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REENACTING AND EXPERIENCING THE PAST IN OLD HOUSES AND STONEWALLS*

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The present relates with the past in a number of ways. It can remember and memorialize it, over- or under-represent it, imagine it, and reconstruct it. The present can also experience it. Ghost encounters and hauntings are the interfaces of the perceived past and the lived present. They are experienced and eventually woven into stories that contextualize the place or artifact. Ghost encounters engage the senses: among the diverse experiences include sighting a beautiful lady dressed in white flowing gown, walking several steps before vanishing into thin air; hearing the ring of a telephone when its cable has long been disconnected; noticing the typing sound of a manual typewriter at four in the morning when nobody has been using it for the past twenty years; recognizing the strong smell of a burning candle when no candle is there; and feeling a cold, transient, chilling sensation that “makes your hair stand” without any known reason while you pass by a strange place.

Hauntings are negotiated by the present through visual, auditory, olfactory, and thermo-tactile sensations, constituents of what Urry (2001:3) calls the *sensecapes*, involving bodies “in performances especially to fold notions of movement, nature, taste and desire, into and through the body.” This idea of sensecapes has been used in the context of tourism, where it is applied to how the tourist derives pleasurable sensations from goods and services. A convenient illustration of this for the purpose of our topic would be the ghost tours, which are tours of known haunted places in the United States, Australia, or Europe. Tour operators in the American city of New Orleans take tourists to the old French Quarter where visitors see first-hand the sites where suffering and death took place, which are also the sites reputedly haunted (Haunted History Tours n.d.). Old gaols provide the haunted settings in tours of convict-era Australia (Extreme Tourist n.d.). During both tours the visitor is expected to consume the fright derived from his or her contact with a haunted place, together with the nostalgia

of being in quaint 19th century settings, with both fright and nostalgia providing entertainment. But it is another thing if the visitor experiences the haunting. From the website of Extreme Tourist (n.d.) there are claims that “tourists and tour guides alike report strange occurrences in and around the gaol [in Tasmania], from apparition to noises, feelings of being strangled by invisible hands and even a conversation with a disappearing convict” (www.extremetourist.com n.d.).

I would like to extend the idea of sensecapes to things allowing the experience not necessarily involved in the acquisition of pleasure or the occurrence of a commodity transaction. And for this matter, ghost encounters are experienced through sensecapes that do not usually result in entertainment. Most of the time they take place unplanned. They are trailers of past actors and events being unexpectedly viewed (or sensed) by spectators of the present. Our discussion does not delve into the issue of whether ghosts exist or not, but subscribes to the assumption that there are experiences with supernatural entities, or of phenomena, considered to be ghosts or ghostly.

While majority of ghost encounters have a past element, they could also refer to the future. Perhaps among the better words that could be used to portray this idea is *premonition*, “a strong feeling that something is about to happen” (Soanes et. al. 2001:697). There is for instance the incident of seeing a friend, or his shadow, or a reflection of his on a mirror headless in a very short, transitory span of time; another would be encountering a coffin for no apparent reason while walking along a lonely part of a country road. Both experiences deliver a glimpse of bad events to come: that in the near future there would be a corpse (your friend would soon succumb to an accident), or a coffin (your father would have a fatal heart attack before the day ends, then your family would hold a wake for him). There could also be a visit of a supposedly sick but seemingly well person to his or her

relatives and friends, when actually he is at that very moment in coma at the intensive care unit, to be pronounced dead by the resident physician in a few hours. His unusual appearance was an earlier version of his formal farewell.

A few popular legends take the form of ghost stories where both past and future could simultaneously relate to the present. Tales of the *La Llorona*, the ghost of the weeping woman, abound in Latin American countries and their diasporas. The *La Llorona* is supposedly the ghost of a woman crying for her own children whom she drowned. Countless variations exist regarding the stories behind the ghost. People say that she was a woman seduced by a local man who made her pregnant, begot many children, and was left by the man because he has either to work in a far-away place or has deserted her for another girl. The abandoned woman later on decided to kill the children by drowning them either because she doesn't want them to experience a life of poverty, or to free herself from the responsibility of motherhood, or, like Medea, take revenge from the man who discarded her. It is believed that sightings of *La Llorona* would bring misfortune (en.wikipedia.org).

Historical places and old artifacts are often implicated in experiences and stories of ghosts. One important aspect worth mentioning is that there is a temporal character to hauntings and ghost stories. Meanings in a haunting are produced with reference to the past. Artifacts and structures are powerful devices that facilitate the link of the then and now, and are fetishized to become participants in the haunting. It is possible to experience a haunting when involved with these artifacts because these are usually objects from the perceived past that had their active roles in that past. They have eventually entered into another time, becoming involved in the experienced present. They can be remains from the past event or persona, helping to generate memories and nostalgia. But aside from being representations of the then event or persona, they can also be the medium that brings these elements of the past to the sensescapes of the consumer of the present experience. They are objects seen to be meaningful in the perceived past which, for instance, may have been used or owned by the past persona now responsible for the haunting.

Fetishized structures and sites find their prototype in the Haunted House. In the town of San Ildefonso (Bulacan) is an old house called *Bahay na Pula* ("Red House") which is rife with meanings and regarded as haunted. The "Comfort Women" of Mapaniki, Candaba

(Pampanga) have their narratives that recount their own harrowing experiences in this mansion during the Second World War (Fabian 2002). To punish the village of Mapaniki for supporting guerillas, the invading Japanese soldiers killed its male inhabitants and brought several of its female inhabitants to *Bahay na Pula*, then a Japanese army garrison. The females served as comfort women for the soldiers in the house. It is said that many of the women have been abused and killed in the vicinity of this house. The house is now considered a heritage site of San Ildefonso (Wikipedia page of "San Ildefonso, Bulacan").

The house serves a multiplicity of purposes as heritage. It could either remind of the "good, old" colonial days of the Bulacan elite; of the sufferings of Mapaniki women; of the need for an alternative treatment of women; of the brutality of war; of the helplessness of Filipinos; or of the shame of Imperial Japan. Aside from representing the past, the *Bahay na Pula* structure is the stage where the past is reenacted and experienced. One visitor of the house narrates:

Then there was this voice of a young girl sobbing, "inang [mother]...." The group trembled in that area. After a while, there was this entity that some of the members saw near the window. It was an image of a man wearing a white shirt looking in from outside. The head of the man was twisted as if it was hung or as though a blade slashed through its throat. It appeared to be a gray image then that gradually takes a form...

There were [sic] so much pain that could be felt in the house... Some of the members cried after scanning that place for some unexplained reason. Apparently a girl was drowned in that bathtub before being raped. There was too much suffering.

The creepiest area was upstairs in the terrace where an entity was peeking from outside (Bernardo 2005).

The window, bathtub, and terrace of the mansion structure the presentations of vignettes of the past. Not only is the 1940s realized in the visual and auditory spheres, but is also resurrected with strong, permeating emotions. Pain and suffering is communicated through the bathtub, which also generates the feelings of pity,

sorrow, and fear, much like the window and terrace.

In some cases, the artifact is the haunting object. An urban legend in the neighborhood of Alabang, BF Homes Parañaque and Almanza (Las Pinas) we have known since childhood tells of a ghostly car appearing in a quiet stretch of a road at night to challenge unsuspecting drivers to a drag race. Another was a story told by my cousin from Negros Occidental. There was a group of friends who went to a party in Bacolod one night. On their way home to Silay, a small city to the north of the capital, they had to take a road through the sugarcane fields. Their cars followed one after the other. At one place the last car stopped for some time before proceeding to rejoin the convoy. When they took time out to converse among themselves, those leading the group asked why the ones in the last car stopped for a while. They replied that they saw a bagon (train carrying sugarcane) crossing their path. Everyone was dumbfounded as they knew that no hacienda has been operating the bagones for a very long time now!

In encounters and stories of hauntings, the past is a narrative of death, many-a-time a tale of suffering and unfulfillment. Highlighted among them are circumstances of the death of persons that have become the ghosts. Old, unfamiliar structures and infamous sites provide the venue in which to replay the past and dramatize it according to these narratives. To these elements of material culture, the past is most often a tragic past. The *Bahay na Pula* portrays the Second World War, remembered as *Panahon ng Hapon* (“Time of the Japanese”) when many suffered and died; the Manila Film Center, reputedly haunted by the ghosts of workers who died in the collapse of its scaffolding when it was being built in 1981, recalls the days of the Marcos regime when many were tortured and killed. The oppression of the Spanish colonial years, *Panahon ng Kastila* (“Time of the Spaniards”), has been remembered in the state-sanctioned execution of priests and intellectuals, either by the garrote or firing squad.

The garrote and firing squad of the Spanish occupation did not decapitate victims; but there are countless tales of headless phantom priests (or friars) in Filipino ghostlore like those associated with the new archaeological sites in Oriental Mindoro excavated by the University of the Philippines-Archaeological Studies Program. The site in San Teodoro which was excavated in 2007 features an old stone-made structure called the *baluarte*. Mang Piling, a 72 year old male resident of the place who manages a small buy-and-sell enterprise of

used bottles, told me that he had sightings of a headless phantom priest walking about the *baluarte*. He said that he saw the specter one night, dressed in white soutane. Other residents say that the headless priest could be seen in front of the baluarte, and sometimes walking towards the small gate to the road. The town of Bulalacao, in the province’s southern end, was the site of the field school in 2006 that similarly conducted excavations on a hill that has old stone structures. Residents of the town say that the ghost of a headless priest can be seen walking about these wall structures and the surrounding mangrove swamps at night, especially when the moon is full.

Archaeological studies of these sites referred to as *Lumangbayan* (“Old town”) of the present municipalities strongly suggest that these structures date from the centuries of Spanish occupation. The ghosts, by being decapitated, jibe less with the known Spanish execution method of the garrote than the use of katana to behead guerillas during the Japanese Occupation. When asked about their remote histories relative to the stone structures, old residents of these two towns were likely to emphasize the collective memory of the 19th century (late Spanish colonial era) their parents or grandparents bequeathed them, and their experiences during *Panahon ng Hapon*. The preoccupation is usually greater on the latter, often with tales of hidden treasures left during the war. The still remembered 1940s is juxtaposed into the imagined 19th century and the earlier beyond, and the narratives of a remote past become dechronologized. The haunting past, too, has been created from histories that have been spliced from, and reconnected to, chosen segments. This past, however, is far from just being told verbally; it is glimpsed personally through visions of a “third eye” in the *Lumangbayans* of San Teodoro and Bulalacao, against a backdrop of the old walls from the *Panahon ng Kastila*, reenacted by the headless Catholic priest clad in soutane who, perhaps, has been guarding buried treasure from the *Panahon ng Hapon*.

Ghosts and experiences of them invest objects with “social life” (Miller 1998:484-486) as things negotiate the human world of meanings in a time-space continuum. The refurbishing of meanings takes place in this particular genre, as the past becomes unfamiliar, alien, muted, eerie, but still (in an oftentimes macabre way) remembered. Then we try to wake up the dead past. The past rises from the grave, and it is now a zombie defleshed by time, in the process of decomposition, garbed in once magnificent but now soiled, tattered clothes and walking with incomplete life; or an unusually

flickering light attempting to take on human form, devoid of corporeal substance but still manifesting itself. These happen not just anywhere but usually through the intercession of artifacts, physical structures, and sites, the very elements that also intercede to make the study of archaeology possible.

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Annual General Meeting of the Solheim Foundation

The Annual General Meeting of the W.G. Solheim II Foundation for Philippine Archaeology is scheduled to take place on March 1, 2008 at the Ortigas Foundation Library, Ortigas Building, Pasig City, Metro Manila. Registration will begin at 2:00 pm.

On the Agenda are lectures by Dr. Victor J. Paz about the Latest Research in Ille Rockshelter and other cave sites in Dewil Valley, El Nido, Palawan; and Ms. Janine Ochoa and Dr. Phil Piper about their preliminary findings regarding the animal remains assemblage excavated from Ille Rockshelter.

For further details, continue checking our website: www.solheim-foundation.ph.

The Solheim Foundation wishes to acknowledge the generosity of the members who responded to our request for contributions over the Holiday season.

Many thanks for your continued support!

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