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The Hauntology of Everyday Life

Sadeq Rahimi

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“Building an arc from Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* via Lacan, Winnicott and Derrida to *The Hauntology of Everyday Life*, Rahimi lucidly traces the trajectories through which hauntings have become the hallmark of today’s hyper-mediated world. Highlighting a consequential shift from the spectacular violence of traumatic events to the slow structural violence of today’s mediascapes in which networked subjectivities are haunted by ghosts in the machine, he introduces his readers to emergent spectral cyberworlds in which “deep fakes in swarming circulation” host ghosts and revenants whose capacities reach far beyond the human senses. In the shadow of AI, however, digital activism emerges that harnesses the powers of ghosts for the decolonization of haunted minds and everyday worlds.”

—Gabriele Schwab, PhD, Distinguished Professor, *Department of Comparative Literature and Anthropology, University of California, Irvine*

“The Hauntology of Everyday Life is an original, insightful, and timely inquiry into the spectrality of presence. Combining insightful philosophical, cultural, and anthropological reflections with an engrossing psychoanalytic account of Jacques Lacan’s theory of trauma, Sadeq Rahimi has written an intelligent meditation on hauntological thinking that enriches our understanding of ghosts in lived experience, historical memory, the social world, and justice.”

—Marita Vyrigioti, Associate Lecturer, *University of East London*

“Sadeq Rahimi offers us a remarkably documented text that demonstrates an impressive culture. His reflection around Hauntology is situated at the crossroad between psychoanalysis and philosophy. In dialogue with Lacan, he takes up the idea that a lack is inherent in desire and inscribes it in a broader theorisation: desire as well as words and language, personal and collective representations are haunted by a lack, an unreachable primitive signifier in quest for presentation. This introduces a kind of “worryness” in our relationship to reality, including the very notion of Justice. At the same time, such a worry translates into an ethical responsibility inviting to pay attention to the first signifiers haunting us and to lost voices. Such an approach raises an original and important lighting on a world to become. This complex text is presented in a pedagogical mode that renders our navigation easy and inviting.”

—Ellen Corin, PhD, Psychoanalyst and Scientific Secretary, the Montreal Psychoanalytic Society, Emeritus Researcher and Professor in Psychiatry and Anthropology, *McGill University*

The everyday life is full of ghosts, which means full of *petit objet a*, full of *emanet*, full of *La Chose, das Ding*, things-in-themselves that are not things at all, but the haunting of their desire and the experience of their absence. Their assemblage constitutes the *hauntology of everyday life*, Sadeq Rahimi argues in this elegantly haunting volume. Reading the intergenerational transmission of affect as constitutive of hauntology, Rahimi presents the complicated and dense texture of memory by anchoring it in specific phantoms of the everyday—a half pack of cigarettes and a ten-Franc coin, given as objects and claimed as *mana*, in words given as things and claimed as ghosts, in the crypt of everyday language that constantly transfers presence to and through absence, in the virtual subjectivities of the present and the haunting presence of the pantemporal (war, colonialism, hunger, genocide, slavery). “What haunts is not that which is gone, it is that which was expected to come but whose condition of arrival has been foreclosed, and the ghost is an advocate of the promised future that was unrightfully cancelled when the past was destroyed” Rahimi writes, fixing thus time (and thus being) as a haunted concept. This is a book that reweaves the warp and the weft of structuralism and symbolism by revisiting the trajectories of language theory and psychoanalysis, from Jacobson, Sebeok, Derrida, and Kristeva through Freud, Victor Turner, Lacan, Raymond Williams, and the political project of Protevi. It is a demanding book that rewards the reader with nuanced and careful microreadings of grand theories.

—Neni Panourgia, PhD, Associate Professor, *Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, Columbia University*

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Foreword by Byron J. Good

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*To the many ghosts, living and dead, who have left their marks on me.
And to the many whose lives my ghost will mark.*

LIVING WITH GHOSTS: FOREWORD TO SADEQ
RAHIMI, *THE HAUNTOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE*

Anthropologists live with ghosts. Many of us live and work for important periods of our lives in societies and communities in which spirits and ghosts are part of the everyday social world, almost as present as family members and neighbors, colleagues, and friends. Our driver in Bali honks his horn for a moment as he passes certain crossroads or groves of trees to show respect to the spirits he senses are there. Once driving at night, our car engine simply stopped; while we checked the carburetor, he spent a moment conveying his apology to a spirit he had offended by failing to give proper acknowledgement. Fifteen minutes later we were on our way. A Javanese friend, sleeping in a house we rented in Bali for a few weeks, was troubled at night, until he enlisted Balinese friends in making an offering to the spirit that had been keeping him awake. A man in a village in Java where our friends live sold a piece of his land for a cell phone tower. Not long after, he went mad, being haunted by the spirit of the land he sold without proper permission. My Javanese “god daughter” was lured into marriage by an East Javanese man through love magic, her father believes, and kept her in a violent domestic relationship by continuing to carry out magical rituals, until her father finally enlisted a healer to help free her. A physician friend was troubled by stones being thrown onto his roof at night. Thinking they were being thrown by neighborhood youth, he sent his night watch staff out to find who was doing it, only to learn that no one was there, though the stone throwing continued. He called in a Javanese paranormal, who told him his land was once a Chinese graveyard, and the ghosts were troubling him. The paranormal made offerings,

and only then did things become quiet. A *kiyayi*, head of an Islamic residential school or *pesantren*, tells us how when he began clearing the bamboo along the river to make space to develop his school, he would hear the spirits crying at night. The spirits, he told us, use this river as a highway to pass back and forth from Mount Merapi, the sacred volcano north of Yogyakarta, down to the sea to the south, where Nyi Roro Kidul, the great Queen of the South Sea, resides. And so it goes.

Spirits, ghosts, and hauntings are part of everyday life in central Java, where we have lived part-time and worked for the past 25 years. It is through this lens, that of an anthropologist of Indonesia, that I read this manuscript by Sadeq Rahimi on the hauntology of the everyday. It is also through the lens of a friend and longtime collaborator in thinking through the place of hauntology in anthropology, particularly psychological anthropology (see Rahimi & Good, 2019). What is the place of hauntology as a conceptual and interpretive construct for anthropology? Should hauntology be focused on historical trauma and the politicization of memory? What is special about hauntology in contexts in which ghosts and spirits are a part of everyday life? How should anthropologists position themselves within local discourses of haunting ghosts? How do we theorize the “subject” for whom haunting is a reality? Why and how is it that at certain moments in the lives of individuals and societies there seems to be an eruption of ghosts and haunting? And how do we understand responses to such hauntings? This essay represents Sadeq’s formulation of the grounds from which questions such as these might be addressed.

Long-standing forms of engagement with the spirit world, as well as new and innovative forms, are as much a part of contemporary modernity in Southeast Asia—and in many parts of the world—as are high-tech medical care and science and engineering, forms of entrepreneurial capitalism, contested legal practices, or constantly evolving religious activities. Encounters with the spirit world may be deadly serious. At the same time, playful engagements with the local world of ghosts and hauntings are key domains of contemporary popular culture and cinema, certainly in Indonesia and Thailand.¹ *Pocong*, ghosts/corpses wrapped in white shrouds that have mistakenly remained “tied” at burial, so that the spirits remain captured rather than freed at burial and float about threateningly, are standard figures in the most popular genre of Indonesian cinema. They are also, quite often, vividly present in the hallucinations of those Javanese suffering psychotic illnesses whom my colleagues and I have come to know. And when Javanese urban *kampung* or neighborhoods charged

with COVID-19 control were closed to persons wishing to enter or leave, streets entering the *kampung*s were often guarded by young men dressed as *pocong*. *Pocong* are thus present as realities in everyday life and popular culture, as well as in the direct experiences of those open to that part of the world partially hidden but known to be present.

It is not surprising that spirits, ghosts, and haunting are common sources of ethnographic writing in Southeast Asia. It is surprising, however, that analyses drawing on the writings on hauntology remain relatively absent in anthropology until the last few years. Since the publication of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993, 1994 in English translation), hauntology has been a key analytic project within cultural studies—indeed, so central that in 2013 María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren drew together a large anthology of essays, published between 1999 and 2011, as *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*. In the Introduction to the volume, the editors pose the central question of “how, at the end of the twentieth century, a specific metamorphosis occurred of ghosts and haunting from possible actual entities, plot devices, and clichés of common parlance ... into influential conceptual metaphors permeating global (popular) culture and academia alike” (p. 1). This metamorphosis, they note, was signaled by the “sudden preference expressed in 1990s cultural criticism for the somewhat archaic terms ‘specter’ and ‘spectrality’ over the mundane ‘ghost’ and ‘ghostliness’” (pp. 1–2). While acknowledging publication of *Specters of Marx* as being the catalyst for what some have called the “spectral turn,” they describe the broader influences leading to this theoretical “metamorphosis”—the crucial role of “trauma studies,” the larger Derridean corpus and the emergence of deconstruction within literary criticism, as well as graphic and photographic arts in which spectrality is a critical conceptual dimension. Representative essays that emerged within cultural studies from this period are drawn together under headings such as “The Spectral Turn,” “Spectropolitics,” “Spectral Media,” and “Haunted Historiographies.”

While “spectrality” framed a large body of writing in cultural studies and literary criticism, “trauma” and “haunting” have been key terms among anthropologists in the emergence of what Derrida called for under the rubric of *hauntology*. Not surprisingly, given the ubiquity of settings of conflict and unspeakable violence, newer generations of anthropologist have increasingly found themselves working in what Michael Fischer (1991) has called “post-trauma politics.” Anthropological writing in which “haunting” figures prominently includes writing about societies in

which a past history of violence seems to haunt the present in powerful ways, as well as work undertaken in settings of recent or on-going conflict. While images of haunting have long figured in writing about colonialism (Good, Good, and Grayman, 2010), a more recent body of work has focused on “historical trauma” within indigenous societies, where the traces of violence of settler colonialism remain powerful. Explicit use of the powerful metaphors of ghosts and haunting, linking the work directly or indirectly to Derrida and classic works in hauntology, is found in titles such as *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Kwon, 2008), *War and Shadows: The Haunting of Vietnam* (Gustafsson, 2009), *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Cho, 2008), *Seeing Like a Child: Inheriting the Korean War* (Han, 2021), and *Ghosts of the New City: Spirits, Urbanity, and the Ruins of Progress in Chiang Mai* (Johnson, 2014).

Other anthropological writing on haunting and hauntology has grown out of ethnographers’ experiences working in conflict or post-conflict settings or amidst unthinkable natural disasters. Certainly, that is true of my own work, referenced by Sadeq in the Acknowledgements to this text. In 2005, following the Great Indian Ocean Tsunami that killed nearly 200,000 persons along the coasts of the Indonesian province of Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra, my wife Prof. Mary-Jo Good and I began collaborating with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in developing mental health responses for communities of survivors. As we write elsewhere, the great influx of humanitarian organizations in response to the tsunami quickly faced the complexity of an on-going military conflict between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian military.² Though my initial use of the term haunting was in a presentation written immediately after a trip to begin working on a post-conflict project with IOM, which I titled “Haunted by Aceh,” my real commitment to making hauntology a central concept in psychological anthropology grew out of the next several years working directly in the field with persons who had experienced horrifying violence from the Indonesian special forces (see Good, 2015). There is something deeply disturbing about listening to intense stories of interrogation and torture, challenging one to ask quite fundamental questions about human nature. Ghosts there were—we heard explicit stories about dreamtime visits of those killed in the tsunami or the conflict. But haunting was present in the on-going experiences of those who had deeply troubling intrusive memories of violence and torture witnessed or experienced personally, memories that would come over and again, day and night, and experienced in the present tense. Our own

experiences were of course second hand, listening to stories as part of a program of mental health outreach work into Acehnese villages we helped IOM develop, a system of care that provided relief from the sense of immediacy of the memories for many. However, throughout this work it was hard to distinguish neatly between the “haunting” experienced by those subjected to violence and the haunting we ourselves experienced, as did the care providers. It is this sense of haunting that has served as the basis for many of my own reflections about haunting and hauntology since that time.

Living in the presence of everyday ghosts, as we do in Java and Bali and elsewhere in Indonesia, living with the ghosts of violence in Aceh, similar to the violence now being perpetrated by the same special forces in West Papua, raises a host of problems for anthropological writing and analysis. So too does living in the presence of that part of Indonesian history that includes not only massive colonial violence but the killings of nearly a million people in 1965, killings which were a part of the Cold War violence throughout Southeast Asia but enacted by one wing of the Indonesian armed forces that brought Suharto to power. On the one hand, such experiences raise the question of the extent to which writing on hauntology should be grounded in what del Pilar Blanco and Peeren call simply “trauma studies.” Avery Gordon, in her classic *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008 edition), argues that “haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied.... Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them” (p. xvi). Clearly attention to haunting raises questions about the urgent and haunting appearance of ghosts of multiple pasts, carried on as forms of structural violence and suppressed memories. But asking about the place of trauma studies in what Rahimi describes as the “hauntology of everyday life,” as well as to the on-going “abusive systems of power,” opens a wider set of issues.

On the other hand, living in the presence of ghosts raise other classic issues of how we as ethnographers position ourselves in worlds in which spirits, ghosts, and hauntings are part of everyday life, as well as in our ethnographic texts. When I opened this Preface by saying that “anthropologists live with ghosts,” I might have said “anthropologists live with those who live with ghosts.” In an important paper on what they describe

as an effort to develop a “critical hauntology,” Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln (2015) distinguish provocatively between “primary haunting” and “secondary haunting,” focusing particularly on distinguishing literal haunting—by real ghosts—and metaphoric haunting, which refers (a la Avery Gordon and others) to a wide range of phenomena that haunt societies and demand repair. Though not explicitly referenced is the question, raised by recent proponents of the “ontological turn” in anthropology, of the radical otherness of worlds, of those with ghosts versus those without ghosts and spirits, for example. Do primary hauntings belong only to very specific worlds, those in which “real” ghosts are present, while secondary hauntings belong more broadly to all worlds, worlds “haunted” by histories of violence and structures of inequality? Does all anthropology have to position itself within one “ontological” world or another?

Questions such as these make this book by Sadeq Rahimi so welcome. In a few words, I want simply to give hints to the reader about how Rahimi’s important text reframes ways we might address questions such as these, while raising new questions. The text begins by puzzling why Freud used as epigraph to his book *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* the two lines from Goethe’s *Faust*, “Now the air is so filled with ghosts / that no one knows how to escape them.” Rahimi’s answer frames the text that follows: “To be bold, the answer is because ghosts and haunting are so central to Freud’s work that he could not avoid them ... What *The Hauntology of Everyday Life* is meant to put forward is that the very space of everyday life is so filled with ghosts that nobody can avoid them—in fact, that the very experience of everyday life is built around a process that we can call hauntological, and whose major by-product is a steady stream of ghosts.” One important implication of this claim is immediately apparent. As Freud argued, if we are to understand the human subject, we must begin with the everyday. And the everyday is filled with ghosts. Therefore, we must base our understanding of human subjectivity on a “haunted” or “hauntological” subject, on the acknowledgement that the subject can be and is always haunted. What follows from this, in response to the Lincoln and Lincoln suggestion that my Javanese friends live in a different ontological world than do I, is that we all live in a world of ghosts. This is of course a more classical anthropological understanding of the human subject as not completely dependent upon diverse ontological worlds, with little to bridge them (except metaphorically). Ghosts are part of everyday reality in the very diverse worlds my Javanese and Indonesian friends live, as they are in my own. Indeed, as suggested by Rahimi’s own epigraph, we all live