-1877* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

2. Scholars such as Anthony King (1976), Narayani Gupta (1981), Mariam Dossal (1991) have shown how landscape, topography and everyday civic life of cities such as Bombay and Delhi were foundationally restructured in order to promote the imperial agenda of the British state.

may manure mother earth'.¹ Secondly, this process of concealment and sanitization led to the confinement of the dead to the spectral sphere alone unconnected from everyday life and its realities. The dead lacking in historicity could only look to their ghosts for giving deadly spaces a sense of history.

Modern spatiality, Lefebvre has famously argued, is devoid of time. Briefly put he argues that in nature, 'time is apprehended within space . . . and natural space was merely the lyrical and tragic script of natural time'.² With the advent of modernity, however, time disappears from social space. This 'manifest expulsion of time' according to Lefebvre, is 'one of the hallmarks of modernity' (Lefebvre 1991: 96). At first glance the tales of haunting of the new colonial cities seem to be doing exactly the opposite ideological work: that of ascribing time onto space. In reality, however, this is not so. The historicity that colonial spaces acquired from ghosts was necessarily spectral. It was not a history of the real social order but the manufactured time of colonial continuity. Indeed as Francis Hutchins has suggested the 'illusion of permanence' as regards British rule in India became far more pronounced after the Mutiny with the transfer of power from the Company to the Crown.³ One of the most spectacular architectural projects, The Victoria Memorial in Calcutta, that stamped the landscape with this sense of colonial/British historicity was begun under Lord Curzon in 1906 and

1. JAGGANADHAM, P. R. Hay, *Cremation and Burial or Extracts from a Paper read at the Indian Medical Congress* (Lahore: Arorbans Press, 1895): 10.

2. LEFEBVRE, Henri, *The Production of Space* (Boston: Blackwell Press, 1991): 95. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith from *La Production de l'espace* (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1974).

3. According to Hutchins the British during the early days of the Raj were happy to contemplate an eventual dissolution of their rule and an eventual withdrawal from India. In the aftermath of the Mutiny, however, when the Queen was declared the empress of India it seemed almost disloyal to suggest that her rule could ever come to an end thus strengthening discourses of continuity and permanence. For details see Francis G. HUTCHINS, *The Illusion of Permanence: British Imperialism in India* (Princeton University Press, 1967).

completed in 1921. . . . In the process of erecting a marker for the past, the city was thus 'reborn in the two centuries'.¹ The past and the present combined in itself, the architecture, thus laying bare the logic of colonialism.

As we come back to the city, it is thus laden with a history of its own rule itself and as a result of the solved murder of the past, the colonial mansion

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1. CHAKRABARTY, Hirendranath and Sukanta Chaudhuri, eds.

completed in 1921. Unsurprisingly, Curzon was interested in establishing a marker for the 'history of India itself . . . [of] the past two centuries'.¹ This massive colonial building thus significantly combined in itself aspects of European and older Mughal architecture, thus laying claim to both the antiquity and continuity of colonialism.

As we come back to our ghosts in the British stories we find them thus laden with a brittle temporality that is as anxious as colonial rule itself and as eager to appear eternal. It is perhaps the unresolved murder of *real* history that would not let the spirits rest in the colonial mansions of nineteenth century Calcutta.

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Les Carnets du Cerpac

HAUNTED PLACE KAMAU BRAWLEY

Over the last few decades, the world's largest and most culturally rich and diverse region, the Caribbean, has become a major tourist destination. In the past, the Caribbean was a region of wealthy colonial powers, but today it is a region of the world's poorest countries. In the past, the islands were visited by sea captains and explorers, but today they are visited by tourists. In the past, the islands were a source of raw materials, but today they are a source of cultural and environmental heritage.

1. GÖSSLING, Stefan, 'Ecology Perspectives', *Ecology Perspectives*, Stefan Gössling, ed.
2. The link between tourism and power dynamics, has been discussed by many authors. For example, see: TURNER, L. 'Tourism and the Pleasure of Power', *Tourism and the Pleasure of Power*, ed. by Valene Smith, ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). For more recent perspectives on tourism and postcolonialism, see: TURNER, L. *Tourism and Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).