REVIEW


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*Ghost Stories for Darwin: The Science of Variation and the Politics of Diversity* is perhaps the first work of scholarship, in any field, to begin with an evocation of a personal ghost story. In her introduction Banu Subramaniam gives a vivid description of the Bollywood ghosts that haunted her childhood: women in “flowing white” saris hover about in “moonlit nights” (p. 1). The introduction sets up the figure of the ghost as a metaphor through which to frame the complexities of science practice, gender and politics. Subramaniam is well aware of the complexities and potentially problematic set of associations between the preternatural and the non-Western world. She remarks that ghosts were at once frustrating, fitting too neatly within the Western imaginary of an India riven by mysticism on the one hand, and technological ambition on the other; yet ghosts were nonetheless central to understanding these very processes of marginalization which would locate the ideal form of the scientific disposition in the figure of a European man. Although the West might only
understand India’s ghosts as an indication of the nation’s stubborn anti-rationalism, in India, and to Indians, ghosts convey a complex rationality of their own. Ghosts both signal and encourage a way of seeing. Subramaniam writes: “Ghosts…are always characters whose abbreviated life marks urgent unfinished business” (p. 1). Physically, the composition of the specter embodies the dual and contrasting meaning of transparency—ghosts are diaphanous, translucent; they present themselves as the trace of materiality, and yet, as the secondary meaning of transparency conveys, ghosts are conspicuous, and plainly present to those who sense them. A key feature of haunting, indeed, is the enduring presence of the ghost: a specter is bound to a place. Those haunted by the specter cannot but experience the ghost’s uncanny presence in that space, nor can they disassociate that space from the presence of the ghost itself. Thus, in spatial terms, ghosts occupy a liminal zone between presence and absence. We encounter the same contrasting dynamic in our temporal understanding of the ghost as well; they are ephemeral figures whose “abbreviated” lives bid us to recognize the past as it endures in the present.

Ghost Stories for Darwin: The Science of Variation and the Politics of Diversity [henceforth GSFD] draws much of its methodological approach from the work of sociologist Avery Gordon. Gordon (2008) enlists haunting as means to address what she refers to as “the complexities of life,” embedded modes of sociality and comportment that are neither always apparent nor measurable—in other words, the nexus of complex codes and behaviors that are often the results of unresolved and unrecognized histories. Her study Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination asks, how do we attend to social phenomena that are neither animated nor determined by explicit causes or actions; in other words, how do we address something as elusive as power or power dynamics which might be conveyed and maintained in the most visible social practices, like a “policeman’s baton,” or in a set invisible practices, the internalization of inequities that structure the imaginary, and language. Moreover, how do we address the sedimented histories concealed in our
social practices—the “unrememberable past and unimaginable future” (p. 4) overlooked by methods that scrutinize only the present, and the world of appearances.

As a literary critic, I am no stranger to ghosts, nor am I unfamiliar with their function as an analytic through which to approach a difficult past or history, or a suppressed wrong or injury. Situated in the fictional encounters with the history of slavery and racial oppression in the United States, Faulkner’s ghosts, Morrison’s ghosts disrupt comfortable, self-consolidating narratives of pure, heroic, and genteel genealogies—the appearance of the ghosts compels the haunted to recognize unresolved and constitutive acts of injury or violence. Indeed, ghosts fit comfortably in the analytic framework of literary studies—figurative language is our bread and butter after all. But to present ghosts as a metaphor through which to better understand the suppressed histories and discourses of science practice is impressive, audacious even. Most boldly, Subramaniam elevates haunting to a methodological framework through which to examine the concept of variation as it moves from science practice to political and social discourse.

The foundation of this fascinating study is built upon the author’s doctoral research in evolutionary biology examining color variation among morning glory flowers. What specters lurk among the morning glories? GSFD employs a variety of genres: in one chapter a thorough and useful genealogical account of the concept of variation from Darwin to the present; in another a meticulous outline of the genetics of flower color variation; and in yet another an irreverent short story written in a hybrid style somewhere between a parable and fantasy. The book assembles and syncopates a disparate and innovative collection of formal genres and theoretical approaches to address and give voice to the multivarious and contending histories and discourses that haunt the seemingly innocuous study of color variation in a common North American flower. I would like to take a moment to address the question of genre. What form does scholarship that follows the methodological directive of haunting take? As a work of science studies GSFD resembles the prose experimentation of
Michel Serres in so far as it clearly and provocatively resists and repels the authority of scientific metalanguage. However, among its many contributions, the work’s engagement with literature and the literary is exceptional. “What forms, style, and analysis” would Subramaniam use “that draws from both the sciences and the humanities, but still does not belong to either” (p. 71)? Her answer is fiction. Fiction, Subramaniam argues, is vital to the process of creating a “reconstructive project for biology,” a form of analysis, closely resembling feminist standpoint epistemology—that is, an epistemological position fully implicated in the identities and histories that haunt scientific analysis. She continues: “I do not want to endlessly deconstruct science from the outside, pure and untainted in my epistemological location. After all, scientific work is performed by human actors in relation with their objects and subjects of study…” (p. 71). Audaciously, one chapter, “Singing The Morning Glory Blues: A Fictional Science” is, indeed, a story of three young Indian women—students—and their encounters with a collection of allegorical characters. These characters, representing a full range of academic disciplines—evolutionary biology, poetry, linguistics, psychology and psychoanalysis, each argue the merits and limits of their respective fields of study, to the young girls’ amusement. Written in the fashion of Alice in Wonderland, the story conveys the manner in which knowledge, when presented as authority, appears absurd or irrational to those who were not formed in and through those systems of knowledge, those to whom these forms of knowledge were not intended—women, children, the colonized. “Singing The Morning Glory Blues: A Fictional Science” functions as something of a parable, a literary form ideally suited to engage life’s complexities and contradictions. On the one hand parables convey the received wisdom of a community, alluding to myth or dogma (religion), and on the other hand parables present themselves as puzzles to be solved and re-solved over and over again, each encounter yielding new knowledge, thus unsettling the fixed conclusions of received wisdom.

What happens when we look at a field of morning glories not through the isolated persona of the evolutionary biologist, taught to ask the
“right question”, but through the haunted persona, sympathetic and open to the entreaties of the ghost? Subramaniam situates herself between disciplines: “...one that expands my vision, one that narrows it to fine precision” (p. 71). Such interstitial positioning is necessary; ghosts seek out figures who are sympathetic, and thus predisposed to listen: ghosts “always appear to those who, while frightened, are willing to listen, investigate, and excavate a gruesome and troubled past” (p. 1). An entanglement of repressed histories surround both our objects of scientific inquiry and the conceptual tools we deploy to understand them. As Bruno Latour so elegantly formulates in his study of the theatricality of experimental science, behind the apparent solitary actions of the object of experimentation is as an agent: “Pasteur acts so the yeast acts alone” (as cited in Subramaniam, p. 42). Extending Latour’s notion of the “constructed” nature of the experiment, Subramaniam invites us to look beyond both the object and the stage of experimentation to the social histories that are concealed within the morning glory. What is revealed when we follow the directives of the ghostly is more often than not the complex and often terrifying after-effects of a history marked by conflict and violence. Subramaniam writes, “Questions of genetic variation in human organisms are deeply linked to questions of diversity and difference in human populations steeped in tortured histories of slavery, colonialism, and genocide. A naturecultural analysis reveals that the question of variation is fundamentally about power—the politics of life and death” (p. 7). While GSFD makes haunting its methodological framework, “a naturecultural analysis” functions as a reading strategy, making visible what is unseen and yet pervasive in the Darwinian concept of variation—a history of racism and eugenics that was central to the formation of such categories and concepts. In an impressive introductory chapter engaging a wide range of works from the vibrant and crucial fields of critical Darwin studies and feminist science studies, GSFD provides a detailed genealogy of the concept of variation from Darwin through Malthus and early twentieth century population studies and contemporary biopolitical approaches, to population and understanding of variation that is inflected
through the logic of neoliberal and free market economic discourses. Variation, natural selection—these terms, processes, concepts, cannot rid themselves of the sedimented histories and embedded associations that are integral, although suppressed, elements of their meaning. In this way, *GSFD* constructs an implicit theorization of the polysemic nature of experimental science—like all elements of the symbolic, biological concepts such as diversity and variation are polysemic insofar as they maintain multiple meanings, coevally.

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (p. 6). *GSFD* cites Faulkner, suggesting that perhaps yet another dimension of Darwin’s evocative “entangled bank” is the abiding entanglement with the past: is the Darwinian concept of variation forever haunted by the specter of eugenics? Ensnared by their histories, do these concepts necessarily emplot outcomes that further marginalize vulnerable communities? Do such conceptual entanglements produce, in the Foucauldian sense, the very demographic problems they seek to remedy? To counter such a potentially pessimistic interpretation, it would be useful to read *GSFD* in tandem with more sanguine interpretations of Darwin in contemporary scholarship that attempt to rescue his writings from his panoply of Victorian interpreters, the true architects of the social Darwinist tradition. In literary studies the works of Gillian Beer (2009) and Robert Richards (2002) stress Darwin’s interaction with Romanticism and the literary nature of his own writing in efforts to distance Darwin’s writing from the “material effects” of social Darwinism. These ambiguities in Darwin’s life and work set the foundation for later Bergsonian interpretations of evolution which saw in the concepts of natural selection and variation an example of processes of life that were at root benign, and infinitely creative. However, *GSFD* would gain most from an engagement with the rhetorically masterful work of the feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s (2011) *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art*. Grosz’s long-term project has been to derive from the sometimes problematic yet life-affirming philosophies of Darwin, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze a strategy to think concepts of life that “do not privilege the human as the
aim or end of evolution, but sees the human as one among many species” (p. 2). Decentering the human as the origin and end of thought is the necessary step for what I would refer to as a politics of novelty—that is, a political practice that introduces new coordinates of engagement and conflict. In Becoming Undone, Grosz writes: “If the human is simply one among many of the trajectories that life on earth has elaborated, then many of the most cherished beliefs about how humans will and should behave in the light of the manifest and lived differences that divide the human will be thrown open to new lines of development, new kinds of practice, and new modes of thought” (p. 2). At the core of Darwinian concepts is an understanding of life as change, mutation and becoming; in Grosz’s interpretive framework, variation can only be understood in and through the fluid temporality of life itself—thus, the immobile temporality that haunting requires is at odds with the very processes of life. Indeed, a most radical project would be to liberate Darwin from the thanatos-inflected interpretations of his interpreters—Victorian and contemporary. Although GSFD at moments gives the impression that these concepts are irredeemably bound to their troubled histories, there is ample indication that Subramaniam participates in the same liberatory project as Grosz. In the end, the only way to liberate the spirits from the violent histories that immobilize them, that bind them to the space of haunting, is recognition; we must listen to the complaints of those wronged, and vow to take steps towards their redress.

References


**Bio**

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