GHOSTLY MATTERS

Haunting and the Sociological Imagination

Avery F. Gordon

With a New Introduction
Foreword by Janice Radway

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"Time Honored Hands" (copyright Jaimie Lyle Gordon, 1990, silver print, 16 × 20 inches)

1

her shape and his hand

That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance.
PATRICIA WILLIAMS, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*

That life is complicated may seem a banal expression of the obvious, but it is nonetheless a profound theoretical statement—perhaps the most important theoretical statement of our time. Yet despite the best intentions of sociologists and other social analysts, this theoretical statement has not been grasped in its widest significance. There are at least two dimensions to such a theoretical statement. The first is that the power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply. Power can be invisible, it can be fantastic, it can be dull and routine. It can be obvious, it can reach you by the baton of the police, it can speak the language of your thoughts and desires. It can feel like remote control, it can exhilarate like liberation, it can travel through time, and it can drown you in the present. It is dense and superficial, it can cause bodily injury, and it can harm you without seeming ever to touch you. It is systematic and it is particularistic and it is often both at the same time. It causes dreams to live and dreams to die. We can and must call it by recognizable names, but so too we need to remember that power arrives in forms that can range from blatant white supremacy and state terror to "furniture without memories."

One day, the students in my undergraduate course on American culture and I made a thorough list of every possible explanation Toni Morrison gives in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) for why dreams die. These ranged

from explicit externally imposed and internalized white supremacist standards of value, *the nature of white man's work,* and the dialectics of violence and hatred to *disappointment,* to *folding up inside,* to *being put outdoors,* to *the weather,* to *deformed feet and lost teeth,* to *nobody pays attention,* to *it's too late,* to *total damage,* to *furniture without memories,* to the *unyielding soil,* and to what Morrison sometimes just calls *the thing,* the sedimented conditions that constitute what is in place in the first place. This turns out to be not a random list at all, but a way of conceptualizing the complicated workings of race, class, and gender, the names we give to the ensemble of social relations that create inequalities, situated interpretive codes, particular kinds of subjects, and the possible and impossible themselves. Such a conceptualization asks that we constantly move within and between *furniture without memories* and Racism and Capitalism. It asks us to move analytically between that sad and sunken couch that sags in just that place where an unrememberable past and an unimaginable future force us to sit day after day and the conceptual abstractions because everything of significance happens there among the inert furniture and the monumental social architecture.

But this list also reminds us that even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents. It has always baffled me why those most interested in understanding and changing the barbaric domination that characterizes our modernity often—not always—withhold from the very people they are most concerned with the right to complex personhood. Complex personhood is the second dimension of the theoretical statement that life is complicated. Complex personhood means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those called "Other" are never never that. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward. Complex personhood means that people get

tired and some are just plain lazy. Complex personhood means that groups of people will act together, that they will vehemently disagree with and sometimes harm each other, and that they will do both at the same time and expect the rest of us to figure it out for ourselves, intervening and withdrawing as the situation requires. Complex personhood means that even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not. At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning.

That life is complicated is a theoretical statement that guides efforts to treat race, class, and gender dynamics and consciousness as more dense and delicate than those categorical terms often imply. It is a theoretical statement that might guide a critique of privately purchased rights, of various forms of blindness and sanctioned denial; that might guide an attempt to drive a wedge into lives and visions of freedom ruled by the nexus of market exchange. It is a theoretical statement that invites us to see with portentous clarity into the heart and soul of American life and culture, to track events, stories, anonymous and history-making actions to their density, to the point where we might catch a glimpse of what Patricia Williams calls the "vast networking of our society" and imagine otherwise. You could say this is a folk theoretical statement. We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there.

The Alchemy of Race and Rights by Patricia Williams (1991) is a book that captured my attention because, among other things, here is a woman who does not know if she is crazy or not, who sees ghosts and polar bears and has conversations with her sister about haunted houses and writes all of it down for us while she is sitting in her bathrobe with disheveled hair. Patricia Williams is a commercial lawyer and a professor of contract and property law. Her great-great grandmother was a slave, property. Her great-great grandmother's owner and the father of her children was Austin Miller, a well-known Tennessee lawyer and jurist. What is Patricia Williams looking for?

> I track meticulously the dimension of meaning in my great-great-grandmother as chattel: the meaning of money; the power of consumerist world view, the deaths of those we label the unassertive and the inefficient. I try to imagine where and who she would be today. I am engaged in a long-

> term project of tracking his [Austin Miller's] words—through his letters and opinions—and those of his sons who were also lawyers and judges, of finding the shape described by her absence in all this.
>
> I see her shape and his hand in the vast networking of our society, and in the evils and oversights that plague our lives and laws. The control he had over her body. The force he was in her life, in the shape of my life today. The power he exercised in the choice to breed her or not. The choice to breed slaves in his image, to choose her mate and be that mate. In his attempt to own what no man can own, the habit of his power and the absence of her choice.
>
> I look for her shape and his hand. (19)

I look for her shape and his hand; this is a massive project, very treacherous, very fragile. This is a project in which haunting and phantoms play a central part. This is a project where *finding the shape described by her absence* captures perfectly the paradox of tracking through time and across all those forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time. Cajoling us to reconsider (if only to get some peace), and because cajoling is in the nature of the ghost, the very distinctions between there and not there, past and present, force and shape. From force to hand to her ghostly presence in the register of history and back again, this is a particular kind of social alchemy that eludes us as often as it makes us look for it. Patricia Williams is not alone in the search for the shape of force and lost hands; there is company for the keeping. Wahneema Lubiano (1992, 1993), too, is looking for the haunting presence of the state in the cultural zones where it seemingly excuses itself. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) is trying to raise the specter of the ghostly violence of law's regime of objects, its objectivity. Catherine Clément has for some time been trying to "remember *today*" the "zone" that "somewhere every culture has . . . for what it excludes" (Cixous and Clément 1986). Norma Alarcón (1990) is following the barely visible tracks of the Native Woman across the U.S.-Mexico border, as she shadows the making of the liberal citizen-subject. Hortense Spillers (1987a) is reconstructing the American grammatology that lost some subjects in one passage and found others in a phantasmatic family of bad mothers and absent fathers. Maxine Hong Kingston (1977) is mapping the trans-Pacific travel of ghostly ancestors and their incessant demands on the living. Gayatri Spivak (1987, 1989a, 1993) keeps vigilant watch over the dialectic of presence and absence that characterizes "our" benevolent metropolitan

relationship to the subaltern women "over there."[1] *I look for her shape and his hand.*

Ghostly Matters is about haunting, a paradigmatic way in which life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted. Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production. *Ghostly Matters* is a theoretical and conceptual book that I hope demonstrates the utter significance of well-placed (as opposed to misplaced) concreteness and conveys the relevance of ghostly matters to the sociological enterprise, an enterprise at once in sociology and eagerly willing to make it into something entirely different. *Ghostly Matters* is an interdisciplinary work and in this sense representative of our times and needs. But it is Roland Barthes's notion of interdisciplinarity that it strives to instantiate: "Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it's not enough to choose a 'subject' (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one" (quoted in Clifford and Marcus 1986: 1). Not owned by anyone yet, this interdisciplinarity is in the public domain, which does not guarantee anything except that there is still some room to claim rather than discipline its meaning into existence. *Ghostly Matters* looks for a language for identifying hauntings and for writing with the ghosts any haunting inevitably throws up.

Ghosts are a somewhat unusual topic of inquiry for a social analyst (much less a degreed sociologist). It may seem foreign and alien, marginal to the field that conventionally counts as living social reality, the field we observe, measure, and interpret, the field that takes the measure of us as much as we take the measure of it.[2] And foreign and alien it is, for reasons that are both obvious and stubbornly oblique. There is a long story of how I came to write a book about ghostly matters, much of which is relevant to an engaged sociology of knowledge and some of which is even perhaps interesting, but a good deal of it is not what my colleague Harvey Molotch would call news.

I came to write about ghostly matters not because I was interested in

the occult or in parapsychology, but because ghostly things kept cropping up and messing up other tasks I was trying to accomplish. Call it grounded theory: in one field another emerged to literally capture my attention and become the field work. The persistent and troubling ghosts in the house highlighted the limitations of many of our prevalent modes of inquiry and the assumptions they make about the social world, the people who inhabit these worlds, and what is required to study them. The available critical vocabularies were failing (me) to communicate the depth, density, and intricacies of the dialectic of subjection and subjectivity (or what in my business we call structure and agency), of domination and freedom, of critique and utopian longing. Of course, it is not simply the vocabularies themselves that are at fault, but the constellation of effects, historical and institutional, that make a vocabulary a social practice of producing knowledge.[3] A vocabulary and a practice were missing while demanding their due. Haunted and, I admit, sometimes desperate, sociology certainly—but also the human sciences at large—seemed to provide few tools for understanding how social institutions and people are haunted, for capturing enchantment in a disenchanted world.

If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.

How I came to write a book about ghostly matters is a long story, and some of that story has to do with postmodernism, its trail of associations, its often deafening white noise. In 1992 the president-elect of the Society for the Study of Social Problems called the members to the

"Employees must wash hands" (copyright Jaimie Lyle Gordon, 1988–90, silver print, 16 × 20 inches)

annual meeting to discuss a new postmodern world order "structured around the dense and high velocity technological rituals of image management, informational CAPITAL, [and] cybernetic-like mechanisms of social control" (Pfohl 1991: 9) without forgetting that "it's not that the ghosts don't exist" (Pfohl 1992b: 7). The invitation linked a certain terminology of postmodernity with the critique of the social sciences' empiricist grounds of knowing. This was not inappropriate since over the past ten to twenty years there has been a veritable assault on our traditional ways of conceptualizing, studying, and writing about the social world and the individuals and cultural artifacts that inhabit this world. Whether the post-1945 period is conceived as the loss of the West's eminent metanarratives of legitimation or as a series of signposts announcing the arrival of significant reconfigurations of our dominant Western organizational and theoretical frames—poststructuralism, postcolonialism, post-Marxism, postindustrialism, postmodernism, postfeminism—many scholars across various disciplinary fields now are grappling with the social, political, and epistemological confrontations that have increasingly come to characterize it.

The claims and summons poststructuralism, in particular, has made

on our traditional notions of the human subject, meaning, truth, language, writing, desire, difference, power, and experience have more recently "been placed in a larger context, or 'condition,' of which they have been seen equally as a symptom and as a determining cause. This larger condition—postmodernism—addresses a whole range of material conditions that are no longer consonant with the dominant rationality of modernism and its technological commitment to finding *solutions* in every sphere of social and cultural life" (Ross 1988: x). Situating postmodernism thus locates what is often construed as strictly philosophical or epistemological questions on a decidedly sociological and political terrain. As the invitation elaborated, and as Ross states, "postmodernist culture is a real medium in which we all live to some extent, no matter how unevenly its effects are lived and felt across the jagged spectrum of color, sex, class, region, and nationality" (ibid.: viii).

For the discipline of sociology, postmodern conditions have made their impact felt most strongly in the resurgence of "the ancient problem of the relationship between what in everyday language we call 'experience' of 'reality' and what we then decide to call 'knowledge' about it" (Jardine 1985: 145) and in the attendant dilemmas created for an empirical social science (see Agger 1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993; Bauman 1992, 1993; R. Brown 1987, 1989; Clough 1992; Denzin 1986, 1991; Lemert 1990; Pfohl 1992a; J. W. Scott 1992; Seidman 1991, 1994a, 1994b). At the core of the postmodern field or scene, then, is a crisis in representation, a fracture in the epistemological regime of modernity, a regime that rested on a faith in the reality effect of social science. Such a predicament has led to, among other consequences, an understanding that the practices of writing, analysis, and investigation, whether of social or cultural material, constitute less a scientifically positive project than a cultural practice that organizes particular rituals of storytelling told by situated investigators. The promise of this postpositivist and, in a limited sense, post- or antimodern rupture for sociology is that rather than leading away from an analysis of the social relations of power (which is the presumed drawback of a concern with representation), it will lead to a different agenda for asking how power operates. Such an agenda could deliver, albeit with necessary improvements, on the unfulfilled promissory note given to sociology by Horkheimer and Adorno: namely, to link a thoroughgoing epistemological critique of modernity as what is contemporaneously

ours with an insurgent sociological critique of its forms of domination (Frankfurt Institute for Social Research [1956] 1973).

Questions of narrative structuring, constructedness, analytic standpoint, and historical provisionality of claims to knowledge direct sociology to the ways in which our stories can be understood as fictions of the real. The challenge to the monopolistic assumption that sociology can provide an unproblematic window onto a more rather than less secure reality is both necessary and desirable in order to understand how the real itself and its ethnographic or sociological representations are also fictions, albeit powerful ones that we do not experience as fictional, but as true. At the same time, the increasingly sophisticated understandings of representation and of how the social world is textually or discursively constructed still require an engagement with the social structuring practices that have long been the province of sociological inquiry. It is these that draw our attention to the multiple determinations and sites of power in which narratives of and about our culture and its artifacts are produced and disseminated.

Part of the widespread ambivalence toward postmodernism and postmodernity stems from the complicated relationship between reality and its modes of production, a relationship crucial to the primary investigation of exclusions and invisibilities. Neither postmodernism nor postmodernity resolve this relationship by any means. (And, indeed, the common tendency to distinguish between postmodernism as a kind of voluntary idealism—a style or choice of approach—and postmodernity as a kind of crushing, all-encompassing materialism does not help matters at all. In fact, it sends social theorists back to the drawing board needlessly.) What some feminists and critical theorists have sensibly insisted on retaining is precisely a double structure of thought that links the epistemological and the social (see Flax 1992; Lubiano 1991). Feminism's presumed (and putatively paradigmatic) relationship to postmodernism rests on its participation in the critique of the transparency of language, objective causality, transnational generalization, and so on, all of which are part and parcel of the so-called crisis in representation (see Nicholson 1990; Butler 1992). But the critique of representation does not solve the problem of the continuing crisis of domination—coercive and consensual—unless it is linked to issues of governmentality, broadly understood (see Hennessy 1993; Mouffe 1992). Coupling problems with representation to an ongoing and aggressive concern with representability, in the political sense, is what enables epistemol-

ogy to be properly situated in the ensemble of social relations of power in which such epistemologies are ensconced.

To say that sociology or social analysis more broadly must retain a double structure of thought that links the epistemological and the social, or, in other words, to say that sociology has to respond *methodologically* and not only as if from an autonomous distance begs the question of what exactly the novel postmodern social conditions to which we ought to respond are. Difficult diagnostic issues are at stake here, exacerbated by "the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an 'age,' or zeitgeist or 'system' or 'current situation' any longer" (Jameson 1991: xi). It is no doubt true that some of the central characteristics of the modern systems of capitalism, state and subject formation, and knowledge production are undergoing significant modifications, and many are working to describe these changes and their implications (see Bauman [1988] 1994; Haraway 1985; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991; Lash 1990). An equally powerful argument could be made, as Derrick Bell (1992) does in one of the more moving examples of Antonio Gramsci's maxim—optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect—that things have hardly changed at all. I am simply not in a position to adjudicate the degree of continuity or discontinuity at such a grand scale and am inclined to consider most conclusions premature at this point, and perhaps at any point. In my own limited view, therefore, we are not "post" modern yet, although it is arguably the case that the fundamental contradictions at the heart of modernity are more exposed and much is up for grabs in the way we conceive the possibilities for knowledge, for freedom, and for subjecthood in the wake of this exposure. It is also arguably the case that the strong sense of living in "a strange new landscape . . . the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization" (Jameson 1991: xxi) so pervasive in many quarters is an influential and itself motivating social and cultural fact.[4]

Of one thing I am sure: *it's not that the ghosts don't exist.* The postmodern, late-capitalist, postcolonial world represses and projects its ghosts or phantoms in similar intensities, if not entirely in the same forms, as the older world did. Indeed, the concentration on haunting and ghosts is a way of maintaining the salience of social analysis as

bounded by its social context, as in history, which is anything but dead and over, while avoiding simple reflectionism. Yet, in one particularly prominent framing of postmodernism, an overweening and overstated emphasis on new electronic technologies of communication, on consumerism, and on the spectacular world of commodities has, despite the rhetoric of exposing the new machinery, replaced conventional positivism with a postmodernist version that promotes the telecommunicative visibility of all codings and decodings. Crudely put, when postmodernism means that everything is on view, that everything can be described, that all "tacitly present means . . . [become] conscious object[s] of self-perfection" (Bauman [1988] 1994: 188), it displays an antighost side that resembles modernity's positivities more than it concedes.

Let me give you an example. Don DeLillo's 1985 best-selling novel *White Noise* is a paradigmatic postmodern text. Nothing much happens in it really. Jack Gladney, professor and inventor, in 1968, of Hitler studies, ruminates on American popular culture and family life while trying to learn German, which he doesn't speak. He has a hard time keeping his tongue in place, but does keep his competitive edge by refusing to really help his friend Murray set up a similar institutional program to promote Elvis studies. Jack loves his extended family, composed of children from various marriages, all of whom display a level of maturity Jack and Babette, his wife, lack. Babette is, like Jack, obsessed with a fear of dying, and all their shopping doesn't seem to help her, although it does "expand" her husband. Her fear leads her to covertly trade sex for drugs, which is all just fine until Jack and the children find her out. At this point, Babette becomes irrelevant and Jack plots to recover the drugs, his wife's sexual propriety, and his manhood. He never learns to speak German and the whole drama is interrupted by a toxic disaster that confuses the town, which had been simu-planning it for months. It is of no consolation to Jack that he might really die from postindustrial contamination, although the specter of "real" death provides him with enough justification to minimize his wife's "unreal" fears.

DeLillo's novel is a descriptively rich evocation of white suburban North America in the commodified landscape of late capitalism, full of clever insights and portable quotations. It conjures up some of the dominant and disturbing features of American life that are increasingly named postmodern: television-structured reality, the commodification

of everyday life, the absence of meaning and the omnipresence of endless information, the relentless fascination with catastrophes, and the circulating advertisements for the death of author, referent, and objective reality set within image upon image of the electric connections among life, death, and sex.

Notwithstanding my docudrama rendering of the plot, the familiar and familial noise of *White Noise*, a fiction, reads like a sociological map of white postmodern America, like an ethnography of sorts. Significantly, this reading effect is precisely related to those social conditions that the text itself identifies as challenging the distinctions between the fictive and the factual, and between the imaginary and the real. This is *White Noise*'s great strength as a social science fiction: it attempts to link the sociological and the epistemological dimensions of postmodernism. At the level of everyday language and procedure, DeLillo captures the optimistic cynicism of imploded meanings, empty memory banks, and televisual screenings. He is neither critical nor celebratory. Abandoning the terrain of politics, the contestation about and over power, he opts instead for a kind of market media effect where *everything was on television last night.*

White Noise is, however, a ghost-busting text that refuses to confront what has been rendered spectral by the twin hands of the social and the writer. At the close of *White Noise*, the language of enthusiasm for an American culture mediated and saturated by commodities whose hieroglyphics and secret codes fascinate and offer entrance into a world full of abandoned meanings and momentary ecstatic experiences gives way to a "sense of wandering . . . an aimless and haunted mood." *Smeared print, ghost images.* The members of DeLillo's television public find that the "supermarket shelves have been re-arranged . . . one day without warning":

> The men scan for stamped dates, the women for ingredients. Many have trouble making out the words. Smeared print, ghost images. In the altered shelves, the ambient roar, in the plain and heartless fact of their decline, they try to work their way through confusion. But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. (325–26)

At the end of DeLillo's novel, his story of contemporary white suburban everyday life (which in this novel is the virtual history of post-

World War II American culture) is figured by the rearrangement of the supermarket shelves. This is an apt metaphor for the social world *White Noise* articulates and orients around its protagonist, Jack Gladney: a commodified, post-Hiroshima landscape of late (night) capitalism where "everything was on television last night." Up until this point, Jack, who constantly interprets and theorizes (in perfectly encapsulated, spectacular one-sentence units) the popular culture that fascinates him, has been enthusiastic about the *waves and radiation* of an electronically simulated culture. *The myth being born right there in our living room* has its dark side, of course: *they believed something lived in the basement.* But neither the Airborne Toxic Event (Blacksmith's Bhopal), nor a world full of *abandoned meanings,* nor a wife fearful for her life for inexplicable reasons can shatter the smooth switching of channels that gives us *Family Ties* and *Guiding Light*(s). At the end all that remains is confusion, an inability to make out the words, and the postmodern surface sheen gone cynical and pessimistic. DeLillo's conclusion eerily encants: *But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see.* The terminals can *decode the secret of every item.* No secrets, no gaps, no errant trajectories, only a passive scene of waiting and watching. From my point of view, and simply put, *But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see* is the language of waves and radiation, a language in which the ghostly (or the living for that matter) cannot get a word in edgewise. *But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see* is the postmodern positive language of power and indifference that is nothing more than the "second nature" of commodification speaking as our common culture (Jameson 1991: 314).

If the ghostly haunt gives notice that something is missing—that what appears to be invisible or in the shadows is announcing itself, however symptomatically—then in *White Noise* there are no ghostly haunts, or shadows, only the insistent visibility of fetishized commodity surveillance and that which masquerades as its absence. Indeed, one could argue that *White Noise* enacts a detour around just those issues of power it aggressively renders explicit. And it enacts that detour by its insistent emphasis, to the exclusion of a more dialectical way of seeing, on the hypervisibility of what could be called technological irrationality.

Visibility is a complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness (Kipnis 1988: 158). It is perhaps DeLillo's "hysterical blindness" to "apparitions" and to the "complex system of permission and

prohibition, of presence and absence" that makes his book an example of postmodernist positivism, or hypervisibility. Hypervisibility is a kind of obscenity of accuracy that abolishes the distinctions between "permission and prohibition, presence and absence." No shadows, no ghosts. In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe not only that everything can be seen, but also that everything is available and accessible for our consumption. In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe that neither repression nor the return of the repressed, in the form of either improperly buried bodies or countervailing systems of value or difference, occurs with any meaningful result.

The representation of value or difference is indispensable for understanding the cleavages that power's divisive work accomplishes. To the extent that DeLillo's text performs some of the new ways in which difference, rather than simply being excluded or marginalized, is being staged or simulated, it tells an important story. For example, *White Noise* clearly puts the reader on notice that it will not (and then cannot) tell, with any sympathetic apprehension, the story of Jack's panicking wife, Babette, a powerful indicator of the way in which even silence and invisibility can be accessed. Such a narrative makes it difficult, if not impossible, however, to imagine her story as other than a kind of visible invisibility: *I see you are not there.* In other words, not much is left of Babette's value other than the fact that her absent life world can now be acknowledged, advertised, and consumed as background white noise. DeLillo's text may very well echo Jean Baudrillard's point that postmodern culture can increasingly bring within view (for consumption) that which previously remained at the margins, but it also reproduces the same features it describes. In so doing, it offers no place from which to challenge the ubiquity of that white noise and offer a countermemory. Indeed, the obsession with death in the novel is a substitute for dealing with the ghostly matter, the ghostly and haunting trouble. Rather, we are confronted with the morbidity of existence as a symptom of the inability to confront modernity's phantoms. Kept busy just surviving in the confusing supermarket of life, itself already having coded and decoded all exchanges, reification—the effacement of the traces of production—appears, in this milieu, to be the welcome relief one hopes for. Jameson (1991: 314–15) puts it well: "the point of having your own object world, and walls and muffled distance or relative silence all around you, is to forget about all those innumerable others

for a while." To remember "would be like having voices inside your head" (315).[5] *It would be like having voices inside your head* because a postmodern social formation is still haunted by the symptomatic traces of its productions and exclusions. A different language than the one DeLillo offers is needed to even begin the work of writing a text that might have something more to say about *smeared print, ghost images.*

In a 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man,* Ralph Ellison wrote: "despite the bland assertions of sociologists, [the] 'high visibility' [of the African-American man] actually rendered one *un*-visible" (xii). Hypervisibility is a persistent alibi for the mechanisms that render one *un*-visible: "His darkness . . . glow[ing] . . . within the American conscience with such intensity that most whites feigned moral blindness toward his predicament." The difficulty for us now, as it was for Ellison when he published *Invisible Man* in 1952, is the extent to which the mediums of public image making and visibility are inextricably wedded to the co-joined mechanisms that systematically render certain groups of people apparently *privately* poor, uneducated, ill, and disenfranchised.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* gives double reference both to the unvisibility of the hypervisible African-American man and to the invisibility of "the Man" who persistently needs an alibi for the blindness of his vision. As a strategy of analysis, Ellison's insight underscores the need to conceptualize visibility as a *complex system of permission and prohibition, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness.* If Ellison's argument encourages us to interrogate the mechanisms by which the highly visible can actually be a type of invisibility, Toni Morrison's (1989) argument that "invisible things are not necessarily not-there" encourages the complementary gesture of investigating how that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence. Both these positions are about how to write ghost stories—about how to write about *permissions and prohibitions, presence and absence,* about *apparitions and hysterical blindness.* To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows. Why would we want to write such stories? Because unlike DeLillo's indifference, *in the end* and in the beginning *it* does *matter what they see or think they see.* It matters because although *the terminals are equipped*

with holographic scanners, they cannot *decode the secret of every item, infallibly.* Indeed, what is at stake here is the political status and function of systematic hauntings.

If the ghost is a crucible for political mediation and historical memory, the ghost story has no other choice than to refuse the logic of the unreconstructed spectacle, whether of the modern or postmodern variety. *White Noise* might bring us to the brink of establishing the necessity of reckoning with the instrumentality of hauntings. But because it does not invite us to make contact with haunting, to engage the shadows and what is living there, it does not help us to develop a form of historical accounting distinct from the diagnostics of postmodern hypervisibility. The purpose of an alternative diagnostics is to link the politics of accounting, in all its intricate political-economic, institutional, and affective dimensions, to a potent imagination of what has been done and what is to be done otherwise.

"Guardian Angel" (copyright Jaimie Lyle Gordon, 1992, silver print, 30 × 40 inches)

How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly? How do we develop a critical language to describe and analyze the affective, historical, and mnemonic structures of such hauntings? These questions have guided my desire to articulate, however insufficiently, a sense of the ghostly and its social and political effects. I use the word *sense* here deliberately to evoke what Raymond Williams called a structure of feeling—perhaps the most appropriate description of how hauntings are transmitted and received. I have not endeavored to establish transhistorical or universal laws of haunting per se[6] but rather to represent the structure of feeling that is something akin to what it feels like to be the object of a social totality vexed by the phantoms of modernity's violence. What does this mean? It means following the insights that come to those who see all these forces operating at once. Such a way of seeing can make you a bit crazy and imprecise and wary of shorthands. While it may be true that the constellation of social forces all collide in various ways, that social life's complication is, to use an often overused phrase, overdetermined, the obvious task of the critic or analyst is to designate the precise contours of experience and causality in particular instances. It is not a matter of accepting or rejecting any of a range of notions of social totality, and, academic common sense to the contrary, Marxists do not have a lock on this concept (Gordon 1992). Rather, it is a matter of exploring here the particular mediation that is haunting. As a concept, mediation describes the process that links an institution and an individual, a social structure and a subject, and history and a biography. In haunting, organized forces and systemic structures that appear removed from us make their impact felt in everyday life in a way that confounds our analytic separations and confounds the social separations themselves. Paying attention to the disjuncture between identifying a social structure (or declaring its determinate existence) and its articulation in everyday life and thought, I have hoped that working at understanding these gaps, the kinds of visions they produce, and the afflictions they harbor would enable us not to eradicate the gap—it is inevitable—but to fill in the content differently. Could it be that analyzing hauntings might lead to a more complex understanding of the generative structures and moving parts of historically embedded social formations in a way that avoids the twin pitfalls of subjectivism and positivism? Perhaps. If so, the result will not be a more tidy world, but one that might be less damaging.

It was in such a spirit that Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1987) wrote a two-page note, appended to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment,* entitled "On The Theory of Ghosts." Despairing at the loss of historical perspective, at our "disturbed relationship with the dead—forgotten and embalmed," they believed we needed some kind of theory of ghosts, or at least a way of both mourning modernity's "wound in civilization" (216) and eliminating the destructive forces that open it up over and over again: "Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like

them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope" (215). One wonders what a completed theory of ghosts would have looked like had Horkheimer and Adorno actually written more than the note.[7] I have not written the Theory of Ghosts, a far too singular proposal for my purposes, but *Ghostly Matters* does attempt to describe, in homage to the viability of a Marxist concept of haunting, the ghostly haunt as a form of social figuration that treats as a major problem the reduction of individuals "to a mere sequence of instantaneous experiences which leave no trace, or rather whose trace is hated as irrational, superfluous, and 'overtaken'" (216).

And a problem it remains despite all that we can claim now to understand in the wake of what are, without doubt, major changes in who is permitted to make public knowledge and in the assumptions that direct and underwrite much contemporary inquiry. We have taken the legs out from under that fateful and deceptive Archimedean standpoint, substituting the view from somewhere for the old view from nowhere. We have become adept at discovering the construction of social realities and deconstructing their architecture, confounding some of the distinctions between culture and science, the factual and the artificial. We have rethought the relationship between knowledge and power, between text and context, highlighting the relationship between authorization and modes of authority. And we have made considerable representational reparations for past exclusions and silencings, making the previously unknown known, telling new stories, correcting the official records.

These are major accomplishments for work in universities, which change slowly and which, despite their ideology of invention, do not like too much of it. Yet I have wondered sometimes whether, for example, we have truly taken seriously that the intricate web of connections that characterizes any event or problem *is the story*. Warnings about relativism to the contrary, truth is still what most of us strive for. Partial and insecure surely, and something slightly different from "the facts," but truth nonetheless: the capacity to say "This is so." But truth is a subtle shifting entity not simply because philosophy says so or because evidentiary rules of validation are always inadequate, but because the very nature of the things whose truth is sought possesses these qualities. To tell the partial deconstructive truth of the thing that is the complex relation between subjection and subjectivity requires making common cause with the thing, requires what Michael Taussig calls sympathetic magic, that is, "granting . . . the representation the power of the represented" (1993a: xviii). Particularly for those who believe in the progressive quality of modernity's secularity, this is a somewhat remarkable claim. But a kind of sympathetic magic is necessary because in the world and between us as analysts and the worlds we encounter to translate into world-making words are hauntings, ghosts and gaps, seething absences, and muted presences. The political and affective modalities by which we gain access to the facticity of constructed power either reckons with or displaces these ghostly matters and the matter of the ghost, with consequences either way.

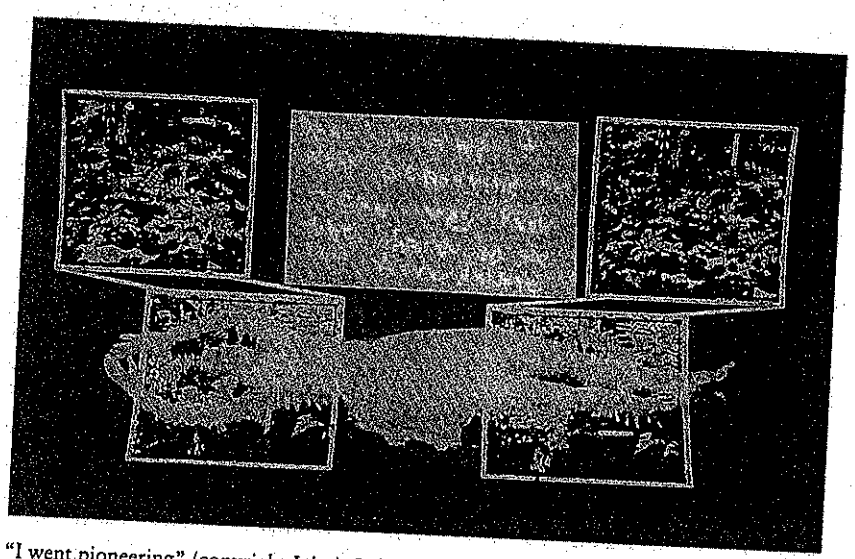
Bloodless categories, narrow notions of the visible and the empirical, professional standards of indifference, institutional rules of distance and control, barely speakable fears of losing the footing that enables us to speak authoritatively and with greater value than anyone else who might . . . Our methods have thus far been less than satisfactory for addressing the very nature of the things and the problems it is our responsibility to address, leaving us not yet making something new enough out of what are arguably many new ideas and novel conditions. A different way of knowing and writing about the social world, an entirely different mode of production, still awaits our invention. Such a mode of production would not reject the value of empirical observation per se, but might, to use Taussig's words, be more "surprised" by social construction, the making and making up of social worlds, thereby giving it the "respect" it "deserves" (1993a: xv-xvi). Indeed, we might expand the domain of the empirical considerably to include not only haunting and ghostly matters but also our own relations to social analysis. We might make common cause with our objects and subjects of analysis. Making common cause with our objects and subjects of analysis involves "understanding . . . the representation as contiguous with that being represented and not as suspended above and distant from the represented" (Taussig 1992: 10). Making common cause with our objects and subjects of analysis, which *is* to take social determination quite seriously, means "that one has to see oneself and one's shared modes of understanding and communication included in that determining. To claim otherwise, to claim the rhetoric of systematicity's determinisms and yet except oneself, is an authoritarian deceit, a magical wonder" (ibid.). Making common cause means that our encounters must strive to go beyond the fundamental alienation of turning social relations into just the things we know and toward our

own reckoning with how we are in these stories, with how they change us, with our own ghosts.

Doing so is not easy because, among other things, knowing ghosts often shows up not as professional success, but as failure: the one whose writing/not writing only came together as she came together with the object, with the reality of fictions and the unrealities of the facts; the slightly mad one who kept saying, "There's something in the room with us," as those bloodless reified categories became animated through wonder and vexation. But it is also true that ghosts are never innocent: the unhallowed dead of the modern project drag in the pathos of their loss and the violence of the force that made them, their sheets and chains. To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study, is not a methodology or a consciousness you can simply adopt or adapt as a set of rules or an identity; it produces its own insights and blindnesses. Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future.

Sociology, in particular, has an extraordinary mandate as far as academic disciplines go: to conjure up social life. Conjuring is a particular form of calling up and calling out the forces that make things what they are in order to fix and transform a troubling situation. As a mode of apprehension and reformation, conjuring merges the analytical, the procedural, the imaginative, and the effervescent. But we have more to learn about how to conjure in an evocative and compelling way. If haunting is a constitutive feature of social life, then we will need to be able to describe, analyze, and bring to life that aspect of social life, to be less fearful of animation. We ought to do this not only because it is more exact, but also because to the extent that we want our writing to change minds, to convince others that what we know is important and ought to matter, we need to be more in touch with the nature of how "the pieces of a world . . . littered all over a sociological landscape" (D. Smith 1987: 99) affect people. And we do not usually experience things, nor are affects produced, in the rational and objective ways our terms tend to portray them. The counterpart to reification, the conjuring trick, might be better captured by Walter Benjamin's profane illumination or Marx's sensuous knowledge. Of course, the tricky thing is that scholars too are subject to these same dynamics of haunting: ghosts get in our matters just as well. This means that we will have to learn to talk to and listen to ghosts, rather than banish them, as the precondition for establishing our scientific or humanistic knowledge.

Ghostly Matters is thus, on the one hand, a modest book and, on the other hand, quite ambitious. Its modesty lies in its very simple point. Ghostly matters are part of social life. If we want to study social life well, and if in addition we to want to contribute, in however small a measure, to changing it, we must learn how to identify hauntings and reckon with ghosts, must learn how to make contact with what is without doubt often painful, difficult, and unsettling. The book's ambition lies in asserting that in order to do this, we will have to change the way we have been doing things.



"I went pioneering" (copyright Jaimie Lyle Gordon, 1993, silver print, 16 × 20 inches)

I have many more questions than answers, a potentially disappointing feature of this book, but endemic to the enterprise. In the chapters that follow, I have tried to explore three broad questions. First, what are the alternative stories we ought to and can write about the relationship among power, knowledge, and experience? I have been particularly troubled by the contrast between conceptual or analytical descriptions

of social systems and their far more diffused and delicate effects. Haunting occurs on the terrain situated between our ability to conclusively describe the logic of Capitalism or State Terror, for example, and the various experiences of this logic, experiences that are more often than not partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory, ambiguous. What is it to identify haunting and follow its trajectory? Second, if the ghost's arrival notifies us of a haunting, how does the ghost interrupt or put into crisis the demand for ethnographic authenticity—what Jacqueline Rose (1986: 12) has called the "unequivocal accusation of the real"—that we expect from those who can legitimately claim to tell the truth? The intermingling of fact, fiction, and desire as it shapes personal and social memory situates us on the border of the social sciences and makes me wonder, What does the ghost say as it speaks, barely, in the interstices of the visible and the invisible? And, third, we are part of the story, for better or worse: the ghost must speak *to me* in some way sometimes similar to, sometimes distinct from how it may be speaking to the others. How then can our critical language display a reflexive concern not only with the objects of our investigations but also with the ones who investigate? What methods and forms of writing can foreground the conditions under which the facts and the real story are produced?

What is my method for answering these questions? The method here is everything and nothing much really. (The question of method has also gotten me into some trouble, as chapter 2 shows.) I do not devise procedures for the application of theories because one major goal of this book is to get us to consider a different way of seeing, one that is less mechnical, more willing to be surprised, to link imagination and critique, one that is more attuned to the task of "conjur[ing] up the appearances of something that [is] absent" (Berger 1972: 10). A way of seeing is not a rule book for operationalizing discrete explanatory theories. It is a way of negotiating the always unsettled relationship between what we see and what we know (ibid: 7). I suppose you could say that the method here involves producing case studies of haunting and adjudicating their consequences. What kind of case is a case of a ghost? It is a case of haunting, a story about what happens when we admit the ghost—that special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present—into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world. It is a case of the difference it makes to start with the marginal, with what we normally exclude or banish, or, more commonly, with

what we never even notice. In Gayatri Spivak's formulation, it is a case of "what . . . it [is] to learn, these lessons, otherwise" (1992: 775). It is not a case of dead or missing persons sui generis, but of the ghost as a social figure. It is often a case of inarticulate experiences, of symptoms and screen memories, of spiraling affects, of more than one story at a time, of the traffic in domains of experience that are anything but transparent and referential. It is a case of modernity's violence and wounds, and a case of the haunting reminder of the complex social relations in which we live. It is a case that teaches a lesson (or two) about how to write what can represent that haunting reminder, what can represent systematic injury and the remarkable lives made in the wake of the making of our social world.

Literary fictions play an important role in these cases for the simple reason that they enable other kinds of sociological information to emerge. In the twentieth century, literature has not been restrained by the norms of a professionalized social science, and thus it often teaches us, through imaginative design, what we need to know but cannot quite get access to with our given rules of method and modes of apprehension. Where else do we learn of the tremulous significance of *furniture without memories,* learning about it in the same moment as we are drawn in, hearts in hand, to a story told just so? In the broadest sense, sociology is concerned with both the production and the interpretation of stories of social and cultural life. Yet the division of the disciplines separates literature (story/fiction) and social science (fact). This disciplinary segregation is an uneasy one, however; the border is not quite as secure as institutional mandates presume. Not only is the origin of sociology as a unique discipline bound up with its relationship to literature (see Lepenies 1988), but sociology's dominant disciplinary methods and theoretical assumptions constantly struggle against the fictive.[8] By the fictive I mean not simply literature but that complication with which I began: the ensemble of cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power's presence. For sociology, the fictive is our constitutive horizon of error; it is what has been and must be exiled to ordain the authority of the discipline and the truthful knowledge sociology can claim to produce.

As a mode of storytelling, sociology distinguishes itself from literature by its now historical claim to find and report the facts expertly. The maintenance of a disciplinary object, social reality, that meets some-

thing akin to the juridical strict scrutiny test is predicated upon a clear distinction between what is (socially) real and what is fictional. As Michel de Certeau puts it, "At the level of analytic procedures . . . as at the level of interpretations . . . the technical discourse capable of determining the errors characteristic of fiction has come to be authorized to speak in the name of the 'real.' By distinguishing between the two discourses—the one scientific, the other fictive—according to its own criteria, [sociology] credits itself with having a special relationship to the 'real' because its contrary is posited as . . . [fictive]" (1983: 128). To the extent that sociology is wedded to facticity as its special truth, it must continually police and expel its margin—the margin of error—which is the fictive. But these facts are always in imminent danger of being contaminated by what is seemingly on the other side of their boundaries, by fictions. Like a taboo that is always being approached in the act of avoidance, when sociology insists on finding only the facts, it has no other choice but to pursue the fictive, the mistake it seeks to eliminate. A marginal discourse, the story of how the real story has emerged, consistently shadows and threatens to subvert the very authority that establishes disciplinary order.

If "the margins of the story mark a border between the remembered and the forgotten" (Haug et al. 1987: 68), my use of fiction to designate this border intends to call attention to both the broader issues of invisibility, marginality, and exclusion, and also to the "twist[s] and turn[s], reinterpret[ations] and falsifi[cations], forget[tings] and repress[ings] [of] events" (ibid.: 40) that are part of the research and writing process. These are characteristically the elements an objective account attempts to minimize. But these are precisely what interest me. So, I have tried to make the fictional, the theoretical, and the factual speak to one another. In that conversation, if we can call it that, I have hoped to acknowledge and foreground as real and operative just those twists and turns, forgettings and rememberings, just those ghostly haunts that a normal social scientific account routinely attempts to minimize. I have hoped to find in writing that knows it is writing as such lessons for a mode of inscription that can critically question the limits of institutional discourse. More importantly, I have hoped to draw attention to a whole realm of experiences and social practices that can barely be approached without a method attentive to what is elusive, fantastic, contingent, and often barely there.

There is no question here of privileging Literature. Literature has its

own problems or, rather, it has its own business. It has a history and a market that implicates it in the production of a highly ideological enterprise called Culture; part of its economy of literacy situates it within an academic discipline, literary criticism or now cultural studies, where particular struggles over value and access take precedence. My concern is unequivocally with social life, not with Literature as such (even if literature itself is, of course, riddled with the complications of the social life—my object of inquiry—it represents and sometimes influences). But fictions are what stand on the other side of the facts in our lingering Manichaean scheme, and so they have helped to highlight the problems with "logical and chronological frameworks" and "the simplicity of casual chains"; they have helped to show what "breaks through precisely where the [sociologist] assembles and joins" (Robin 1980: 234–35). It is precisely the relationship between what *assembles and joins* and what is gaping, detouring, and haunting that concerns me and is central to the cases I have analyzed. Fictionality and the inventiveness of social constructionism are not ends in themselves, however. They open the door to understanding haunting. Haunting is a part of our social world, and understanding it is essential to grasping the nature of our society and for changing it. Social life, especially when so fraught with ghosts, does not obey our rules of method and our disciplinary organization of it. We need not, however, find the loss of this deluding innocence so terribly frightening.

Ghostly Matters consists of five chapters that should be read sequentially, but can be read in any order you wish. In chapter 2, forced to take a detour, I go looking for a woman, Sabina Spielrein, who was not in a photograph in which she was supposed to be. I find her in psychoanalysis, the only human science that has taken haunting seriously as an object of analysis. But psychoanalysis does not know as much about haunting as it might seem. Chapters 3 and 4 venture to contemplate haunting and ghosts at the level of the making and unmaking of world historical events. Chapter 3, written around Luisa Valenzuela's novel *Como en la Guerra/He Who Searches,* is about the system of state terror known as disappearance in Argentina. Chapter 4, centered on Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved,* is about Reconstruction and the lingering inheritance of U.S. racial slavery. These chapters attempt to show how paying attention to ghosts can, among other things, radically change how we know and what we know about state terror and about slavery

and the legacy of American freedom that derives from it. Chapter 5 concludes by way of a summary of the book's principal themes and lessons.

Specters are still haunting, not only in Europe and not only of communism. Our contemporary society is still a "society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange . . . like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells" (Marx and Engels [1888] 1973: 72). The task then remains to follow the ghosts and spells of power in order to tame this sorcerer and conjure otherwise.