Introduction

Ghosts and hauntings occupy an unusual space within cultural consciousness and academic discourse. Throughout their historical trajectory and within contemporary culture, themes of ghosts and hauntings consistently surface and remain as present today as they have ever been. In spite of the prevalence of these themes, both from a historical perspective and within our current cultural context, the subject of ghosts and hauntings is often relegated outside the bounds of serious academic study. This first issue of the Digital Literature Review aims to present ghosts and hauntings as relevant and necessary subjects worthy of analysis and critical attention. This volume seeks to illustrate that analysis of ghosts and hauntings reveals important truths about our cultural histories and contemporary lives.

The articles and critical editions collected here theorize ghosts and hauntings from the perspective of multiple disciplines and schools of critical thought. In their individual articles, authors utilize a range of frameworks to analyze historical and contemporary representations of ghosts and hauntings, including sociology, film theory, postcolonial theory, gender and queer studies, and psychoanalysis. In the critical editions, the co-editors provide annotated versions of published ghost stories. These ghost stories appear alongside introductions and collected documents, written and assembled by the co-editors, that contextualize the specific story's representations of ghosts and hauntings within particular historical periods and social movements. Out of this multidisciplinary approach come several questions that are of particular importance to this edition: How can we understand ghosts and hauntings as being socially, culturally, and historically inscribed or constituted? What does the study of ghosts and hauntings reveal about our historical and contemporary contexts? In what ways do ghosts and hauntings illuminate anxieties, particularly about the transgression of boundaries, including those of space and time, as well as of gender, race, and class? Finally, in what ways do ghosts and hauntings create opportunities for representing marginalized narratives and lives?

In their exploration of these questions, the authors and co-editors included in this issue call attention to important, recurring themes. Several authors explore how ghosts and hauntings function as a means of calling attention to institutional violence and oppression. These articles examine the impact of cultural hauntings and times in history that linger in the public memory. Often these moments are ones in which great atrocities are committed, acts of violence whose memory is an open wound within the cultural psyche. In “Spells, Spirits, and Charms in the Harlem Renaissance,” Jamie Battaglia examines the Harlem Renaissance and how Voodoo was used as a spectral weapon against the oppression of African Americans. The articles “Cultural Incursion into Wendigo Territory,” by Jackson Eflin, and “Dealing With Our Bloody Past: Repression vs. Recognition of American History in Stanley Kubrick’s The Shining,” by Kameron McBride, examine how histories of colonial
violence haunt modern popular culture. In “Except the Haunted, Hidden Thing Was Me: Ghostly Matters and Transsexual Haunting,” Esther Wolfe explores motifs of ghostliness and spectrality in transsexual representation, arguing for the recognition of transsexual oppression as a contemporary form of cultural haunting. Reading history as haunting allows a chance for the ghosts of the past to find some peace.

Ghosts also disorder our constructed understanding of time and place, displacing boundaries of inside and outside, private and public. In this vein, several authors look at how ghosts are constituted within various architectures and different types of social space. In “Beware the House that Feels: The Impact of Sentient House Hauntings on Literary Families,” Ashley Starling uses Freud's theory of the uncanny and its relationship to deconstruction to describe the unsettling nature of the haunted house through its disordering of private, domestic space. Rebekah Hobbs’s article, “A Place to Mourn: Why the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is Crucial to American Healing,” analyzes the ghostly architecture of the Vietnam memorial, examining the ways in which the memorial space blurs the boundaries of private and public.

Several authors in this issue explore how ghosts and hauntings portray the spectral, immaterial workings of media and technology, both historically and within contemporary culture. In “Resurfacing Specters in the House of Media: The Ghosts of Columbine in American Horror Story: Murder House,” Jared Lynch illustrates how the recurring narrative framing of the Columbine tragedy in the media renders the event ghostly. In “Multilayered Specter, Multifaceted Presence: A Critical Edition of H.P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Tomb,’” co-editors Shelby Hatfield, Rebekah Hobbs, and Jared Lynch use Lovecraft’s short story to contextualize the ghostly disordering of time and space in relation to emerging technologies such as the telephone and long-distance travel that altered the ways people of the early 1900s conceived time and distance.

Ghosts and hauntings also express anxieties about the capitalist economic system, particularly the immaterial functioning of markets; the spectral relationships between capital, labor, and production; and the divisions of class. In this vein, several editions in this issue explore how ghosts are used both to resist and reassert dominant class and economic structures. In “The Peasant Ghost: A Critical Edition of ‘The Ghost of Sakura’ as Adapted by A. B. Mitford,” co-editors Kameron McBride and Jordan Meyer illustrate how ghosts and hauntings function as a means by which to manage and maintain the class structures of feudal Japan through the lens of a traditional folktale. In “Dead End Job: A Critical Edition of ‘The Transferred Ghost’ by Frank Stockton,” co-editors Jackson Eflin, Wendy Faunce, and Brittany Means explore “The Transferred Ghost” to show how Stockton uses the theme of haunting to make a humorous critique of capitalism and institutional bureaucracy. Finally, in “Shadows and Specters: A Critical Edition of ‘The Shadow in the Corner’
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by M.E. Braddon,” co-editors Rachael Heffner, Elizabeth Palmer, Malorie Palmer, and Esther Wolfe explore M.E Braddon’s short story to illustrate how the haunting motif is used to represent the spectral absent-presence of the female working class during the Victorian Period.

Several authors also consider how ghosts and hauntings express the spectrality of gender roles, as well as the historical condition of women’s oppression. In “Ghostly Hands: A Critical Edition of Henry James’s ‘The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,’” co-editors Morgan Aprill and Lauren Lutz use their edition of Henry James’s tale to portray the ways in which complex dynamics of gender and power in nineteenth-century America are communicated through the trope of spectral, disembodied hands. In “Ghosts of Loss: Rossetti’s Haunted Poetry,” co-editors Ruth Weller-Passman, Mackenzie Fluharty, and Ashley Starling illustrate how the ghostly structures of poetry provided an outlet for women of the Victorian era to communicate their grief, loss, and fears as well as their marginalized subjectivities and secret selves.

Other articles in this volume stand alone in their representations of ghosts and hauntings. In “At Home in Babel: The Language of Hyperreality in the Immigrant Narrative,” author Abigail Shachar shows how the ghostly concept of the simulacrum or the hyperreal reveals the haunted, spectral nature of immigrant narratives in the United States. In “The Spirit of a Thought in a Fictional World: Summoning Ghosts to the Stage,” author Ruth Weller-Passman investigates ghostliness through the medium of theatre, unpacking the utilization of props and the use of silence to show the spectrality of the stage.

Taken together, the articles in this first issue of the Digital Literature Review illuminate the underlying cultural contexts of historical and contemporary representations of ghosts and hauntings, and they explore the ways authors use ghosts to express national traumas, cultural anxieties, and silenced voices. In this way, the articles in this issue also demonstrate the relevance of the study of ghosts and hauntings to current academic discourse. These articles also touch on a deeper kind of work. In traditional tales of haunting, ghosts haunt the living because a violence done remains unrecognized and unresolved. In this way, to study ghosts and hauntings is to engage in a collective, cultural working-through of the injustice of both the present and the past. Ghosts linger because they are unheard. This issue does the work of listening to them.