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Ghosts of the Lizzie Borden House Tour: Hauntology, Historicity and Attention at Work

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Ghosts of the Lizzie Borden House Tour: Hauntology, Historicity and Attention at Work

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Anthropology

by

Emily Anne Lucitt

2014
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ghosts of the Lizzie Borden House Tour:
Hauntology, Historicity and Attention at Work

by

Emily Anne Lucitt

Master of Arts in Anthropology
University of California, Los Angeles, 2014
Professor Douglas Hollan, Committee Chair

This thesis combines work in hauntology and phenomenology to explore the ways in which individuals experience the history of the Lizzie Borden House, especially on a tour of the house guided by a member of the staff. “Hauntology” is a concept developed primarily by Jacques Derrida in order to explore the lingering injustices associated with Western fears of communism (1994). However, it has been further utilized by diverse scholars, such as Avery Gordon (2008) and Byron Good (2012) to study how unspeakable traumas are engaged by literature and ethnographic subjects. My work will expand and connect these discrete lines of scholarship through the ethnographic and historical legacy of an infamous American murder scene that is now a privately owned and operated bed and breakfast.
The thesis of Emily Lucitt is approved.

Christopher Jason Throop

Marjorie Goodwin

Douglas Hollan, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014
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Figure 1 reproduced with permission by David Lucitt. Special thanks to David Lucitt and Lindsey Thomas for accompanying me on this tour, and to the staff of the Lizzie Borden House for accommodating my ethnographic and personal curiosity.
Introduction

The Lizzie Borden House is haunted. But what does it mean to be haunted, and what does this mean for the individuals who occupy such a space on a daily basis? Through this thesis, I will present ethnographic data from my experience on a tour of the Borden House, but first I shall describe my theoretical basis for this project. I rely heavily on “hauntology,” a concept developed by Jacques Derrida (1994) and further explored by Avery Gordon (1997). Additionally, I argue that a consideration of phenomenology is also necessary to examine more intimately the way in which the house’s past is attended to by staff and visitors.

I visited the Lizzie Borden House with my cousins on a sunny Sunday afternoon in September 2013. They had just moved to the next town over, and were interested in joining me while I explored the local “haunted” house. I wanted to visit the house as part of a larger pilot study of New England hauntings that I was conducting that summer, so we took the general house tour and then I interviewed two staff members, including Denise, who led the day’s tour.

Hauntology can be useful to psychological anthropology because it provides a unique analytical tool to examine individual experience, especially in reference to a specific place of significance to them. According to Byron Good (2012: 32), “psychological anthropology needs a more robust ‘hauntology,’ to use Derrida’s term (Derrida 1994:10).” Hauntology is important because, as Gordon claims, “investigating [haunting] can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (1997: 8). It is a way to engage with possibility and anxiety, as I shall explore throughout this thesis.

Though it is based in sociology, Avery Gordon’s Ghostly Matters (1997) can help us begin to bridge the gap between the social importance of haunting and the individuals who live

1 Name has been changed
haunted lives. For this reason, in this thesis, I shall introduce Gordon’s work as it sets up and relates to my ethnographic data of the Borden House tour. This tour is set up to introduce visitors to the story of an infamous 1892 murder that happened within the house’s walls and allow them to attend to the elements of various rooms and pieces of furniture of significance.

The central question of the current thesis is: how does hauntology actually work in the world? More specifically, how is a “historically significant” property presented to visitors by staff in order to evoke the tragedy and brutality of a certain event in its past? How can this be of use to anthropology?

What is “Hauntology”?: Derrida and His Legacy

“Somewhere between…the Actual and the Imaginary…ghosts might enter” (Nathaniel Hawthorne, quoted in Gordon 1997: 138).

Hauntology is a term developed by Jacques Derrida in his work Specters of Marx (1994), (SoM). In this work, Derrida takes the first line of the Communist Manifesto (concerning the “specter of communism” that is engulfing Europe) (1994: 46) and reworks the idea of the “specter” to refer to a metaphorical ghost of the past. Derrida’s purpose in SoM is to highlight how the legacy of Marxism can be seen in various “ghostly” ways. The ideas that served as the basis for this book were developed in response to a significant intellectual quandary of the present day (early 1990s): what is the place of Marxism now that the Berlin Wall has fallen and global capitalism seems to reign supreme?

For the purposes of this thesis, I shall review Derrida’s initial concept of “haunting” and how he used it for his own purposes. Derrida says “a spectral moment [is] a moment that no longer belongs to time” (1994: xix); additionally, “haunting is historical…but it is not dated, it is

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2 Perhaps it is due to translation differences, but spectre and ghost seem to be interchangeable in SoM.
never docilely given a date in the chain of presents” (1994: 3). It’s outside of time because “it de-
synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony” (1994: 6). This tells us that Derrida’s specter has a
unique relationship with time as it is conceived in the Western world. This specter is neither a
relic of the past nor an entity existing in the present. It is instead a trace of non-presence in the
form of a past that moves through and the beyond the present. The specter moves through and in
so doing connects the past and the present. Furthermore, the specter is not material (flesh/blood);
it is invisible and looks at us (Derrida 1994: 6). It is a form of non-presence that disrupts the self-
closure of what otherwise manifests as the tangible material reality within which we live our
lives.

So what does the ghost mean for humans living in the present? Just as phenomenologists
claim that we are always being-with others, Derrida claims that we are always being-with
specters as well. They are all around us throughout our daily life “and this being-with specters
would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (1994:
xviii). Ghosts are others who are “not present, not presently living” (ibid.). They are others,
however, to whom we must respond.

Drawing on Marx, the main specter in question for Derrida is the possible event of a
communist revolution. Derrida specifically cites the first line of the Communist Manifesto, which
reads: “A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of communism” (Marx and Engels 1978: 473).
According to Derrida, this “specter” first haunted Europe in the form of a possibility, a potential
future in the mid-nineteenth century (1994: 46). Later, in the 1990s, it is “a threat that some
would like to believe is in the past and whose return it would be necessary...to conjure away”
(1994: 48). In this way, a ghost does not need to simply be a dead person; it can be an idea or a
possibility that requires action on our part.
What should we do about the ghosts that we live with? Derrida claims that he speaks about them “in the name of justice” (1994: xviii). Justice is a central concept in Derrida’s writing and quite complex. Specters are the remnants of past injustice (Derrida 1992, 1994). Additionally, Derrida argues that justice is impossible in the present because it can only come about from a freely made decision, not made simply by following the law or standard customs because these come out of violence (Derrida 1992). We can only try to make justice possible in the future, through his conceptualization of “deconstruction” (for a further explanation of deconstruction, see Derrida 1992).

Specters often are met with hostility, fear, anger, but they are here with us and we must speak to them (1994: 58, 11). This does not literally mean to have a conversation, but to “let them speak or...give them back speech” (1994: 221). To give specters a voice in this way means that we give specters back the opportunity to claim a future for themselves, apart from our own point of view and motivations. This leads to Derrida’s conclusion, which is: “To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive as...arrivants to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome...out of a concern for justice.” (1994: 220, emphasis in original) He ends SoM with a warning that is relevant for the present case I shall describe: “One must constantly remember that the impossible...is always possible” (1994: 220). Derrida’s ideas have influenced various thinkers in the social sciences. I shall now discuss two whose work I see as particularly relevant to the current project: anthropologist Byron Good and sociologist Avery Gordon.

**Hauntology and Culture Theory**

Byron Good advocates introducing Derrida’s hauntology to anthropology (2012). He argues that “…we need constantly to listen to what is unspoken, unsaid, repressed, unspeakable--
in politics and in everyday life, as well as in psychopathology--and to attend to our own resistances to knowing as much as to the complex forms of resistance to knowing of those with whom we work” (2012: 31). “Ghosts” of Indonesia’s recent history of violence appear in popular media (films, etc.) and declarations of corrupt politicians threatening to bring the secrets of past regimes to the public (2012: 31-2). However, Good perceptively opens up the possibility that anthropologists may find informants haunted by personal as well as larger sociopolitical ghosts (for example, he discusses the case of a son abandoned by his father amid the turmoil of history) (2012: 32). His idea of an anthropological hauntology is one of intersubjective engagement with informants, collaboratively discovering what can and cannot be knowable and/or speakable; and a version of history and subjectivity that is always open for interpretation and future revision (2012: 32). Good’s suggestion for anthropologists comes at the end of a larger project on the use of psychoanalysis and cultural phenomenology in Indonesia, and he addresses the use of hauntology as a call to action of sorts. In this way, the present thesis can be seen as an early attempt to answer this call.

In addition to Good’s suggestion, Avery Gordon (1997) partially builds on the work of Derrida as it attempts to understand the significance of the spectral aspects of human life. Gordon’s main thesis is “that life is complicated may seem a banal expression of the obvious, but it is nonetheless a profound theoretical statement—perhaps the most important theoretical statement of our time” (1997: 3). The implications of this statement are twofold: first, power is not as transparent as we think it is or name it as (1997: 3); and second, personhood is complex, which in this case “means that all people…remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (1997: 4). Part of this complexity of personhood is the fact that individuals are haunted by our histories and history as well.
But what is it really that haunts us? Gordon spends the rest of the book exploring possibilities of this “something” through discussions of literature and history. For the most part, Gordon’s work treats ghosts and haunting metaphorically. Concerning her use of the word ‘haunting,’ Gordon explains that, “It is neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it” (1997: 7).

Defining “the ghost” is no easy task for Gordon. Following Derrida’s claim, Gordon argues that the ghost is a connection that lives between worlds, and does not belong to a fixed time.

What kind of case is a case of a ghost? It is a case of haunting, a story about what happens when we admit the ghost--that special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present--into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world. (1997: 24)

Gordon then makes clear an important distinction: “[Haunting] is not a case of a dead or missing persons sui generis, but of the ghost as a social figure...It is a case of modernity’s violence and wounds, and a case of the haunting reminder of the complex social relations in which we live” (1997: 25). From an anthropological perspective, it is clear that people claim and believe in the supernatural in many societies around the world and throughout history. The question then becomes: what makes Gordon’s ghosts unique?

What Gordon conceives of as a ‘ghost’ or a situation of ‘haunting’ always stands for something much bigger than itself. A ghost can be a symptom of a past injustice or perhaps a reminder of the possibility for any kind of evil. This is important for the main theme of this thesis, which is an exploration of how and why people can become “haunted” by events or
personages from the past. Gordon’s methodology consists of mainly textual analyses of historical instances and renowned works of literature. Later in this thesis, I shall focus on her discussion of Toni Morrison’s Beloved as an example of a way in which slavery haunts characters in the novel (characters who were based on real individuals).

My one critique of Gordon is that her idea of the ghost is perhaps a bit narrow. I think the scale of a “ghost” can be expanded to include individuals with personal stories to tell, as all of our personal stories are wrapped up in the social structures we inhabit. Gordon says that the ghost “stands for something” (as described above). However, I would argue that a ghost should be conceived of as more than just a symbol—a ghost could “stand for” him/herself, as a self that is always tangled up in culture, etc. (echoing an argument made by Blanes and Santo (2013) that ghosts can be considered to have subjectivities of their own in addition to their symbolic capacities). Even if one does not hold a literal belief in ghosts, it is important for this thesis to see that ghosts of actual historical figures can still be felt in the present. Oddly, the second chapter of Ghostly Matters is devoted to Gordon’s exploration of the significance of Sabina Spielrein’s absence from a psychoanalysis conference photograph. Gordon gives us a short but interesting paragraph about Spielrein and her role in early psychoanalysis, but treats the chapter as a “distraction” from the overall project (1997). Why is this story a distraction? Gordon’s hesitancy to fully embrace the kind of case where a ghost has a subjective life herself leaves the possibility open for further engagement by anthropology. Additionally, Gordon states that Spielrein felt that she literally saw ghosts, such as that of a wolf in a mirror (1997: 36, 49). Was this a product of her “schizophrenic disturbance or severe hysteria” (1997: 58)?

Taken together, the work of Good and Gordon provide an important foundation for this project. And yet, their perspectives also differ in some crucial ways from each other, and from
my own. First, Gordon provides no ethnographic examples, but Good bases his text entirely on them. However, Good uses ethnography for a project distinct from my own. He is interested in exploring his Indonesian informants from both a phenomenological and psychodynamic perspective. I, on the other hand, aim to look at the relationship between history and experience that is largely absent from his work but a central tenant of Gordon’s project in a more abstract way. Because of this, my phenomenologically informed work will bridge the gap between Gordon and Good’s respective projects and therefore provide psychological anthropologists with a new theoretical framework with which to examine haunting.

What this thesis presents is an ethnography of haunting. I will do this by analyzing data from a tour and two interviews with staff at the Lizzie Borden Bed and Breakfast. As we enter into the data, it is important to ask ourselves, “...what if this is just a ghost story marking the itinerary of one woman’s haunting by a ghost...? It is what the story leads to that is important” (Gordon 1997: 59). However, first I shall examine a separate tradition of scholarship that will help us further engage in hauntological work.

**Phenomenology and the historical imagination**

It may seem odd to talk about phenomenology and historicity in a thesis about haunting, but as I see it, there are scholars whose work can help us build a richer interpretation of the present phenomena. Two prominent figures of this school of thought are Dilthey and Collingwood. Dilthey sees interpretation as a process that can only come from, in part, an act of “re-experiencing” the past (1977). Somewhat similarly, Collingwood imagines the job of the historian to be one of imaginative re-experiencing of the object in question. He states that “...the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind” (1994: 282). By this, he does not mean physically re-enacting the past and trying to gain the same sort of immediate experience as the
subject of one’s study, but instead to engage in an effort to mentally re-enact the experience of his/her subject of study (1994: 283, 294).

This is important for the present work because I argue that hauntological work can be done by the historian and perhaps also the ethnographer. Participants on a tour of the Lizzie Borden House are led through the house, listening to an account of the murders and the trial, moving through the space while re-enacting the actions of those involved in the crime. In this way, both social scientists and philosophers are working towards an understanding of how individuals attend to the events of the past. As Dilthey and Collingwood remind us, history is mediated by lived experience, with the historian’s efforts at “re-experiencing” the past being only one aspect of a more complicated interpretive process. Objects such as those found at the House only have meaning because we give it to them. However, hauntology challenges us to ask: is there is not some energy (trace? residue? scar? shadow?) left from the past that invites our constructions of meaning?

In this regard, it is important to note that the notion of “experience” itself has been a point of debate in both philosophy and anthropology, a fact that critically challenges any reliance upon taken for granted notions of “experience” in efforts to understand the past (see Throop 2003). In addition to the work of Dilthey and Collingwood, therefore, I believe that phenomenology and phenomenological anthropology can help to provide an approach to “experience” that moves beyond taken for granted understandings, while also enabling us to better explore the idea of “experience” as lived by those who may be encountering haunting in concrete situations (for an extensive review of phenomenological methods in anthropology, see Throop and Desjarlais 2011).

How could one think of ghosts in a phenomenological sense? I argue that Husserl can
help to answer this question with his concept of the *epoché*, better known as “bracketing” (1931). From a Husserlian perspective, it does not matter if you literally believe in the presence of the spirits of the dead. Instead, phenomenology is concerned with how an object (such as a past event or person) *presents itself* to a subject, and the sensations and thoughts associated with this presentation. This is a useful methodological tool for a discussion of a tour for two reasons: one, it allows us to bracket the natural world to focus only on the presentation of an object, and two, it gives scholars a way to discuss the role of the subjects’ bodies during an experience with an object. This allows me to explore the following question: what is actually *felt* when one enters a “haunted” house?

For the purposes of this thesis, I see hauntology as a theoretical tool for engaging with the past in the present. This is possible because the past has not truly left us. Its energy lingers in places of particular significance to individuals and can be encountered by an individual who is willing to open him/herself to the possible existence of “ghosts.” For example, this can be done via a historically-oriented tour, where one positions their body in ways similar to past figures, among other methods. Ghosts present themselves to us, *in a phenomenological and hauntological sense*, as reminders of past events or as uncanny actions. Now, I will set up the ethnographic data with an extended historical narrative of the Borden murders and Lizzie’s trial for them. I do this because, according to Dilthey, “re-experiencing is always grounded in a ‘kind of grammatical and historical spadework which only serves to transpose one who attempts to understand a fixed remnant of something past...into the situation of a reader...’” (Dilthey 1977: 135, quoted in Throop 2009). In the present case, this means that I must outline the history of the house in detail so that the reader can understand what is significant about the tour and also perhaps do a bit of re-experiencing as well.
History and the House

“The major events of the Borden case might have happened anywhere. Its chief personages could have flourished in Oregon, in Alabama, in France or Russia. Stepmothers, dissatisfied spinster daughters and grim old fathers are not peculiar to Massachusetts.” (Edmund Pearson 1937: 10)

For a bit of background, I will outline the relevant history of the Borden murders and their historical impact. In the late 19th century, the house at 92 Second Street was the residence of Andrew and Abby Borden and their two adult daughters, Emma and Lizzie. The Bordens were a prominent New England family and could trace their heritage back to the original Puritan settlers of the region. (It is ironic, in a way, that the Borden family coat of arms was a lion holding an axe.) Their name was common for the region, but the Borden family in question was anything but that. Mr. Borden was a self-made millionaire due to his entrepreneurial endeavors (his fortune at death was $500,000 but that would be about $12 million today). He also had a
commanding presence, walking through town on a regular route and wearing his heavy black coat no matter the outside temperature. Historian Edmund Pearson described Mr. Borden in this way: “If one of the patrolmen...had seen an erect, white-bearded old gentleman, who was trudging through South Main Street, he would have given him a thoughtful bow. Everybody knew old Andrew J. Borden, the bank president” (Pearson 1937: 3). In life, Mr. Borden had a reputation as a strict but fair businessman who enjoyed few comforts of his wealth. He saw no need for even common conveniences as electricity or indoor plumbing. He also refused to move from his house in a middle class district near the center of town to an estate on “the Hill” where other high society families lived, despite his younger daughter Lizzie’s pleas. However, the family did employ one maid, an Irish immigrant named Bridget Sullivan (whom the girls called “Maggie” after the name of their previous maid, though Mr. and Mrs. Borden called her by her own name). Bridget assisted Mrs. Borden in household chores, and was responsible for keeping the first floor tidy. She slept in a small room in the third floor attic.

Figure 2: Andrew and Abby Borden
Everyone also knew Mr. Borden’s family, which in 1892 consisted of his second wife, Abby, and his two adult daughters: Emma and Lizzie. Both daughters were unmarried, at the ages of 41 and 32, respectively. Mr. Borden’s first wife, Sarah Morse, had died when Lizzie was 2; however her brother John V. Morse remained a close friend of his late sister’s family and often visited unannounced. Mr. Borden married Abby when she was 36, already considered a spinster. Abby has been described as an introverted woman with few close friends aside from her sister, Sarah Whitehead. An important point is that though he was frugal, Mr. Borden bought farm property for Sarah and her family at Abby’s request. Like her stepmother, Emma was shy and though she did make social calls on occasion, she was not considered an active member of Fall River high society. We do not know if she enjoyed living at home with her parents, but she seemed to her peers to be content enough with her situation.

Figure 3: Lizzie Borden

Lizzie, on the other hand, longed to be accepted by the elites of the region and often made social calls. She was also the only one of the family who was actively involved in the local
church, teaching Sunday School and helping to organize fundraisers (Mrs. Borden and Emma attended services and Mr. Borden boycotted church after an argument with a church leader over taxes). She wanted her father to move the family to “the Hill” so she could be closer to her wealthy friends. It has been suggested by Pearson (1937) that Lizzie was embarrassed by her father’s modest living arrangements and therefore did not often invite friends over. For her 30th birthday, her father paid for her to embark on a month-long grand tour of Europe and it has been suggested that Lizzie relished the freedom she experienced on this trip and resented the constraints on her life upon her return to Fall River (Porter 1893, Pearson 1937).

Speaking to his contemporaries in the 1930s, Pearson comments that “Today, the daughters would be free to go elsewhere and make their own establishment. Then, however, the four Bordens had to sacrifice to the idol, Respectability, and keep up the wretched pretense of family unity” (1937: 9). Respectability was certainly a concern for all members of the family. For example, Lizzie was known by her family to be a kleptomaniac. This was true even though she possessed the funds to purchase the small items she stole from the local shops. In an attempt to conceal this fact, the shopkeepers would send Andrew a bill for the items stolen by Lizzie and he would discreetly pay for them. Additionally, Andrew suspected Lizzie of stealing from him on an occasion where his bedroom was broken into and various valuables were taken. Because of this, he decided to keep his bedroom door locked even from his own daughters.

Familial harmony was most certainly a pretense as far as Lizzie Borden was concerned (Porter 1893, Pearson 1937). Lizzie likely felt stuck in her living arrangements and admitted that she was not overly fond of her stepmother. Though she was reported to have been very close to her father, exchanging expensive gifts with one another, she did not consider Abby a mother at the time of Abby’s demise. The reasons for this can be traced back to events that occurred years
before the murders. As I mentioned, Andrew Borden purchased farmland for his sister-in-law. When his daughters heard of this transaction, they were jealous and demanded that he purchase land for them too. This was likely instigated by Lizzie, who was the leader among the two sisters. Mr. Borden acquiesced, and the daughters became landlords. (However, they found this job unpleasant and complained to their father, who then bought back the property for $5000, a fair price at that time.) Though the property he bestowed to his daughters was more valuable than the first, Lizzie had apparently not been satisfied with the arrangement and had argued with her stepmother. This interaction prompted Lizzie to stop calling Abby “Mother” and instead “Mrs. Borden,” which was seen as quite scandalous to those outside of the family (Pearson 1937: 8-9).

Recall that the Borden daughters were unmarried. This is important because their entire inheritance would have come from their father, who was 70 years old in 1892. (Abby was 64.) It is unclear to this day whether or not Andrew left a will. According to his brother-in-law John Morse, he considered writing one and the two men discussed how Andrew should divide his estate, which consisted of cash and valuable properties. Massachusetts law at the time stipulated that if a man dies before his wife, all of his property goes to her. Alternatively, if Abby had died first, which indeed happened, Mr. Borden’s properties would go to Emma and Lizzie, as his heirs (Douglas and Olshaker 2000: 130). Thus, to make sure they inherited their father’s entire estate, it was important that Andrew die after his wife, who would have left the wealth to her family, primarily Sarah Whitehead.

The Murders

On August 3, 1892, John Morse appeared at his brother-in-law’s home as an unannounced visitor, with no luggage. As mentioned previously, this was not an unprecedented event. He spent the evening with Mr. and Mrs. Borden, and they were said to have been
conversing late into the night. However, Lizzie was not present at the home to welcome her uncle. In what is possibly an eerie event of foreshadowing, that night she was paying a social call to Alice Russell, who was primarily Emma’s friend but knew both sisters. Lizzie confided in Alice that she was worried about her parents. She said that she saw her father arguing with a business associate and was concerned for his safety. Her exact words were: “I’m afraid somebody will do something!” (Pearson 1937: 16).

The next day, August 4, 1892, Mr. and Mrs. Borden were found brutally murdered. It was a hot day and the family had eaten leftover mutton stew for breakfast. This was likely the cause of the stomach illness they all suffered the previous day which left Mrs. Borden worried that the family had been poisoned. Mr. Borden had gone out for a walk that morning and come back to rest on his couch when his life was ended. Upon returning from his home, he found the front door locked and required the family maid, Bridget, to assist his entry. He inquired as to the whereabouts of his wife and Lizzie told him that she had received a letter from a sick friend and was in town visiting that friend. However, Lizzie did not know who this friend was and no letter was ever recovered. Mrs. Borden’s only close friend was her sister, Sarah, who claimed no...
illness when police later questioned her. Little did Mr. Borden know that at this time, his wife was upstairs in the family’s guest bedroom lying in a pool of her own blood.

While taking a nap in her room, Bridget was awakened by Lizzie’s screams of horror as she looked at her father’s corpse. It may have simply been a coincidence, but on that day, almost the Fall River police force was on a holiday trip out of town. This left a small corps of officers able to respond to calls to investigate the shocking discovery in the Borden home.

Figure 5: Mrs. Borden’s corpse as it was found (and photographed) by the police

The crime quickly became the biggest news story of the century and the public eagerly awaited every development in the police investigation. It is interesting to note that one of the first reports of the crime (from The Fall River Herald) opens with the following headline: “Shocking Crime. A Venerable Citizen and his Aged Wife Hacked to Pieces at their Home. Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Borden Lose their Lives at the Hands of a Drunken Farmhand. Police Searching Actively for the Fiendish Murderer.” (reproduced in Kent and Flynn 1992). The fact that the first “suspect” of the murders was not Lizzie is a fact that history has forgotten. Actually, the first

3 Note that the camera is visible in the mirror in this photograph. In 1892, photojournalism had been in use in the United States for decades (most notably by Matthew Brady during the Civil War). For more on the history and impact of photography of suffering and death, see Sontag 2003.
clue to the crime’s perpetrator was that there was a mysterious Portuguese laborer seen around the Bordens’ property earlier that day and had apparently spoken with Mr. Borden. However, this man could not be identified or found later for any questioning and therefore the lead went cold.

The list of suspects was narrowed down to John Morse, Bridget Sullivan and Lizzie. Morse had been seen around town during the time of the murders, and he had crafted an airtight alibi: he greeted many neighbors and took the bus, even managing to remember the driver’s badge number. He then stopped outside the Borden house to eat pears in the garden— even though the hysteria had begun inside. Though Morse’s behavior seems out of place, the police could not connect him to the murders. Unlike Morse, Bridget was inside the house at the time of the murders. However, she had an alibi as well— while washing windows, she stopped to chat with the neighbor’s maid, who vouched for her to the police.

Lizzie, on the other hand, did not have an alibi. In fact, she had three. When questioned by police about her whereabouts at the time of her parents’ murders, she said that: she was outside eating pears, she was collecting lures for an upcoming fishing trip, and that she was ironing handkerchiefs. Additionally, she was seen burning a dress days after the murders, claiming that it was soiled with paint. Because of these circumstances, Lizzie was arrested and indicted for the murders.

Lizzie’s arrest came as a shock because few believed a woman could commit such a horrendous act of violence (this shall be further explored in the following section). In fact, Lizzie’s arrest was so unprecedented that she had to be housed in a women’s jail in Taunton, a neighboring city, because Fall River had no such facilities. Even though Lizzie spoke to police

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4 There were many recent Portuguese immigrants in New England at the time. They were often targets of discrimination and easy scapegoats.
officers at length before her arrest, the evidence gained through this interview was deemed inadmissible in trial (and therefore not used against her) because it was taken from her without legal counsel present. Additionally, as I have previously mentioned, the family had been feeling sick days before the murder and Mrs. Borden suspected poison. One of the witnesses for the prosecution was a pharmacist who swore that Lizzie had come into his shop a few days before the murders looking to buy rat poison. He refused to sell it to her. However, because poison was mentioned as a possible factor in the murders, the police allowed for the victims’ stomach contents to be analyzed by Harvard Medical School for traces of poison. This was included as evidence in the trial, but the judge refused to see a connection between Lizzie’s attempted purchase of poison and her parents’ murders.

Lizzie’s lawyers were among the best in the area and were well paid for their services. They created every opportunity for reasonable doubt, stressing the presence and disappearance of the mysterious Portuguese man. Lizzie maintained her innocence throughout the trial and only spoke for herself at its conclusion. She said only the following words: “I am innocent. I leave it to my counsel to speak for me” (Douglas and Olshaker 2000: 124).

Lizzie was acquitted by the jury, but members of the community were not so convinced of her innocence. She quickly moved out of her parents’ former home and mostly retreated from society. She died at the age of 66 from complications due to a gallbladder surgery. Though Lizzie and her family are now dead, their story lives on in public imagination as it had from the beginning.

Public Imagination

This invites us to consider the structural factors that helped to cement the Borden murders in public imagination. According to Kent and Flynn, chroniclers of the Borden crime and its
legacy, “The Borden mystery is...pristinely unique in the archives of mayhem, set apart from all other murders wherein the only question is whether X did it, or was it Y or Z. The contradictions in the evidence have nagged aficionados since the fourth day of August in 1892” (1992: i). These “contradictions” have haunted public consciousness from the day of the murders and don’t appear to be letting go any time soon.

Because of its place in public imagination, the house is now a bed and breakfast and popular tourist destination. Part of the appeal of the house for tourists is that one can stay overnight in the rooms that once housed the murdered couple or the potential murderer. In fact, one can even stay in the room that Mrs. Borden’s body was found in! The staff also conducts hour-long tours of the house for the public for about $15/person. The tour is set up to make one feel like a member of the jury. It does not feature the paranormal—only the facts of the history of the house and its infamous previous occupants. Because this case was well-documented, there are detailed data on the daily life of the Bordens and their activities on the day of the murders.

This brings up the very important issue of the commercialization of the past, a topic that has been given much more attention by scholars of tourism, but for now it is important to keep in mind that this is a case in which commercialism was present from the start. In 1892, Americans could not get enough of the Borden story and newspapers made a large profit from stories concerning the crime (Porter 1893). According to contemporary sources, this was the trial of the century. The public from far and wide had their eyes glued to the newspapers, hungry for any details about the crime. This is something that the lawyers on both sides were well are of. For example, in addition to the inclusion of the stomach contents, Mr. and Mrs. Borden’s skulls were exhumed from their graves without family permission and also entered as evidence. The prosecution took the opportunity to showcase the brutal, violent nature of the crime. As a proper
nineteenth century man, however, he allowed the ladies present to cover their eyes or leave the courtroom temporarily. Lizzie and her lawyers took this as an opportunity to elicit compassion--she left the room, apparently quite distressed.

According to the Bordens’ contemporary, reporter and author Edwin Porter,

The murders soon became the theme of universal comment, both in public and private and every newspaper reference to the affair was read with eagerness digested and commented upon in a manner unprecedented. The crimes stand out in bold relief as the most atrocious, and at the same time, the most mystifying which the American public had ever before been called upon to discuss. They had about them that fascination of uncertainty, horrible though they were, which fixes the attention and holds it continually.

(1893, n.p.)

Additionally, it is important to note that these murders took place only four years after the infamous “Jack the Ripper” murders in London, and many New Englanders had worried that “Jack” had made his way to America (Pearson 1937: 28). Brutal murder was already on the minds of many, but those things happened in big cities and to those who live in the shadows, do they not?

Since the murders and trial, there have been a few film and TV interpretations of the crime and countless books written for the following generations of Lizzie enthusiasts. As Porter (1893) implies, some have been able to make a profit off of the case but they were only able to do so because people were drawn to its shock and departure from the mundane.

**Gender, Family and Crime**

To further explore this phenomenon, we can again return to Gordon (1997) because she discusses another infamous American murder trial and its literary legacy. She tells the story of Margaret Gardner, a runaway slave who killed her daughter rather than see the child become a
slave. Gardner was indicted for this crime but later disappeared from the historical record. However, Gardner’s story has been adapted into the novel Beloved by Toni Morrison. At this time, I wish to make it clear that I do not wish to compare the folklore of the Borden house to Morrison’s masterpiece. Here, I am simply trying to use some of the insights provided by Morrison and Gordon to help understand the significance of public engagement in a popular “ghost” story. It is important to also remember that though Margaret Gardner was a real person, the characters in Morrison’s novel are fictional. However, the novel and Gordon’s discussion of it provide a way to discuss unspeakable facts and events.

In both murder trials, an important point to remember is: who is speaking for whom? As Gordon tells us, Margaret Gardner never wrote an autobiography; she never spoke for herself (1997: 144). Instead, her story was transmitted through newspaper reporters and abolitionist writers such as Levi Coffin (1997). Though her story takes place in a similar time and place to Lizzie Borden’s and they are both women thought to have killed family members, the two women occupied very different social positions and had very different possible motives. Because of her race and wealth, Lizzie certainly had more power to author her own story than Margaret did.

One extraordinary example of Lizzie’s “speech” (far out of Margaret Gardner’s reach) is her purchase of the copyright to Edwin Porter’s account of the murders and trial, The Fall River Tragedy, which was written one year after the murders and sourced from Porter’s journalist accounts as the events of the murder and trial unfolded. Personally, I find Porter’s portrayal of Lizzie to be rather sympathetic. However, Lizzie did not want this book to be distributed and

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5 However, as she was considered “property” instead of a person, she could not be tried for murder. The case brought to light not only the psychological trauma of slavery on a personal level but the legal and pragmatic contradictions and twists of logic that had sustained it. (From Gordon 1997)
therefore bought the rights. (Luckily, this did not completely stop the book’s distribution.)

In both Margaret Gardner’s and Lizzie Borden’s cases, gender and the possibility for intrafamily violence became key issues. In the nineteenth century (and still today, I would argue), the idea that a woman was capable of murder was shocking and quite inconceivable. That a woman would be accused of killing a member of her own family for whatever reason was even more so.

Gardner’s trial soon became about the inhumanity of slavery and what it could drive a person to do. Alternatively, according to former FBI criminal profiler John Douglas, “[The Lizzie Borden] case was about the potential for violence lurking within seemingly normal families, and the even more profound and searing loss of innocence that implied” (Douglas and Olshaker 2000: 94). To illustrate this point, he asks: “Could a demure, well-mannered, and well-to-do former Sunday school teacher, active in her church and charities and a prominent member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, actually be a monster?” (2000: 95). If so, was anyone safe?

After all, Douglas explains that the circumstances of the case point to a personal connection between the assailant and victims. Because the murders took place within an hour of each other and in the same fashion, the police concluded that the same person murdered both husband and wife. They also “took place in broad daylight, in a low-crime area, on a street with frequent pedestrian and vehicular traffic” (Douglas and Olshaker 2000: 129). This was not the dark alleys frequented by “Jack the Ripper.” Thus, police concluded that the murderer knew the layout of the Borden house well enough to enter without force, hide inside and not arouse suspicion from residents or neighbors (since no one was caught between the murders and/or fleeing the premises). Additionally, the level of aggression indicates personal connection, which
is a pattern seen in domestic homicide. The vicious attacks on Mr. and Mrs. Borden conveyed “deep-seated and often “long-standing anger by the offender against the victim, but also an attempt to depersonalize him or her...here, the facial battery indicates an attempt to strip the victim of actual identity and familiar power” (Douglas and Olshaker 2000: 127).

Was a respectable woman such as Lizzie capable of such aggression? Many thought not, and Lizzie had multiple character witnesses testify at her trial, including her sister Emma. Once the trial came to a close, presiding Justice Dewey instructed the men of the jury\(^6\) thusly: “take into account her fine character and devotion to charitable organizations…” (Douglas and Olshaker 2000: 124). This was part of a very long and detailed treatise about reasonable doubt in which Dewey himself demonstrated how doubt could be established in even the tightest of cases.

Lizzie was only put on trial after the evidence against her was deemed sufficient to warrant one. This decision was made by presiding Judge Blaisdell, who declared,

> The long examination is now concluded, and there remains for the magistrate to perform what he believes to be his duty. It would be a pleasure for him...if he could say, ‘Lizzie, I judge you probably not guilty. You may go home.’ But upon the character of the evidence presented through the witnesses who have been so closely and thoroughly examined, there is but one thing to be done. (new paragraph) Suppose for a single moment a *man* was standing there. He was found close by that guestchamber, which, to Mrs. Borden, was a chamber of death. Suppose a *man* had been found in the vicinity of Mr. Borden, was the first to find the body, and the only account he could give of himself was the unreasonable one that he was out in the barn looking for sinkers; that he was out in the yard; that he was out for something else; would there be any question in the minds of men what should be done with such a man? (Quoted in Pearson 1937: 43-44)

The judge’s words illustrate how much gender mattered in this case. However, social class also

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\(^6\) Massachusetts had no female jurors until 1950 (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2014).
made a difference. In contrast, “Jack the Ripper” targeted working-class prostitutes. One of the most haunting aspects of the Borden murders is that it raised the possibility that such violence is not only a problem of the poor or of those living in “the bad part of town.” As Douglas and Olshaker conclude, “Wealthy, prominent people just didn’t get hacked to death, and their children didn’t get accused of doing it. If this kind of thing could happen to a man like Andrew Borden and his wife, it could happen to anyone” (2000: 117).

Adaptations

Margaret Gardner’s tragic story was interpreted in the novel Beloved. “Morrison’s resolution of the struggle between Sethe and Beloved helps us to see that haunting as a way of life, or as a method of analysis, or as a time of political consciousness...” (Gordon 1997: 182). In the novel, Margaret Gardner is reimagined as the character of Sethe, who in 1873 is approached by a mysterious woman, Beloved, whom Sethe believes to be the ghost of the baby that she killed 20 years earlier. Beloved the character can be seen to represent a haunting not only of an individual (the baby who was killed), but also the millions of slaves who were killed by slavery itself; their identities have been lost to historical memory. When Beloved arrives, she is hungry and has physical needs and wreaks havoc on Sethe’s household when these needs are not met (Morrison 1987). As Gordon interprets, “…when the ghosts appear to you, the dead or the disappeared or the lost or the invisible are demanding their due” (1997: 182).

So how are we to live with haunting, such as that of a century-old crime? Gordon invites us to consider fiction as a source of insight into this matter. Fiction is important as it is often a better method than ethnography for understanding and representing the human condition (Fassin 2014). This is important here because Gordon describes how a horrendous event from the antebellum United States became a novel of haunting. In my case, Lizzie Borden has become a
“character” of sorts in various fictional portrayals of her life in movies and books. The idea of her as a cold blooded murderer also haunts the public imagination, such as in the famous rhyme “Lizzie Borden took an axe…” I argue that together with house tours, this idea of Lizzie--along with all that it implies about gender, family and crime--is a case of haunting.

Conversely, Lizzie’s story has been adapted into various books and movies, including two contemporary miniseries. The most popular remains a TV miniseries featuring Elizabeth Montgomery (Wendkos 1975). The legacy of Lizzie Borden also lives on everyday in the form of tours of the infamous house itself. Interestingly, a costume worn by Montgomery for this movie is now on display at the house and has been integrated into the tour given by house staff. I will now discuss in more detail this tour as a way for participants to engage with the history of the Borden murders. As I discuss this tour as an engagement with haunting, I ask the following questions of my data: are we giving the Borden ghosts their due? What is it that they demand from us and how should we engage with them?

A Visit for a Tour

“‘What haunts are...the gaps left within us by the secrets of others’ (Abraham [1975] 1988: 75) or the articulated and often disarticulated traces of that abstraction we call a social relationship of power” (Gordon 1997: 183).

To begin, driving into Fall River is an interesting experience. As we approached the house, the character of the town became clear. There were streets named for the Bordens, and I even recall topiary in their honor. The house still holds the same address that it did in the 19th century. I should add that by this time, I was nearing the end of my second trip to New England from my lifelong home in Southern California, and on both of these trips, I have seen towns and cities dating back to the period of the Mayflower. However, this did not prepare me for the

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uncanny feeling I received when arriving at the Borden House. Fall River itself is an old working class factory town. Most of it has been brought into the 21st century (or at least the 20th); however, the Borden house and the one right next to it seemed oddly out of time. The house next door is also Victorian in architectural style, and it has been painted in a pleasing yellow color. However, the Borden house is an ominous dark green color and towers over the rest of the street. You cannot miss it if you tried. When you arrive, you are directed to the barn out back, and in my opinion, there is an odd feeling as if you are trespassing. But perhaps that is the idea.

Before this visit, I had a general idea of the history of the case but wanted to learn more through a guided tour of the house. The tour can be seen as a means to engage in ‘hauntological’ work, using directed attention to objects and pictures that help participants imagine what life was like in general, what these people were like and about that day, letting participants play as jury.

On the tour this meant that we (our group consisted of about 8 people) were led around the house, given the opportunity to see the rooms and learn the story of the inhabitants along the way. The very first step was a brief but useful introduction to the time period in which the Bordens lived and the general personalities of the family. Our guide, Denise, told us that the house was restored using period-correct furniture (though not the Bordens’ actual furniture). She tried to help us inhabit the home as the family did by explaining how they would have lived their daily lives. For example, we were told that Mr. Borden was a rather thrifty millionaire during his life. To illustrate this concept, we were then told that he refused to install gas lighting, even though it was employed for the streetlamps outside; he instead was content to use kerosene lanterns or just sit in the dark. This point allowed us to imagine sitting in the room we were in, but in total darkness (at the time it was around noon or so, and bright).

Once the introduction was over, we became immersed in the story of the murder itself.
One point that must be made explicitly is that this general tour of the house is not a ghost tour. Denise only spoke of ghosts on the tour when participants asked her about them. Instead, the tour is conceived of as a way to show tourists about the history of the crime that has led them to visit the house. It has a legalistic nature to it, as if the guide were in a courtroom and we (tourists) were a jury who need to be guided through the events of that fateful day as well as the search for the killer.

The tour also featured introductions to the major “players” of the crime: Andrew, Abby, Lizzie, Emma, Bridget, John Morse and members of the police and judicial system. This allowed for a discussion of motive, evidence and personality. How and why could one possibly murder a member of their own family?

The tour guide, Denise, is an important person for this scene. In addition to “leading the way,” a tour guide’s job is to be a middleman (or -woman) between the visitors and the attractions of interest and introduce the “Other” or object to tourists (Suvantola 2002: 141). A guide decides what is presented and what is left out of the tour and exhibit (2002: 142). In phenomenological terms, a guide has the power to direct tourists’ attention and facilitate intentional modifications (Duranti 2009). As a brief explanation, the “concept of ‘modification,’ as introduced by Husserl [can be used] in discussing different ways in which the phenomenal world changes for the perceiving, thinking, acting and interacting Subject” (Duranti 2009: 206). “Intentionality” has been used by phenomenologists to mean “aboutness” (in the sense that an object is about something else) (Duranti 2009: 206-7). A modification allows the subject to see different aspects of what the object is about. For example, as I shall explain below, a tour can be about different aspects of a place’s history.

The tour all about reliving the day of the murders, August 4, 1892, for different
household members involved. As such, Denise directed us to attend to objects of significance for
the Bordens on that day. For example, we were invited to sit on (a replica of) the couch that Mr.
Borden was murdered on after seeing the gruesome crime scene photos, and also to lay down on
the bedroom floor where Mrs. Borden was found murdered. Denise allowed us a few minutes in
each spot for our own re-enactment photos.

**Re-experience, Revisited**

In a way, I felt as if I embodied history. I not only entered the space of a specific
historical event, but I became part of it. I could become the victim or the perpetrator. I could also
become the outcry witness: For example, as guests are led up the curved staircase, we are
directed to orient our bodies in order to see the corpse of Mrs. Borden as she was discovered
after her murder:

Denise: “So we get almost to the top of the landing, look to
the left to get an idea of what they say when they saw the
dead body of Mrs. Borden on the opposite side of the bed
because you can actually see right underneath the
bed…Now when you get right about here is where you’re
gonna want to look to the left.”

In this way, we were allowed to attempt to see the house as it would have been seen by Bridget
Sullivan, the maid who found Abby’s body, not as 21st century tourists. We were told to attend
to the space under the bed in a second floor room and, though we saw an unoccupied room with
our eyes, we were allowed to imagine that a body laid there. This was done through our
embodied movement through the house, following Denise’s guidance. Thus, one’s experience or
sense of place is constituted through the motion of a lived body (Casey 1996: 23).

Though we cannot go back in time to 1892, we can try to understand what was in Lizzie’s
mind (as well as the minds of the other “characters”) through imaginative historical work. In the
present case, the work of re-enactment is intensified on the tour because the individual is actually experiencing some of the same things as his/her object of study. One can inhabit the space of the house similarly to how the Bordens would have. In this way, the haunted individual is even closer to history than they do to the armchair historian.

This engagement with the senses--especially touch--is very important because “…the very way in which we discover things or learn about others or grapple with history is intimately tied to the very things themselves, to their variable modes of operation, and thus to how we would change them” (Gordon 1997: 65). Additionally, Gordon argues that “haunting is…about reliving events in all their vividness, originality, and violence so as to overcome their pulsating and lingering effects. Haunting is an encounter in which you touch the ghost or the ghostly matter of things: the ambiguities, the complexities of power and personhood, the violence and the hope, the looming and receding actualities, the shadows of our selves and our society” (1997: 134). Here, we encountered the exact space in which a couple was brutally murdered, possibly by their daughter.

At the Borden House, there is quite a bit of touching things and intentional modifications associated with them. As I mentioned before, the house is filled with period-correct furniture, but not the Bordens’ actual furniture. This was a bit of a disappointment to our group, which had been immersed in the 19th century beforehand. The realization that certain items were correct to the time but did not have a substantial connection to this particular house and family was jarring (echoing the discussion of staged war photography in Sontag 2003). Haunting thus requires the actual thing to work best. This illustrates a subtle series of attentional modifications: e.g. “the house as authentic,” “the house as inauthentic,” “at least they tried to match the period styles,” accompanied by visitors’ wide, excited eyes, audible sighs and resigned nods, respectively.
The only exception is that the doorknobs were original to the Borden family, a bit of good news for those of us looking to make a tangible connection to the Bordens; our hands touching through time via doorknobs. I was intrigued, odd as this may sound upon reflection. As Denise mentions, “If you touch enough doorknobs, you may have touched something Lizzie touched. So I always tell everybody for good luck, tap all the doorknobs.” This is interesting because not only is it part of the experience of visiting the house to touch the Bordens’ property, but our guide actually adds the dimension of “good luck” to it. It even struck me at the time because where else do you touch the same object as a murder suspect for good luck?

Another group of items actually connected to the family is the book collection. We could identify Lizzie’s personal books because she put her initials on the inside cover. As I saw these, I imagined her writing her name, claiming her possessions. Like the staircase incident, I felt myself momentarily transported back in time. For the sake of preservation, we were not allowed to touch the books, but even the visual reminder of the past was enough to invoke a haunting. In a phenomenological sense, one’s visual perception of these items often hides a rich background of information and history that could easily be overlooked (Ahmed 2006).

There is much more to be said with regard to the phenomenology of the Borden House tour. The 1892 murders can certainly be described as an “event” in a “place.” But what does that mean? Edward Casey’s discussion of the phenomenology of place can help. He argues that “space and time come together in a place” (1996: 36). Events therefore encompass both temporal and spatial dimensions (1996: 37). The “event” of the murders is tied to the Borden House because that is where they were carried out. They happened at a specific time, on a specific day. These statements are agreed upon as facts. However, they hold subjective meaning for individuals who experience the space today. Tourists are only interested in the house because of
the murders and the lore behind them.

But why is it important for some people to actually go to the Borden house if they are interested in the murders? According to Casey, following the legacy of Merleau-Ponty especially, the answer consists in our perception (1996: 17). As I have already discussed, this perception occurs through our senses and ultimately informs not objective knowledge about the place itself but our subjective experiences of a place. Casey encourages us to think of a place not as an object but as an event that unfolds for us as we move through it and perceive different aspects of it (1996), such as visitors do on the Borden House tour.

A place, such as the one being discussed, often houses various objects as well as gathers different individuals that contribute to the place’s uniqueness. A place’s “power consists in gathering these lives and things, each with its own space and time, into one arena of common engagement” (Casey 1996: 26). Those on the tour are connected to the House staff because even though we have our own perspectives, we are all, in some way, connected to the same place. In addition to the immediate people and things occupying a space, place is also “constituted by cultural and social structures that sediment themselves into the deepest level of perception” (1996: 18). Places “take on the qualities of its occupants, reflecting these qualities in its own constitution and description and expressing them in its occurrence as an event: places not only are, they happen” (1996: 27). Because they ‘happen,’ places are very important for narratives. In other words, “an event becomes the possibility of writing a story, a history” (Gordon 1997: 152). A place can be recognized as the space for a murder mystery. It also potentially becomes a part of the lives and experiences for all who enter, each in a personalized way. It could be one’s place of business, vacation destination or ethnographic field site.

At this point, the reader may wonder if the previous discussion of the phenomenology of
place would be applicable in other cases as well. Perhaps this is the key to understanding tourists’ experiences of any “significant historical” place? I agree. However the question raised is why is the Borden House a tourist destination in the first place? Why are visitors interested in the site of a murder over 100 years ago? More specifically, what is left behind from the events of August 4th, 1892 that still haunt the house?

The closest I could get to an answer to this question is that the house not only presents the visitor with a chance to re-experience history, but also opens up a possibility for visitors to create their own stories about the house’s ghosts. This opportunity is not lost on the owners of the house. For a price, they offer a tour which capitalizes on this notion of place and event because it allows the house to unfold for participants as they experience different features and artifacts on display.

I will unpack the previous discussion of place and event through an example of one of the most infamous pieces of furniture in American history: Mr. Borden’s couch. Of course, each person’s experience of the couch is going to be different because we all come to the house with different previous knowledge of the crime and the late residents. As mentioned previously, with the exception of the doorknobs, all furniture is period specific but not authentic possessions of the Bordens. This includes the couch, which is not in fact the couch Mr. Borden died on but one that matches the crime scene photos and is an antique. It is interesting to note that since the crime scene photos are black and white (as they were taken in 1892), the staff responsible for restoring the house for its role as a bed and breakfast had to imagine the color scheme that should be used. They studied Victorian home decor fashions and all available photographs of the house from the time of the Bordens. Then, using the antique furniture and decorations available, they crafted the interior in what they considered to be a believable, comfortable space for visitors.
Let us now return to the couch. It is a small loveseat made of wood and velvet in a bright shade of royal purple. When our group entered the sitting room where it rests, some visitors were unwilling to sit on it during Denise’s presentation. I was not one of those people. I sat right where Mr. Borden sat when he was killed. After just hearing that he was very protective of his home and possessions, I felt as if sitting in his seat was risky. It was also creepy since the spot was “haunted” by the trauma of the past and set up to highlight this fact. Would I feel the presence of any ghost? Perhaps a cool wind or pressure on my body telling me to leave? Anticlimactic as it may be, I felt nothing unusual. After Denise gave a short explanation of the manner of Mr. Borden’s demise and the discovery of his corpse, I joined my cousins in a re-enactment of the position of his body upon its discovery. We took silly pictures, posing as if one was going to kill the other.

As I type these words, I recognize that my behavior may seem absurd. Why was it fun and humorous to re-enact a gruesome murder? Perhaps this is an instance to return to Gordon (1997) yet again. A theme of this book is not only recognizing but confronting haunting. Confronting haunting thus requires “…negotiating the always unsettled relationship between what we see and what we know” (Gordon 1997: 194). I would replace “see” with “sense” to reflect potential engagement of various bodily elements. Reflecting Gordon’s concept of “complex personhood,” it makes sense that people respond to stimuli in different ways. Some tour participants were wary of Mr. Borden’s couch and others (such as me) found it intriguing and a chance for fun. The house does not dictate any single reaction or experience; it provides a possibility for visitors to engage in a place that is objectively present but becomes present for subjects in all sorts of ways.

**The Importance of Embodiment**
“Haunting is material” (Gordon 1997: 184)

To return to a quote that appeared in the beginning of this essay, Byron Good’s appeal for psychological anthropologists to consider hauntology may need some editing. As he says, “I am not advocating that psychological anthropologists should abandon more classic studies of cultural and psychological lifeworlds or embodiment” (Good 2012: 32). However well intentioned this call to action may be, I believe that within it lies a false dichotomy. Hauntology is inextricably tied to embodiment, and can actually work through embodiment.

According to Casey (1996), an individual’s understanding and constitution of a “place” is only made possible by our perception of it as we move our bodies in it and around it, as I have discussed above. The philosophers of history may disagree and argue that one can imagine a place or a ghost from a safe distance away. I argue that both methods of knowledge acquisition (perception and imagination) are useful. The tour in fact capitalizes on visitors’ engagement with three types of embodied knowledge: seeing photographs of the subjects of the tour both in life and death, being in a space as a visitor, and re-enacting the murders. One can see what Andrew Borden’s corpse looked like hours after his death, inhabit the space where the murder took place and significantly, sit on a replica of his couch in the exact spot of the murder as his body was positioned. Of course, no one is forced to take the tour or sit or stand in any particular way. Only the possibility for such activity is opened up by guides such as Denise. Echoing Gordon (1997), it is up to us to decide what to do next.

**Conclusion and Further Implications**

The Lizzie Borden House is haunted. It is haunted by the legacy and possibility of intra-family violence. It reminds us that no one is safe and that people are complex. We do things for all sorts of reasons and respond to trauma personally (Gordon 1997, Douglas and Olshaker...
2000). Individuals in the present engage with the house in different, complex ways. Some staff even claim that the house is literally haunted by the ghosts of Mr. and Mrs. Borden, “stuck” in the place where they met their demise. Intrafamily violence is, unfortunately, neither new nor unique. In fact, today only 9% of violent crimes in victims’ homes are committed by strangers (Harrell 2012: 1).

I grew up near the Manson Caves and though my friends often hiked there for the fun of it, I didn’t want to go near a place associated with such evil. I was also around the same age as JonBenet Ramsey when she was murdered. This project thus had a personal aspect as well--why was I drawn to the Borden House? Once there, why was it such a fun, exciting experience? Though I still do not have an answer to these questions, I hope that this paper can be of use to others wrestling with the problem of individuals engagement with the past, especially a traumatic past. Perhaps this project may also help us to look at notorious crimes in a new way by examining the experiences of those who visit or work in associated places?
Works Cited


