One, Two, Three, Four, There’s a Shadow in Your Dorm:

A Scientific Investigation of Goucher’s Ghost Stories

Part 2:

The spooky events described by Ms. Hanna Dowling sure seem like fright tale material. However, all of them can be easily explained with the help of physics, chemistry, and psychology. Let’s begin with the reports of the doll walking around the building she is kept in. First, we should once again remind ourselves that no one on campus has actually seen her do so. All reports come in the form of footsteps and shadows. According to Goucher Psychology Professor Thomas Ghirardelli, auditory hallucinations are often created by the brain because every human being interprets reality differently. To help me understand the topic better, he offered as an example the psychological phenomenon of pareidolia. Pareidolia is defined as the tendency to see familiar things in inanimate objects. This condition mostly includes seeing human faces where they should not be seen. A very famous example of that is Man in Moon. It refers to a period of time when humans on Earth were convinced they could see the features of a human face engraved into the surface of the moon. In reality, what they saw was the position of light and shadow on the moon at a specific time of day. Dr. Ghirardelli explains this phenomenon by our tendency to seek human facial features in everything we see, perhaps due to the need of identifying ourselves with something we are seeing. Auditory hallucinations could have a similar origin. From what I have understood from Dr. Ghirardelli’s explanation, hearing inexplicable sounds automatically makes us compare them to something we know, and sometimes, something we don’t really like to hear. The said footsteps, for example could have been simple tapping from a loose cabinet door in the wind, tapping from maintenance work outside, or even a mouse crawling on the floor. The same goes for what Lilian Fernandez and her friend Devin Brashear experienced in Gamble 314. The lead test I took of the paint outside the room was negative, which excluded lead-induced hallucinations. However, let’s look at their testimony logically. Gamble 314 is located on the 3rd floor of the Gamble building. In an audio recording of her tale, Fernandez mentions that they had realized at the time they were “really the only residents on our hall.” The way she phrased this already gives me clues as to what might really have happened. She indicated that in their preparations for residences, they were rearranging the furniture in the room, resulting in a distinct sound of wood sliding across the laminate floor. Later, when settling in for the night, they both heard the same distinct sound of furniture being dragged across the floor. She commented: “And out of nowhere, we hear this sound, like someone was dragging a chair across the floor. But it didn’t even sound like it was coming below us, or even beside us…or even above us. I mean, we ruled that out, since…we were on the very top floor.” They were both terrified, and unable to identify any other source of the sound. “And we kind of stopped. We were like: Oh, my goodness. This is a ghost. Like, what was that?” Their terror only intensified when, thirty minutes later, they herd distinct knocking on the wall of the room. “And that’s when we started to realize, maybe there *is* a ghost.” Soon, both of them came out of their dorm to investigate. But outside, there was no one, and it was the relatively late hour of 8 P.M. But their supernatural ordeal was not done yet, as they soon saw the light outside of their room was out, something they surprisingly failed to notice for the three days they were living there.

However spooky all of this may sound, it could once again be explained with various physical and psychological phenomena. Let’s take it all from the very top. Fernandez informed me that when her and Brashear moved in, they were “really the only residents” in the room. What made me play the recording back several times was the word *really*. By definition, “really” is an expression of certainty. But when used in certain ways, “really” betrays a thin note of doubt. Take, for example, a mother trying to clear her son’s name: “He’s never *really* hurt anybody.” However, paradoxical it may seem, this sentence could also be rephrased as “He hasn’t hurt anybody, as perceived by me.”, or, “He’s never hurt anybody, as far as I know” In the same way, Fernandez saying they were “really the only residents” on that floor, could mean they were “The only residents on that floor, *as far as I know.*” She indicated that before they walked around the area, knocking on doors to see if anyone would answer. But personally, I greatly doubt they knocked on every single door, especially given their necessity to hurry up and prepare for a move-in. This could mean that unbeknownst to the two students, someone, especially faculty or workers, could have still been in the building. She described the sound of furniture sliding across the laminate floor as “loud” and “annoying”, and claimed she heard the same exact sound when a mysterious, non-existent chair started moving across the room. From personal experience, I can safely say that the walls in my dorm room are thick enough to pass any sort of sound coming from neighboring areas. Even now, as I am writing this, I recall a personal experience in my own home, when my next door neighbors were hitting on the wall, possibly with a hammer. However, to me it sounded exactly like one of the kitchen cabinets opening and closing. In fact, the sound was so similar, I started checking all cabinets, and figured out the source of the sound only about ten minutes later. The same exact thing likely happened to Fernandez and Brashear. In conclusion, it can be said that the two most likely fell victims to acoustic pareidolia. That is, pareidolia associated with sounds. As for the mysteriously turned off light, it might have been turned off all the time, and the girls simply did not notice it with all of their preparation to get things done. One of them may have turned it off without noticing. But there is also a third theory, which was seemingly confirmed when I examined the Mildred Dunnock theatre.

Upon entering the Meyerhof building, I looked for someone I could talk to about the paranormal events in the theatre. I was greeted by Ms. Allison Campbell, Theatre Professor and Production Director in the Blackbox Theatre. She admitted that she hadn’t ever had any encounters with “Millie” herself, and therefore, couldn’t be of much help. Despite this, she allowed me to stay in, and take photographs of the structure. The theatre itself is a spacious structure with tall walls, and a ceiling full of lights. But what makes it fitting for a role in campus horror stories it that it is entirely painted black, thus earning its name. The walls and the ceiling make one feel as if they were literally inside a black box, something I doubt claustrophobics would appreciate.

I remained there for about an hour, taking pictures of every electrical outlet, wire, and lightbulb I could, in order to understand where exactly the problem was. It was then that I noticed something slightly suspicious. On the wall across from me was a wire. Though not an uncommon thing to exist in such a place, this wire drew my attention due to its position. It began somewhere inside the booth above the stage, and passed through a very narrow opening in the wall, to end up getting lost somewhere under the floor. An idea then popped into my mind, but I quickly dismissed it, thinking that I was jumping to conclusions too fast. I took a picture nonetheless, and decided to focus on other areas. Little did I know that what I noticed then, would play a key role in the debunking of the theatre haunting a bit later. Meanwhile, my next big surprise walked right through the door.

His name is Tom Gill, and he is a Facility Maintenance Services employee. And when I shared my purpose with him, he told me a story that was unlike any other I had heard so far. And, perhaps, the scariest of all. According to Gill, he used to often go to Julia Rogers before the building was renovated, and every time he visited, a strange feeling enveloped him. He confessed that any time he found himself anywhere in Julia Rogers, he could feel, “…that I wasn’t alone. Maybe that there was another something there.” Furthermore, he seemed to blame his experience on a shocking fact from our institution’s history, one that I only then learned for the first time. “After that”, he says, “I found out that there was a story involving Hampton Mansion, the farm next door, when Goucher was still a plantation, there was a love affair between two people…and…apparently, I think, the male…came back on horseback without, without his head.”

Unbelievable. Goucher College had been built on a former slavery plantation? Not a very historically ethical place to build an educational institution on. On the other hand, a very good way to try and correct a horrible past. One way or another, I needed more information. Who were the two lovers? Was it a passionate liaison between two hopeful slaves? Unlikely. The male is mentioned to be riding on horseback, something that was allowed mostly to the elite of the time, and certainly to no slave. Was this then an escape attempt? Or was it an affection between an enslaved woman and a higher member of pre-civil war society? That could possibly explain the gruesome end of the latter, as he could have been executed by his peers for insubordination. Mr. Gill suggested that for more information on the topic, I would have to contact Tina Sheller, Assistant Professor of Visual and Material Culture, who, he said, knew many things about the time when the plantation existed. But for now, having no clue as to how to explain the haunting of the theatre, I had another job. I had to figure out what had caused Mr. Gill to feel a mysterious presence. In the next few days, I decided to figure out the “curse” of Julia Rogers. I took an elevator and went down to the building’s basement. Once again, I photographed everything I thought to be even slightly suspicious. All I found were some minor signs of rust, and some tools used by maintenance workers. For better or for worse, I also took close-up pictures of the chemicals used for cleaning the basement. But a Google Search of each one did not reveal any of the side effects I suspected. Subsequent lead tests turned negative. Although Mr. Gill had indicated that the incident had occurred to him before the building underwent renovation, thus getting my hopes high for lead, he pointed to the incident as having occurred “11 years ago”. He must have meant the 2009 renovation. However, as I was informed by FMS staff member Linda Barone, the building had been previously “gutted and remodeled” in 1986, eight years after the EPA lead ban. It was more than enough time to implement them. And so, I can now explain the ghost sightings in Julia Rogers by only two theories:

**Theory One: There are other chemicals in the building, or even on campus in general, that no one is aware of, that are causing people to hallucinate.**

Though not yet completely refuted, this theory is highly unlikely. First, Goucher College has what is called a “Chemical Hygiene Plan”. It is a plan that consists of high safety measures to avoid a chemical incident, which was last revised in January of 2020. The plan states that Facility Management Services “Tests Eyewash Stations Every 3 Months”, “Inspects safety showers, eyewash stations, and hoods annually”, as well as “Reviews construction, modification, or renovation plans for safety design. Second, even if the plan was at some point violated, the number of people seeing ghosts would be much higher. And although there is a possibility that everyone is affected differently due to the varying strength of their immune system, the low frequency of the sightings pulls us away from this theory.

**Theory Two: Just like Fernandez and Brashear, people claiming to have seen deceased professors wandering the building all fell victims to optical pareidolia, or a similar phenomenon.**

To prove this theory, we must recall another way in which these phenomena commonly manifest themselves: Witness misidentification. How do we identify faces? According to the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, about 350 people have been released from prison after being found innocent by DNA evidence, as of 2017. The greater part of these people find themselves in prison due to having been misidentified by eyewitnesses. According to this research, the validity of eyewitness identification depends on the conditions under which the crime was committed. That includes the presence of distractions, the quality of lighting, and the mental state of the witnesses themselves. Another important factor is the level of stress under which they find themselves, either while witnessing the crime, or while attempting to recall everything they saw. The stress level plays a major role in the work I am doing.

According to the article *Ghosts of Goucher*, there are eyewitness reports of the college’s former deceased faculty appearing to the living. There are people who would label these witnesses fame seekers and/or mentally unstable. But as for me, another theory sprang into my mind. What if these people actually saw someone, but misidentified them as witnesses often do. But what are the chances? Misidentified once, twice? A third time is highly unlikely. I wondered who I could talk to that would have actually seen one of the ghosts. One of the notable witnesses in Ghosts of Goucher is 72 year old former faculty member Sydney Roby. She claims to have had an encounter with some of Goucher’s deceased professors. But upon searching her name, I failed to find any sort of communication information. And that, once again, gave me no choice than to wait.

But as it turned out, I couldn’t afford to wait much longer. That week, our News Reporting class met, and our Professor, Mr. Zurawik, announced that the final product had to be ready for release by next Thursday. I now had just nine days to solve a case I hadn’t managed to find clues for in three weeks. One of the students also mentioned that the ashes of several former Goucher presidents are actually buried underneath the college. That was some useful information for whoever would like to give a supernatural explanation to everything that was happening. But I had another goal. And just a little over a week to achieve it.