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GHOSTLY NARRATIVES AND THE LIMITS OF FICTION

Hannah Manshel

Haunting Encounters: The Ethics of Reading across Boundaries of Difference by Joanne Lipson Freed. Cornell University Press, 2017. 220 pp. Cloth \$55.00.

Joanne Lipson Freed's *Haunting Encounters: The Ethics of Reading across Boundaries of Difference* is a valuable addition to the scholarly conversation about the writing and reading of silenced histories. Lipson Freed argues that the "ethical and imaginative claims of fictions that unsettle us with their difference" make space for ethical encounters between readers and texts that depict cultures different from their own (3). Focusing primarily on the way texts by and about people of color can have material effects on the ethical actions of white readers, Lipson Freed posits *haunting*—within the bounds of narrative—as an ethical mode of relation that requires neither identification on the basis of similarity nor absolute alterity, between reader and text. "Haunted fiction," she writes, "encourages its readers to interrogate the assumption that reading fiction, in and of itself, can be an ethically significant act" (24). Without making claims that fictional narratives can actively remedy the violence of omission or produce more just encounters, Lipson Freed is bold enough to make a small claim: that the ethical encounter of haunted reading matters on its own terms.

Each of the four main chapters pairs two narrative texts from different cultural contexts and shows how haunting, which she characterizes as an "intense, temporary,

and ultimately transformative encounter with unfathomable difference” (36), opens onto ethical relationships both among characters and, more importantly for her argument, between fictional narrative and reader. The first and strongest chapter pairs a canonical work of haunted fiction—Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*—with a Bengali novella, Mahaswete Devi’s “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha.” The novella, which is Lipson Freed’s only subject not originally written in English and which, significantly, is translated by Gayatri Spivak, becomes something of an anchor for *Haunting Encounters*, appearing repeatedly to demonstrate different facets of the ethics of haunted reading.

Lipson Freed locates within the texts she discusses the very haunted ethics of reading for which she advocates between reader and text. “Pterodactyl” is about Puran, a bourgeois Indian journalist sent to report on a famine in a tribal village. Despite his presumed worldliness and his wealth of empirical knowledge, Puran has trouble connecting with the tribal people about whom he is writing. An encounter with a pterodactyl—a living impossibility—leads Puran to have more ethical relationships with both the people in the village and his own family at home. Lipson Freed reads the pterodactyl, which Puran must attempt to

care for and communicate with in the absence of reference-book knowledge, as a transformative haunting figure. The pterodactyl is different enough to challenge Puran’s sense of relationality but similar enough to invite his empathy—for both the pterodactyl and for the villagers. In *Beloved*, the eponymous ghost challenges both Sethe’s and the reader’s claims to knowledge, “de-stabiliz[ing] meaning-making” for the other characters and for readers (46). In both texts, the supernatural creatures act as “ethical guides” for both the characters and the readers. Puran’s encounter with the pterodactyl and Sethe’s encounter with *Beloved* are encounters with difference that vex knowledge and that, because they are painful, are ultimately temporary but nonetheless provide an opening onto an ethical encounter. Importantly, Lipson Freed carefully argues that these creatures are not merely metaphors or symbolic stand-ins for the silences of history, but rather are more capacious figures through whom we might imagine the possibilities of ethical relation across difference.

In the following chapters, the book moves away from textual appearances of actual supernatural figures to discussion of the way this ethics of haunting works in the telling of the historical traumas of colonization, in “human rights novels” about people who

have been “disappeared” by repressive governments and in novels set in “dystopian” presents that are “haunted by futures that they themselves cannot presage” (136). The primary strength of Chapter 2, which focuses on Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, is its pointed critique of the fetishization of trauma in the name of the ethical encounter. Lipson Freed engages with arguments put forth by trauma theorists that trauma literature creates an exceptional opportunity for empathy because of the way traumatic stories invite their witnesses to identify with the teller. But Lipson Freed argues that the ethical success of these novels derives from aesthetic, formal choices on the part of the author, not from an inherent quality of trauma (96). By making this distinction clear, she avoids aestheticizing or instrumentalizing trauma. Ethical encounters, she argues, might be made possible through the haunting engendered by trauma, but they do not simply rise organically out of violence and pain. Rather, it is narrative form that makes possible an accounting for trauma that can “make the enduring consequences of imperialism sensible to readers as felt experience, rather than objective knowledge, in ways that can have meaningful ethical consequences” (70).

Though *Haunting Encounters* is invested in the relationship

between literature and material social change, the book is measured in its analysis of any successes that the texts might have in inciting ethical readership. Lipson Freed enumerates a range of risks and failures in novels that might purport to invite ethical action. In Chapter 3, “Invisible Victims, Visible Absences,” which discusses the film *Missing* (1982) and Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost*, she argues that though the work of haunting in each of these texts might open possibilities for readers to take material action, both texts are ultimately flawed. Not, she argues, because they are too fictional, and so cannot give rise to meaningful direct action, but rather because both texts end up further marginalizing the marginalized people with whom the texts might make ethical encounters possible. *Missing* ultimately reinforces American exceptionalism rather than critiquing the repressive Chilean regime that is its subject, and *Anil’s Ghost* ultimately fails to give distinctive characteristics to the disappeared and instead centers on its more cosmopolitan characters. The book is particularly convincing in Lipson Freed’s careful elaborations of the ways that American or otherwise majoritarian exceptionalism can make texts accessible to wide readerships but ultimately hinder their capabilities for leading their readers to translate their empathy into social action.

The book's title asserts that it is invested in reading "across boundaries of difference"; more often than not, those boundaries are not only between a majoritarian reader and a minoritarian character but between the readers' and characters' presents and various violent pasts. As such, it makes a valuable intervention from the field of narrative theory into the body of scholarship about the challenges of representing past violences in the wake of their historical erasure. *Haunting Encounters* might productively be put into conversation with Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and "Venus in Two Acts," with M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, and with Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*, all of which struggle, across different forms and genres, with the question of how to ethically represent unspeakable and silenced violence. If Philip's response to the problem of "there is no telling this story; it must be told" is to "untell" the story of the *Zong!* massacre with a haunted poetics that fractures narrative, Lipson Freed makes the case that narrative might in fact have

space within it for the telling of the impossible story.¹ That space, located somewhere in the distance between sameness and alterity, is what Lipson Freed calls haunting. After all, being haunted, writes Avery Gordon, "changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located."² *Haunting Encounters* ends with the refreshingly realist claim that though literature may have a tremendous capacity to incite some kinds of action in the material world, it is, ultimately, the responsibility of the reader to make what they will of the ethical encounters that fiction makes possible. Whether across time or across cultures, haunting and narrative, Lipson Freed seems to say, can only do so much.

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NOTES

1. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 189.
2. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 22.