

COMMENTS

HAUNTED PLACES

Valdimar Tr. Hafstein

“On n’habite que des lieux hantés,” Michel de Certeau (1980: 196) noted in a work I often find reasons to revisit. It is one of the more inspiring attempts from the last quarter of the twentieth century to reinvent ethnology and the study of everyday life: “Haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (1984: 108). Michel de Certeau’s oft-quoted dictum came to mind more than once as I read the articles in this special issue on *Revisiting Ethnologia Europaea*. As Marie Sandberg explains in her introduction, revisiting may mean “to visit again, return, reexamine, revise, recycle, or even retire.” In the context of the present issue, however, the use of the term refers primarily to considering something again from a perspective altered by the passage of time. But revisiting also refers to coming back. And sure enough, the revenant comes back to visit the living. If nothing else, his visit makes them consider things again from a different perspective. Reading the contributions to this special issue, both senses of the verb ring true.

The guiding concept of revisiting is thus a rich one and the authors put it to many interesting uses: from bringing long dead Norwegians into contemporary conversations on fieldwork, collaborative research, and dialogic knowledge production (Hastrup) to waking up the ghost of the once mighty ethnocartography to contend with the highly current practice of controversy mapping from science and technology studies (STS) (Munk & Elgaard Jensen). These revisits presuppose in every case, however, that there is a relevant past to revisit and a disciplinary context in which such time travel makes sense, with the journal as its vehicle. In turn, revisits such as these,

in their recurrence, perform the discipline: they give it (an air of) substance and continuity; they trace its boundaries and reaffirm its difference, even if the terms in which they do so change slightly (or tremendously) over time. They are among our more interesting border practices (to borrow a term from Fredrik Nilsson’s article in this issue). They instantiate our spectral imaginations.

Revisiting follows an earlier departure. In European ethnology, the revisit is the counterpart to the farewell: the “Abschied vom Volksleben” of the 1960s and 70s. That this is the case is very much in evidence in the authors’ contributions to this issue: contemporary ethnology can here be seen reaching back across the “new ethnology” of the last forty years to the “old ethnology” of the early and mid-twentieth century, sometimes directly, as in Karin Gustavsson’s “Returning to the Archive”, and in other cases by way of mediators, as in Signe Mellemegaard’s article on Bjarne Stoklund’s “translation work between two incommensurable paradigms” (Mellemegaard, this issue). Bringing old debates and arguments back into the present to confront current challenges begs the question of who is visiting whom: are we visiting our disciplinary ancestors or are they visiting us?

“Such visits can take many shapes and forms,” the editor states matter-of-factly, as if introducing a collection of ghost stories. And in one sense, that is exactly what she is doing. This issue reveals European ethnology as a haunted ground, its ghosts lurking in the library, in the dusty pages of old journals and in books that the authors read in their student days, but

also hiding in the nooks and crannies of concepts, ways of doing, and in deep-seated attitudes and assumptions, as the authors reveal in their respective contributions. Reading the special issue from front cover to back cover, one is struck by the time depth of ethnological practice and perspectives; the field is, to quote Michel de Certeau once more, “haunted by many different sprites hidden there in silence, spirits one can ‘invoke’ or not” (1984: 108; “hanté par des esprits multiples, tapis là en silence et qu’on peut ‘évoquer’ ou non,” 1980: 196). This issue invokes them.

In addition to departments, societies, congresses, and journals, one of the hallmarks of a scholarly discipline is surely a temporality in argumentation; a mode of writing, analyzing, and arguing that revisits and brings into the present previous writings, analyses, and arguments. Through the very act of revisiting, they are brought into the same conversation-writ-large and the contours of that conversation are thus defined.

Another way to put this is to say that a discipline is a haunted place; the revenants help form the discipline, or better yet, turning from the noun to the verb, the dead discipline the writings of the living, who summon them precisely for that task. Their invocation adds a dimension to topical questions, namely depth of the temporal kind. It corrupts current theories with history; it disrupts new orthodoxies by stirring up old heterodoxies.

There is a notable difference, however, between the ghosts who discipline the ethnologist and those who discipline, for example, her neighbor from sociology. The haunting that makes sociology inhabitable comes in the guise of familiar names and faces: the specters of Marx and Durkheim and Weber, to name some of the more famous revenants. Rereading them and writing yet another exegesis of their work seems as common and ordinary in sociology as one imagines that going to a séance must have been in Victorian London. Ethnologists seem less often to be visited by individual, named ghosts; the rather exceptional nature of the present issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* is a testament to this. After all, how often do we actually revisit the writings even of someone

like Sigurd Erixon, the major player in mid-twentieth century European ethnology?

To be sure, as Tine Damsholt and Astrid Pernille Jespersen make evident in their article on “Innovation, Resistance or Tinkering”, ethnology is a haunted ground. Its haunting, however, is less individualized, more anonymous. It takes the form of disciplinary tradition, apparent in a special kind of sensibility, a way of doing, and in more or less implicit assumptions, perpetuated in part through conceptual kits (regardless even of changing terminologies). Another way to put it is that ethnology’s ghosts are less likely to be invoked through the author function than those of some neighboring disciplines; one might say that the subject of ethnology resembles in this regard its objects of study. The time-depth and *longue durée* of ethnological practices and perspectives reflect to some extent “the inertness and resistance of everyday life” (Damsholt & Jespersen, this issue) that the ethnological toolkit helps to pry apart and hold up for inspection.

But to be honest, the anonymity of ethnology’s ghosts may be indicative of something else as well: that compared to some of its neighbors in the humanities and social sciences, ethnology is fairly undisciplined. Its disciplinary unity is not as coherent and confident as that of its more securely institutionalized neighbors. I suggested above that a certain temporality in argumentation is characteristic of a unified discipline. Taking a note from Heidegger, one might take that argument a step further and maintain that the unity of a discipline, its existence and identity, is grounded in temporality. The past (or, in Heidegger’s terms, *Gewesenheit*, having-been-ness) is projected out of a future toward which our actions in the present aspire and with reference to which they matter and make sense ([1953]1996: 299–304; [1975]1988: 265). For the sake of argument, let us read Heidegger’s “Being” in the sense of being a discipline (I will be the first to admit that this is an unorthodox reading, but for present purposes I find it an interesting one). We might then say, following Heidegger, that being a discipline involves making analyses and arguments in the present that aspire to a future in which we better understand the

discipline's objects, and that out of that future we project a disciplinary past, on which we rely or from which we take distance, while always recognizing it as our own. Seen through this lens, our ethnological having-been-ness, our disciplinary past, is less palpable and not as well defined as that of some neighboring disciplines. That is not for a lack of it; there is more than enough to go around. Rather, if the past is projected out of a future to which our present actions aspire, I would suggest that perhaps this future is not as well conceived of as it might be. To some extent, this may be explained by the partial and differential institutionalization of the field, with its many names and identities. But part of the reason surely lies with us, its practitioners.

The depth of the discipline's temporality is of course relative, depending to what we compare it. I have drawn a comparison to sociology, but a very different picture emerges if one compares ethnology instead to recent formations like cultural studies or STS. While these are sometimes content to present themselves as interdisciplinary, its practitioners also grapple with projecting a disciplinary past out of a future to which they aspire. To that end, they summon ghosts whose historical relation to the disciplines they are awakened to uphold is tenuous at best. In this issue, Anders Kristian Munk and Torben Elgaard Jensen note that STS/actor-network theory (ANT) in the past couple of decades has been building a "gallery of forefathers" that includes William James, John Dewey, and Gabriel Tarde. Taken together, these "possible inspirations and forerunners (...) might define ANT as part of a specific tradition in the humanities and social sciences" (Munk & Jensen, this issue). The example makes clear that as far as scholarly disciplines are concerned, Heidegger's analysis of temporality is spot on: the future comes first, and the past projects from it. What STS may have been is a function of what it might become. Such temporalization is at the heart of the disciplinarization of knowledge, or the formation and reformation of scholarly disciplines.

Speaking for myself, I find it interesting to belong to a discipline with an overabundance of ghosts, a discipline haunted by a rich and varied and not always exemplary past, one characterized by "an uncanniness of the already there", to borrow another phrase from Michel de Certeau (de Certeau, Giard & Mayol [1994]1998: 133); one that need not hunt for all of its ghosts in other fields. I hasten to add that I say this not out of purism or prudishness, both of which I think would be misplaced; ethnology's intellectual promiscuity is one of its great virtues. There is nothing wrong with summoning ghosts from other times and places, but to my mind it is most interesting to summon them into a house that is already haunted – our house. To end where we began, "haunted places are the only ones people can live in."

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