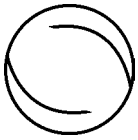

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# Local Government Chief Executives' Everyday Hauntings: Towards a Theory of Organizational Ghosts

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## Abstract

This paper develops a theory of organizational ghosts, a concept that describes the haunted and burdensome aspects of organizational life and in particular of leadership action. The concept of organizational ghosts is not offered as yet another metaphor, a lens through which to analyse particular organizations. Rather, I offer my discussion of ghosts as a theoretical concept that explains how inheritances of the past haunt the relations and struggles of the present. I tell a ghostly tale of the everyday leadership and learning practices of UK local government chief executives, and provide an exploration of organizational ghosts as a contribution to the growing interest in the action in the shadows, atmospheres, margins and boundaries of organizations. Drawing upon an ethnographic study of UK local councils, and embracing the multiplicity and heterogeneity of organizational ghosts, the paper considers the theoretical, political and ethical stakes involved in taking ghosts seriously. Its contribution is to show how ghosts are insinuated in organizations and to highlight leaders as figures who are both willing agents and uneasy hosts of hauntings, and to point to the mediating role of leaders in handling confrontations between the past, the present and the future.

## Keywords

leadership studies, philosophical analysis of organizations, public administration and organizations

## Introduction

This paper develops a theory of organizational ghosts, a concept that describes the haunted and burdensome aspects of organizational life and in particular of leadership action. The concept of organizational ghosts is not offered as yet another metaphor, a lens through which to analyse particular organizations. Rather, I offer my discussion of ghosts as a theoretical concept that explains how inheritances of the past haunt the relations and struggles of the present.

Engaging with Derrida's (1994) invocation that scholars should talk with spectres, and with the idea that public organizations remain a frontier for social science-based organization knowledge (Arellano-Gault, Demortain, Rouillard, & Thoenig, 2013), I tell a ghostly tale of the

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everyday leadership and learning practices of UK local government chief executives, and offer an exploration of organizational ghosts as a contribution to the growing interest in the action in the shadows, atmospheres, margins and boundaries of organizations (Borch 2010; Bowles, 1991; Gabriel, 2003, 2012; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2010; O'Doherty, De Cock, Rehn, & Ashcraft, 2013; Warf & Arias, 2008; Knox, O'Doherty, Verdubakis, & Westrup, 2008). Drawing upon an ethnographic study of UK local councils, and embracing the multiplicity and heterogeneity of organizational ghosts, the paper considers the theoretical, political and ethical stakes involved in taking ghosts seriously. My contribution is to show how ghosts are insinuated in organizations, to highlight leaders as figures who are both willing agents and uneasy hosts of hauntings, and to point to the mediating role of leaders in handling confrontations between the past, the present and the future.

Echoing Calvino's (1986) observation that 'the more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze ghosts' (p. 19), ghosts are part of the landscape and everyday language of contemporary organizations. It is tempting to take a purely figurative approach to ghosts and their linkages to organizations – to establish that we can be said to be in high spirits; or can leave a meeting and be told by a colleague that we look as though we have seen a ghost; or that in abandoning projects, we give up the ghost – and to simply note the abundance of workaday allusions to the ghostly. Instead I move the argument beyond mundane wordplay and position ghosts as a site for organization-theoretical activity. In doing so I argue that organizational life is suffused with ghosts in ways which go beyond the metaphorical and implicate organizational leaders as both haunters and haunted. In developing this perspective I take direction from Derrida's (1999) clarification of his own approach to ghosts and his reminder that:

> 'the motifs of mourning, inheritance and promise are, in *Specters of Marx*, anything but 'metaphors' in the ordinary sense of the word. They are focal points for conceptual or theoretical activity, the organizing themes of the entire deconstructive critique that I am attempting to make.' (Derrida, 1999, p. 235)

Likewise, the work of Marx (1852; Marx & Engels, 1872), Horkheimer and Adorno (1944), and more recently, Bell (1997), Gergen (2009) and Gordon (2008) points to an existence for ghosts which lies beyond metaphor and locates them in the haunted spaces of everyday life.

## *The immaterial is not immaterial*

To address ghosts and hauntings is to become embroiled in a complexity of interrelated associations and meanings. In this section therefore I examine spectres, ghosts and related terms and tease out the different ways in which haunting has been understood. Over time, the axiology of the ghost has fluctuated around various emotive, and threatening, associations. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, etymologically the word comes from the pre-Germanic *ghoizdo*, meaning 'fury, anger', and outside the Germanic the root points to a primary sense, 'to wound, tear, pull to pieces'.' The *OED* also includes: 'The spirit, or immaterial part of man… the seat of feeling, thought, and moral action'; 'The soul of a deceased person, spoken of as appearing in a visible form, or otherwise manifesting its presence, to the living'; as well as obsolete meanings which include 'A good spirit, an angel' and 'An evil spirit'. The idea of haunting shares these sinister associations and has become imbued with the notion of the uncanny. The uncanny is defined by the *OED* variously as 'Mischievous, malicious'; 'Unreliable, not to be trusted'; and 'Partaking of a supernatural character; mysterious, weird, uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar'; and 'Dangerous, unsafe'. References to the uncanny have permeated literature, psychoanalysis, aesthetics, architecture, film studies and cultural, feminist, queer and post-colonial theory (Beyes & Steyaert 2013;

Jay, 1998; Masschelein, 2011; Royle, 2003; Vidler, 1992). Much of this interest originates in Freud's (1919) essay in which he described the uncanny as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' (p. 123). An essential quality of the ghost is its ability to return, and the uncanny stems from the return of a fear that had been once repressed (Arias, 2010). Hauntings and the uncanny entail an experience of liminality, the strangeness of borders, and a disturbing of order and sense.

Though these are unsettled concepts which elude straight classificatory control (Beyes & Steyaert, 2013; Cixous, 1976; Jay, 1998), marshalling these associations for an articulation of ghosts and hauntings in organizational settings highlights the significance of legacies, vestiges and the inheritances of past action; emphasizes our intensive relations with context and the importance of sensuous knowledge; and opens up the potential for inquiry which explores the liminality of leaders who are operating at borders and boundaries of competing priorities for action (Orr & Vince, 2009; Rhodes 2007; Rhodes & Price, 2011).

Booker (2010) emphasizes the pervasiveness of the supernatural in western popular culture. Ackroyd (2011) describes the nineteenth century as the golden age of the ghost, with the rise of melancholy ghosts in Romantic poetry as well as popular interest in spirit-rappings. For Kittler (1999), 'The realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture' (1999, p. 13), a contemporary insight which echoes Plutarch's record of Antiphanes' story of the city in which 'words congealed with the cold the moment they were spoken, and later, as they thawed out, people heard in summer what they had said to one another in winter'.' A long fascination with the spectral has played out in literature. The ghost of Banquo appears at Macbeth's banquet (Act 5, Sc. 1) as a metaphor for the depravity to which people will descend in pursuit of power, glory and authority. In literary theory, ghosts have often been positioned as a critique of capitalist modernity, as in Wilde's (1887) *The Canterville Ghost*. Uglow (1988) provides a class-based reading of ghost stories, noting that it is often 'the country people, the Irish peasants, the Scottish grooms, who open the eyes of the sceptical – or unsuspecting – middle classes to the secrets of the houses they live in… the prosperous families who move into haunted spaces are kept in the dark until the crisis comes' (Uglow, 1988, p. xi). There are innumerable examples of the common ghost story that became 'so popular … while a rational view of the world was making itself felt' (Sebald, 2005, p. 150). Many stories hinge upon the ideas of a ghost bearing a transformative message or making a decisive intervention in the life of the haunted, exemplified by the ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*, the last of whom Scrooge begs: 'Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!' (Dickens, 1842, p. 110).

For the Ancients, ghosts were momentous figures, conveying messages or carrying portents (Johnstone, 1999). In our own days, there remains a sputtering interest in the significance of ghosts. Spectres continue to creep into the work of philosophers and sociologists who urge us to give ghosts a voice and to use their presence as a basis for learning, for ethics and for thinking anew about human agency (Bell, 1997; Carsten, 2007; Derrida, 1994, 1999; Gordon, 2008; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944). Though ghosts are enigmatic and 'ontologically ambitious' figures (Castricano, 2001, p. 5), scholars from across a range of fields have talked if not exactly with, then of, ghosts and an interest in the spectral can be identified in sociology, psychology, anthropology, memory in history, and media studies, as well as classically in fiction, drama and film. In Ancient Greece the world of the dead was both a source of possible help and a mirror that reflects our own, revealing 'like fingerprint powder shaken over a table, where desires, fears, and angers are most acute among the living' (Johnstone, 1999). Bell (1997), in his essay on the ghosts of place, proposes that:

> 'We moderns, despite our mechanistic and rationalistic ethos, live in landscapes filled with ghosts. The scenes we pass through each day are inhabited, possessed, by spirits we cannot see but whose presence we nevertheless experience … Ghosts of the living and dead alike, of both individual and collective spirits, of both other selves and our own selves, haunt the places of our lives.' (Bell, 1997, p. 813)

Ghosts embody a paradox, representing a 'concept for which there is no referent, no evidence, anywhere, any place, any time in the entire sweep of human experience, yet one that is vital in many cultures and perhaps in every culture since the Upper Paleolithic Age' (Turner, 2003, p. 72). Their abiding presence across waves of time and place means that they can be cast as ancient, modern and postmodern.

## Organization Studies and the Ghostly: Research Rationale

There are signs of a morbid turn in organization studies. The metaphor of death has been used to denote an array of organizational change events, including failure, closure, downsizing and restructuring (Bell & Taylor, 2011), whilst the organization of death (Smith, 2006), an appreciation of mortality in the ethics of organizational life (Reedy & Learmonth, 2011) and an interest in organizational miasma (Gabriel, 2012) have added light and shade to the pallor of organization studies. Clegg (2005) describes CEOs and consultants as 'the charismatic visionaries of a secular age' (p. 535), modern visionaries who are paid to hold bureaucracies in a state of enchantment by generating visions of meaning and purpose. Pine e Cunha and Chia (2007) advise strategic managers to develop 'peripheral vision' or 'a cultivated sensitivity to the marginal, the hidden, the obscured and to what lies outside the frame of conscious attention' (p. 561). Ghosts have been harnessed to talk of the *spectre* of 'the dark and repressed side of excess and exuberance in the management of the economy' (Gamble, 2009), the 'virtue gap' in organizations (March, 2007), managerial succession (Haveman, 1993) and the extended afterlife of McKinlay's (2002) subversive bank clerks for whom career progression is a process in which 'we climb upwards on the stepping stones of our own dead selves' (p. 610).

In a recent Special Issue of *Organization Studies* O'Doherty and colleagues (2013) noted that 'Contemporary organization is increasingly understood as contingent and improvisational – and immersed in complex and shadowy realities where customary assumptions about the space and time of organization no longer hold' (O'Doherty et al., 2013, p. 1427). Joining these scholarly conversations about the unstable, trembling and imaginational nature of organizations, and heeding Beyes and Steyaert's (2013) call for work which is 'attuned to and seeks to enact the affective forces that haunt and unsettle organizational life' (p. 1458), this paper now explores the idea that organizations are spectral spaces, teeming with ghosts, and examines the implications of this insight for thinking about leadership action.

Informed by these concerns for the reflexive relations between the dead and the living, the present and the past, pre-modern superstition and modern rationalism, in this paper I focus on the relations between ghosts and learning, and ghosts and ethics in organizational settings, focusing on UK local councils. In doing so I join a conversation among organization scholars interested in organizational life 'on the edge' and the unfolding of action 'in the spaces between' (Derrida, 1994; Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2005), and organizational researchers who are interested in situated relatedness, mindfulness, alterity, and 'the peripheral borderlands … away from the enlightened core' (Thanem, 2006, p. 187). Like those encountered by Scrooge, ghosts can look in at least three directions: to the past (organizational inheritances); to the present (current practices, or how traditions are reproduced); and to futures yet to come (with fateful choices of continuity or transformation). Looking at ghosts, talking with ghosts, therefore enables an exploration of leadership practices,

political management and managing change in organizations such as tradition-laden public sector bureaucracies (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003; Orr & Vince, 2009) whose tortured ambition is described by O'Connor (1984) as being to 'maintain the daydreams and pay for the nightmares'.

## Methodology

In telling the tale of my research into the everyday leadership and learning practices of Council chief executives, this paper is haunted by three interlinked questions:

- How does thinking about ghosts (or giving ghosts a voice) help us fathom the organizational politics of councils?
- How does the concept of ghosts enable an appreciation of the action at the boundaries of politics and management in these organizations?
- How is mindfulness of ghosts linked to these leaders' ethical choices?

To explore these questions I concentrate on instances of people talking of ghosts, the language of the ghostly, of people feeling unsettled or 'losing their bearings' (Gordon, 2008), of people talking of traditions or practices of the dead or the past, of unresolved social violence, of people admitting to a disturbed relationship with the dead, of episodes where people suggest the impact of a sensuous knowledge or feeling a new reality, or of managing a confrontation between the present and the past. In this way, I show the different ghosts which are at play in these organizations and examine what cracks are exposed, or what is unsettled, when people give ghosts a voice and take that voice seriously, and discuss how ghosts mediate the action and the ethical choices of leaders.

### *Research context*

The empirical method presented in this paper is part of an observational study which draws on interviews and elements of an ethnographic approach, including shadowing, interviews and frequent immersion in the milieu of UK council chief executives (Czarniawska, 2008; Van Maanen, 1988). Ethnography is a method for gaining insights about local knowledge and processes which involves entering into a social setting and getting to know the people in it (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Watson, 1994; Yanow, 2000). It enables explorations 'beyond surfaces' (Ciuk & Kostera, 2010, p. 193).

My shadowing of chief executives is an ongoing project, but this paper draws on work undertaken between September 2008 and May 2012, during which I shadowed three chief executives in three different English councils. The organizations were of different sizes in terms of geographical boundaries and of different council types – one county council, one borough council and one unitary council, and my chief executive participants were two men and one woman. The observational research is embedded in a parallel study (Orr & Bennett, 2012a, 2012b) which has involved interviews with 35 chief executives, focusing on leadership and learning and during which, as the theme of ghosts has emerged, I have taken the opportunity to ask interviewees about the resonance of ghosts as part of their everyday practice and to invite reflection on what Gergen calls 'remembered persons' to surface the influence of absent colleagues and other intimate figures on the everyday learning and sensemaking practices of chief executives. Access has varied but a typical visit lasted 3 to 5 days and was repeated for a minimum of four occasions in each case. Access was limited by constraints on how long I could absent myself from my 'day job' (teaching, management responsibilities in the department and so on). My approach has drawn upon elements of an ethnographic approach inasmuch as my aim has been to spend a sustained amount of time observing the nuances

of conduct and context. As Van Maanen (1988) describes, '.. our appreciation and understanding of ethnography comes like a mist that creeps slowly over us while in the library and lingers with us while in the field' (p. xii), and so the paper connects with an approach to research which emphasizes the significance of rich moments of 'felt' experience (Symon & Cassell, 2012). The settings for the vignettes encompassed the front and back stage of local government management: chief executives' offices and cars, council chambers, meeting rooms, anterooms and corridors, and car parks, courtyards and cafes.

Researchers drawing on ethnographic methods emphasize the art of writing, whether Geertz's (1973) thick description, Clifford and Marcus (1986) on the poetics of ethnography, Van Maanen (1988) on crafting tales to startle the reader, and Atkinson (1990) on the role of ethnographic imagination. I locate my research within the narrative approach in organization studies (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska 1998; Gabriel, 2000) and within a research tradition in which language is used to evoke organizational life (Cornelissen, Kafouros, & Lock, 2005), and I try to evoke tales from the field, constructing narratives of the atmospherics of the ghostly. I have taken my field notes, recollections of interactions, conversations and directly witnessed episodes and developed these into maturing theoretical interpretations (Rosen, 2000). My interpretations feature as vignettes written on the basis of my observational research which attended to, in Smelser's (1998) phrase, 'the rational and the ambivalent' of these organizational settings. I wish to evoke a 'participatory sense' in the reader (Van Maanen, 1988). The text presented in this paper has been built from 'smaller, less coherent bits and pieces of writings – out of fieldnotes, many composed long before any comprehensive ethnographic overview has been developed' (Emerson et al, 1995, p. vii). I take an approach to thinking about how to package academic writing in which I conjure the atmospherics through the vignettes and – in ways which mirror the central concept of the study – blur the genre and breach the allegorical (Monin & Monin, 2005).

Cultural practices are created by the active construction of a text (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 7). In this way I recognize my writing as a 'practice of representation' and as a 'narrative performance' (Rhodes, 2001). Ethnographers occupy a 'literary borderland' (Van Maanen, 1988, p. ix) in which they compose an 'otherworld' through their writing. I use dramatic recall to present an impressionist tale – a personalized account '.. of fleeting moments of fieldwork cast in dramatic form' (p. 7) which aspires to be 'a tightly focused, vibrant, exact, but necessarily imaginative rendering of fieldwork' (p. 102), and one which tries to meet Van Maanen's exacting criteria of interest, coherence and fidelity: does it attract, does it hang together and does it seem true? In this way I invite you to absorb the 'spirit'(s) of the tale (Goffman, 1981).

## *Commune with us, Spirits, and move among us*

Van Maanen (1988) says that ethnography is 'highly particular and hauntingly personal' and in this fashion ghosts materialized in my field notes. I wasn't hunting them, they just seemed to appear (a heretical thought for a reflexive researcher). In a discussion of the laying off of staff, someone refers to 'the spectre of the trade union'; an anecdote is told of the dead body that lay in the lake while officials tangled with each other over whose patch it was in; calling to mind Plutarch's frozen voices, there are inky traces of previous conversations written down in one chief executive's big red book; there are references to 'hollowed out districts' and 'hollowed out services', to the ghosts of fallen leaders, to one chief executive's big box of horror stories she keeps under her desk, and to the need for a 'night-time strategy'. There is a warning about 'a Pandora's box for nutters', and references to the shadow of far right parties. One chief executive talks about her use of 'external forces' (in the form of paid consultants) to deliver powerful messages to difficult chief officers; another of members being 'sent out into the world to spread misinformation'. My field notes from

observing one council's 'Performance Clinic' (a briefing of the chief executive by the heads of service) contain death and decay: 'Heads up on a large funeral in the town centre tomorrow – need to have extra wardens on hand'; 'Sickness rates are up and we are not replacing members of staff who leave'; and 'In a cold snap we don't get the car parking income, we get the crematorium income.' One ghost, then another and soon others came to reveal themselves. The more I looked the more they congregated. Here, in six vignettes, I introduce you to a few of them. There are more, possibly, but channelling, like writing papers (and reading them), is tiring and not without risks to the health. In telling you about the ghosts, and sometimes letting them speak for themselves, I'll be directing their spectral glow to illuminate aspects of managing and organizing in the local councils I spent time in. Come closer, friend.

## Ghostly Vignettes and Apparitions in the Field

### *Parallel worlds*

*In this first vignette we encounter the atmospherics of the Council Chamber, and the two worlds of democratic politics and management that Christine, the chief executive, must navigate, service and police.*

The bell tolls. It tolls for the councillors, the chief officers and a halo of heads of service and committee clerks who descend on the Council Chamber in County Hall for the cabinet meeting. After some 'mingling', they take their places. In the body of the pit there are five sweeping rows of seating, and behind these a raised public gallery in which I have been directed to sit. There are dark paintings on the wall surrounding the highest tier of the chamber. These are of the fading faces, robes and chains of 39 past dignitaries (of whom a mere five have been women), fixed forever in oil. A picture book of the dead. One moment sitting for the artist, the next experiencing the fate of all politicians, defeat or death. It has become a truism that all political life is destined to end in failure. These tributes to the place's ex-Leaders remind me of Sebald's (2005) observation in *Campo Santo* about monuments to the dead: 'The biggest stones are usually rolled over the graves of the richest people, for it is to be feared that they are the most likely to begrudge their progeny their inheritance, and to try to take back what they have lost' (p. 22). However, these paintings and their invocation of a long history and the showcasing of the office-bearers through the years also represent a layering-on of the organization's authority, a hardening varnish of legitimacy.

Today there are 41 men and 9 women in the room, including one member of the public and a journalist. At the front of the chamber the Council Leader sits on a raised plinth which elevates him above lesser mortals. At the leader's left hand sits the chief executive. At the left hand of the chief sits the monitoring officer. Below, on the far right, is a table around which sit a number of officers at the ready. Below the Leader sit two scribes taking minutes that will later become the official record and feed the next issue of committee papers. Hanging above the Leader's plinth is an all-seeing-eye – a video camera concealed behind a smoked glass dome. It picks up faces of individual speakers and projects them onto the three giant screens above the podium. The camera is activated by the desktop microphones each person has. At the flick of a switch, and with lightning speed, the nominated speaker's large head (a slightly blurry close-up of their disembodied face) will then materialize on the screens, dominating the room, its words channelled to the entire chamber with a profane volume.

There is a 24-item agenda. I groan. There are actually people (outsiders, citizens, restless natives) here who have come to watch proceedings, though not many. Of all those present probably only three are not being paid to be there. All have been given a bound book of committee papers, fronted by the agenda. The book is 218 pages long. I then notice it is double sided and sink even

lower in my chair. Later, back in her office, the chief executive agrees that the cabinet meeting is a test of endurance and 'the trick is to look interested and maintain your game face' at all times. I am impressed at how magnificently well this is done.

The agenda is organized according to corporate themes. Early on there is an ostentatiously upbeat report from the director of finance, a projection of confidence and the prudent governing of the Council's resources. Budgets are tight and set to get tighter but resources are being marshalled well. Across the afternoon, there are Opposition voices and they are given space but otherwise the process seems to manage them out of the system through time limits and invoking the need for speakers to keep to order. One councillor complains, 'you can stop us speaking as much as you like. We don't have the votes to stop you. But the truth is the truth. *The truth is out there* and the people out there know that.' Another Opposition councillor complains of the Council having a hidden workforce and of sub-contractors 'operating beneath the radar'. He claims that the Council's contractor *Staff-u-like* is providing people through a sub-contractor *Jobforce*, meaning that 'People are turning up in a line every morning with a packed lunch, or are being sent home with no pay and no rights.' He complains of 'a ghost workforce', and of a lack of corporate ethics. A member of the public is called to the dais to speak – her address is dignified and she speaks with a quiet pain about the proposed closure of her son's school and the loss of a local community resource. She says she knows that the Council will ignore all objecting voices, echoing the critique that these occasions 'legitimize decisions that have already been made or to co-opt participants into tacit approval by their very act of attending a public meeting' (McComas, Besley, & Black, 2010, p. 124). Another Opposition councillor – with the glint in his eye shining from the giant screens – says he doesn't want to talk about a school sponsor's 'nocturnal interests'. The Leader becomes distressed at this intervention and later the chief executive expresses her sympathy: 'Jack [the Council Leader] got really upset – he shouldn't have shown it – it's a real shame.' The warmth and empathy of this comment takes me aback and I see the closeness of the relationship between chief and her Leader in a new light. I also come to understand better the role of the chief as being guardian of the Leader's interests, a protector who sits at his shoulder employed to ward off bad spirits.

Symbolically, a cabinet meeting is close to the apex of local democracy, perhaps topped only by a meeting of full Council. It is an example of, as the old saying goes, democracy in action. It's the bit that people might imagine Council business to be like – formal, slightly solemn, a bit slow, weighed down by tradition, tons of paperwork, lots of point scoring and a fair bit of bickering. Decisions get made and the wheels of local government turn. However, the formal meeting is embedded in an array of prior, ongoing, messy, interacting, 'livelier' processes – conversations, management team meetings, appraisals, coups, plots, asides, tip-offs, rude surprises, intelligence sharing, jockeying, framing, nudging, sense-making – of political management.

One illustration of this containment is that there is a differentiated level of access to knowledge and killer intelligence. For example, there is a time lag between what is being discussed today in the public formal setting of the cabinet meeting and how far I know certain agendas to have progressed outside this room. In this sense the 218 pages of reports which demand so much officer and member time – in their production, presentation and scrutiny – are partial and purposeful public documents around which debate is carefully managed. The formal cabinet papers constitute the standing record of decisions and actions and will be passed down from generation to generation. ('My first chief executive was a former committee clerk and he was very big on this', says Christine.) Crucially, these documents also carry immense legal weight. They represent the culmination of particular processes and enshrine choices made in the name of the public, even if much of the action remains behind closed doors.

Thus, when performance information is discussed in management team meetings there is much deliberation about the *domain* in which different information should reside. In one gathering, the

chief executive and senior managers conclude that 'the comparative information suggests we are not as good as we think we might be. If we put those figures into the public domain there is a risk of the opposition making something of it.' Someone adds, 'Yes, and the regulator wouldn't then need to find out for himself!' Uglow (1988) says that there is often a hierarchy of knowledge in ghost stories; the nearer you are to those in power, the closer you guard their secrets – 'the housekeeper won't talk but Bessy the kitchen maid will' (p. xi). A pecking order of knowledgeability looks something like this: The Cabinet members know a lot more than the non-Cabinet ones. The Leader knows even more than the Cabinet members and it is the chief executive's job to make sure of that. The Opposition councillors should know least of all. Information and knowledge are channelled in the parallel universes – the worlds of the Leader, the Cabinet, the Backbenchers, the Opposition, the senior officers, and the public – between which the chief executive moves.

## *'I see dead people'*

*In this second vignette Christine describes her feelings of being haunted in her place of work and introduces us to a personal ghost, a figure at once homely and unhomely.*

The ghosts of former colleagues are regular visitors, sometimes to provide a reminder of lessons learned the hard way. I glimpse this early on. It's Tuesday morning. After yesterday's awayday, it's my first visit to the Council proper. At 8.30 I sit in County Hall reception, a dark, tight anteroom accessed through an anonymous heavy wooden door off the main street. It's a wonderful, quite beautiful sandstone building, a great example of the type, but a welcoming air – signage even – it has not. The chief executive comes down in person to meet me. She gives me a tour of the grounds and courtyard for five minutes en route to her office. It's a disconcerting trip. She points to the windows of the courtroom and the chambers of the Hanging Judge. She points out the spot where the gallows were, the laying-out room, and talks of the bad karma. She shows me the prison and the exercise yard and asks if I've seen the film *The Sixth Sense*. I know she means she sees dead people and this thought returns to me later when she talks of an impending period of lay-offs (plans for which come to occupy increasing amounts of thinking and meeting time across my visits) or of having had to sack different people. Her office overlooks the prison exercise yard and in the winter afternoon it is gloomy and atmospheric, lit by the pale glow of a *Narnia*-style lamppost. Reflecting on yesterday's senior management team meetings and performance board, ghosts of the past are called to mind to help explain her practices:

> 'We once had a massive overspend in legal and I had to sack the monitoring officer. That's why you need a whole systems view. At one time we had the worst financial officer on the riskiest service – children and families – that is why I always ask about their staffing issues and who is the weakest link in their team.'

Another time, she recounts,

> 'When I arrived here a director presented me with four numbers on a bit of paper as the budget briefing and said 'we'll tell you if there's a problem'. There were no supervision meetings. CMT met once a month. I had to get rid of him and most of the team.'

Other ghosts can be more excruciating company. In a later conversation she discusses a behavioural inheritance from her mother and in doing so identifies feelings of both fulfilment and loss. I have said that to her I am struck by the relentlessness of her working day and by her powers of concentration and I ask if there is space to reflect and make sense of a day's events. Her response conjures a personal ghost and it is a painful reference point in her life:

> 'At night I drive for an hour and work for two hours. Thinking, scribbling, about how to run this afternoon… So I reflect as I'm going home… Very very few times I've ever switched off… My mother never stopped with the shop. I used to beg her when I was with her on a day off when we passed the shop, don't go in. But she would always go in. It's like running your own business. You're always clicking. It's not just a job… It's why I like it, it's why I'm in public service.'

A ghost can be an exemplar, a source of energy and commitment, but also embody a trace of sadness and loss in the face of the demands of commerce and work.

## *The ghost of performance past, performance present and performance yet to come*

*In this third vignette Robert and his management team join hands to ward off danger. At the end of the séance the table is turned, and he deploys a ghost story to unsettle the auditors.*

Derrida wrote of politicians coming together, forging uneasy alliances to ward off a spectre (communism), and of the way in which the ghost comes to dominate thinking and action:

> No one speaks of anything anymore but this specter. All phantasms are projected onto the screen of this ghost… One watches for the signals, the tables that turn, the dishes that move. Is it going to answer? All possible alliances are thus forged to conjure away this common adversary… The alliance signifies: death to the specter. It is convoked to be revoked, everyone swears [*jure*] only on the specter, but in order to conjure it away… So one speaks of nothing else but in order to chase it away, to exclude it, to exorcise it. (Derrida, 1994, p. 124)

In all of the councils in the study, managers appear to engage in an incessant process of the review of performance indicators in which the proxies become, as for Baudrillard (2000), not simulated but hyper-real. As Robert describes, 'there's a lot of smoke and mirrors involved', particularly, it would seem, on the part of their comparator councils. Another chief executive, evoking the ethereal nature of her award-winning and higher-profile neighbours, says 'If you look behind the substance of Goldborough or Sundale councils there's very little there actually.'

At a séance, the moving glass, noises off, ambiguous messages to be decoded, a recognized name, a piece of information – known only to a few – revealed, are all seen as indicators of spirits. At senior management team meetings (and performance boards, scrutiny panels and performance spotlights) in local government, there are squadrons of 'PIs', 'KPIs' and 'CPAs' – all indicators of performance, portents of the health of the organization or, like an alarm, warnings of its proximity to danger or death. At one meeting I observe, six senior managers and Robert, the chief executive, are seated in a circle at a round table. The managers are huddling together trying to produce a muscular corporatism, a coordinated movement to handle the performance indicators that have them so continually exercised. They are not joining hands but the atmosphere is reverent and a little tense as they pore over the performance information documents. The indicators are 'ciphers', someone says – 'they are proxies for the service, not the service itself', the chief reminds the team. Even so, these ciphers have an enormous significance to the managers and resound in numerous discussions and meetings. The indicators have to be decoded and their messages interpreted. Many have to be 'wrestled with'. Some indicators 'need to be closely watched'. Others 'we must do our best to protect ourselves against': they are to be kept at bay.

A couple of weeks later, in the chief executive's office, there is an important and lengthy meeting with two external auditors to help the Council prepare for an upcoming audit of its performance. The chief executive and members of the senior management team are present and gather around the

cramped meeting table. The chief later explained to me that the purpose is to bind in the auditors with the interests of the Council, and to communicate to his own staff that the auditors are to be cooperated with and 'are our friends'. He does not trust his director of finance to see this. As ever, Robert starts by framing the meeting. He is extremely accomplished at doing this. He sets it up as a 'How can we help you?' meeting. This tactic also very effectively defuses some of the hardness of the messages emanating from the auditors. The Council is not scoring very well on a large number of indicators. The auditor is the only visitor to his office I ever witnessed that Robert has not tried to dominate. He is seen to respect the auditor's expertise or role. Afterwards, he confirms to me that he was signalling this deference to his staff in the senior team. Robert comments to the gathering, 'this is hard stuff'. The more senior auditor says that they need to understand the detailed guidance and I take this to be a slight dig at Robert's broad-brush, anecdotal approach to representing his organization's performance and achievements. 'You need to understand that the key is to turn it into a point by point issue. *Unless you have that warning now you are in trouble*', says the auditor. 'The wider angle is that the government is going to gear funding towards the better performing authorities. We need two to three pages for each. The top ten things you're proudest of. And the statistics to underpin it.' The statistics will be a challenge for these managers, I think to myself. There is more of a story-telling culture in this organization, emanating from the chief executive himself. Robert complains that the last time around in CPA 'the others had a better story to tell. But they didn't open their office on a Friday morning right enough.' The auditor tells the managers to 'take care of the KPIs – get them out of the red. And improve them relative to other authorities.' It is clear that Robert, despite his best efforts to frame the meeting positively for his team, is dispirited and frustrated:

> 'The KPIs are a proxy for the service. Many people fix the proxy not the service. Are others doing it like us? Others are playing all sorts of games… We've learnt something from that – sod the actuality. Get out and tell the story. It's like Total Place [another reporting exercise required by central government]. We're just counting things and doing nothing differently.'

He feels disjointed and the rigging of local government performance management comes into view.

At the close, Robert rallies. On the way out the senior auditor is referred to a row of yellow sticky-notes stuck to the frame of a motivational poster on the wall of Robert's office. 'Do you want to be in our sweepstake?' Robert asks. 'We are taking bets on how much it will cost Bestborough [an adjoining district council] now that they have lost their appeal against the development of houses.' This news comes as a bombshell to the auditor – he is responsible for that council too and is visibly very worried. He has been upended, spooked. It is a very funny moment. The chief has the last laugh, as well as a dig at a neighbour. He has made his point about proxies, by unleashing a ghost story of impending financial ruin of a 'high performing' neighbour.

## *Friendly ghosts*

*In this vignette we meet ambiguous ghosts who can give friendly advice but from whom the chief executives strive to find distance.*

Several chief executives spoke to me about learning from other chief executives, as role models at formative stages of their career, and later, when they are on the level, as confidantes. One chief executive conjures spectral imagery, and physics-defying feats of movement, when describing the action in socio-professional settings, such as the conference bar, when fellow chiefs exchange stories and advice: 'When you're new, you hover around the other good chief execs to learn from them.' More established (if floating) chiefs form bonds: 'We drift around in groups. We're all I guess of the nature of wanting to know what's going on everywhere else so we're not missing something.'

One chief talked of 'transference' of wisdom, advice about the importance of being able to judge the atmosphere, and of warnings which can guard them against being taken unawares. He recounts:

> 'So one of the things I did when I started at work was a mentoring process; we organized an ex-chief to mentor me…to help with that kind of "I've got this issue, how would I deal with it?" And so that kind of transferred learning, what's normal, what's abnormal, what's dangerous, you know, because sometimes *you have to hear the pitch right, you think that's abnormal, that's fine, ooh, you know, that thing you think is normal, actually that's quite dangerous, you know. That stays with you*.'

Friendly ghosts therefore seem to communicate a sensuous knowledge, returning to help heighten sensitivity whether to peril, or to the restlessness or scheming of colleagues.

However, over time, the order of these relationships can change. Many chief executives I spoke to can call to mind forms who morph from being affable to more ambiguous figures in their professional lives. Someone that started off life as a friendly influence may assume a new character: someone against rather than with whom learning occurs. A figure who in the past offered nourishment can turn and threaten to devour them. One chief executive describes the process of disenchantment as like being freed from an icy and constricting grip:

> 'If I can be rude about Casper Goole for a minute, when he was chief exec in Midtown and I was then his assistant director effectively, I was, yeah, I was quite ambitious… and I worried about Casper because I thought he was too showy and, and too much sort of glib and not enough depth essentially and there's a bit of me which is deliberately and I know, partly I just knew I couldn't do that, I, I'm not a, I wouldn't, I don't think anybody would describe me as being a sort of charismatic sort of person. I couldn't do the showman and I thought for a while that that was, that was career limiting, you know, I just can't, can't do that and, and so finding actually that's only one style and there's plenty of other ways of being effective. *That released me.*'

A related example came from a chief executive who emphasizes the importance of a new chief making a clean break from their predecessor:

> I tell you a ghost story, which didn't happen to me, happened to Victoria, who's the chief of Oldburn. The previous chief of Oldburn was a chap called Terry Fire, who, big larger than life kind of macho leader, you know, 'politicians in my pockets' kind of chief exec… and so he was retired out of the authority and Victoria who was one of the management team there was successful in getting the chief's job… I knew Victoria from, from before anyway, and I was pleased for her and she said the first management team she ran as the new chief, Terry Fire turned up, physical ghost as well, and he did it for the first two or three meetings until she said 'hang on I don't think it's appropriate for you to be here', so, you know, there's… sometimes a physicality.

He advises me that he tells this story to new and aspirant chief executives, intended as a lesson in the need to establish oneself and not to be seen to be beholden to the past, to the previous generation, or to be deferring to ghosts, no matter how transcendent they might appear to be. Awareness of ghosts is part of a rite of passage for chief executives after which they are no longer novitiates, an idea reinforced in the next vignette.

## *Walking ghosts*

*In this vignette we hear of people who, pre-mortem, achieve the status of ghosts, and learn how the scent of imminent death can wrap itself around the vulnerable.*

Gabriel (2012) notes that 'during periods of sudden organizational change, rituals of separation and incorporation may become neglected, allowing contact with "walking corpses"' (p. 1146). In his book on guerrilla politics in Columbia, Dudley (2006) talks of the existence of 'walking ghosts'. These are:

> people who have crossed death's frontier. They're still alive, but many of them wish they were dead. Living, as it stands, is a burden. They're not suicidal. They're just suffering because their enemies have them cornered. The time they have left is short, and they know it. (Dudley, 2006, p. 1)

In councils, such ghosts are discernible. One chief executive told me:

> 'I've got a big whiteboard in my room and I quite like doodling on it, diagrams, words, things I pick up and partly because I consciously know that people will have a look at it and they might ask me about it or they'll, you know, and one of the things Edgar did, he had the same whiteboard, he unthinkingly drew on his whiteboard his new structure, so everybody could see whether they were in or out sort of thing and maybe that pissed everybody off.'

A sense of their own mortality, mirrored by the mortality of their predecessors, is a recurring theme in their readings of the politics of their organizations. Theirs is an 'unsettled relationship with the dead' (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944). The demise of their managerial ancestors is used as a source of learning, warning and guidance, buttressing the agency of the living. One chief executive, Dan, is sensitive to the downfall of his predecessor and talks at length about it, explaining the circumstances of the exit, the imprint on those left behind and the lingering presence of the chief who had been 'bulleted':

> The past would be an authority that lost its way, became insular, became kind of *detached from the local government world* and the outcome of that was an authority that thought it was doing well when in fact it was doing terribly and that *all came to a head with the demise of the previous permanent chief*, which was… handled really badly, so by the time the authority went to market for a new chief it had… lost its way… the previous chief, Sam Wheat, he came in and tried to make a large number of changes and from what I can tell quite a lot of what he wanted to do was probably right, the way he went about it was definitely wrong and that led to his demise and that although they had got an interim chief in, so *I didn't follow immediately on his heels*... [it was] *palpable that from the day I started, you know, the footsteps of Sam were there everywhere*.

Dan continues his story, of how the smell of death wreaths itself around the living:

> I started in the June and it was the November, so it must have only been about five months or something, I got ill, I got a blood clot on my lung… just out of the blue and I had to go into hospital and I was in hospital for three or four days… and a press enquiry came through which was: 'The story's out that the chief executive is ill? Or has he been suspended by the administration like Sam Wheat?' Even the local press had it *imprinted on their minds that this is how the administration goes about its business.*

He sees his job as banishing these ghosts.

> That's quite palpable and I would say wherever you work there's always, they've always been big characters who imprint themselves on places, sometimes politicians and quite often staff, usually of quite senior nature… who are the big personalities and whose person, *whose personalities remain even when they're gone*… So I think there's a very specific set of kind of ghosts with it and in a way my job has been to put Sam Wheat way behind us.'

In these examples, we see the chief executive's mindfulness of the legacy of painful exits, and his apprehension of a need to prevent the abrupt termination of leaders becoming established as a tradition within the organization.

### *Watching ghosts and the ghosts of political management*

*Chief executives are carriers of ghost stories and have tales aplenty, of victims, of threats, of being watched. The first story in this final section shows such a story being deployed to deliberate effect as part of the chief executive's political management strategy. The second is a reflective account which suggests the strains of the politics–management interface.*

One chief executive recalls using a ghost story to manage the expectations of a newly elected councillor whom he felt to be overly demanding, ignorant of the constraints faced by local government and unaware of lessons learned in the past:

> 'So there were a lot of new people who are almost at the opposite end of that spectrum because they think the world began with their election and, you know, I mean they, they do, they have a mindset, they think "Oh well now I'm on the Council what shall we do?" And, you know, part of my role is to remind them actually there is a history and there is a story and some things have been tried and failed, some things have been tried which don't do them now because they were stupid or wasteful or not appropriate for some reason… I think the newly elected politicians think, you know, the world's their oyster and I'm afraid we've had to sort of shatter a few illusions.'

This example highlights the role of the chief executive as a conduit between the past and the present. Telling a ghost story is part of chief executive's repertoire of political management skills, and is used to invoke the past – ghost story as precedent (Boje, 1991) – and unsettle the assumptions of an elected member. As a result, as Marx told us, the traditions of the dead now weigh as a nightmare on the living, as the chief executive forces a meeting of the present and the past, confronting the neophyte with a new or disturbed context in which future action will now play out.

Chief executives' role in interfacing with the local politicians is central to their job, but this duty is sapping, and it can be difficult to achieve respite from it. Sebald (2005) describes the ghostly presences of everyday life as:

> now here and now there, without expecting it, you may meet one of those beings who are somehow blurred and out of place and who, as I always feel, are a little too small and short-sighted; they have something curiously watchful about them, as if they were lying in wait, and their faces bear the expression of a race that wishes us ill. (Sebald, 2001, p. 33)

One chief executive describes the sinking feeling that can be provoked by such scrutiny:

> 'You're living in a goldfish bowl, particularly if you live on the patch, which in a county you haven't got much choice to be honest! You know, I actually live about 300 yards from County Hall so… you know, I went in the pub, literally went in the pub during the election campaign about two weeks ago, on my own, which you don't do very often but it was a helluva day so I just went in for a pint and I was literally in there thirty seconds when a certain councillor came up and said, "Ah, Tom, the very man" and you think "Shit!" you know … didn't even get the pint to my lips so you do, *you need to get away and, and know that you're not being watched all the time*.'

## Spectres of Marx, Derrida, and Freud: Ghosts – can't live with them, can't live without them

The spectre is a figure which has a long lineage in academic thought (Maddern & Adey, 2008, p. 292) and a convocation of writers has engaged with ghosts. In doing so, fissures have opened in

relation to the status and motives of ghosts and the strategies that we should employ in our dealings with them. The most influential scholarly intervention in the last quarter century comes from Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1994), in which he exhorts scholars to walk, and commune, with ghosts. Derrida begins by exploring the 'spectrology' of Marx's use of ghosts and establishes the pervasiveness of spectres in his writing. In *The Communist Manifesto*, a ghost waits there, 'from the opening, from the raising of the curtain' (Derrida, 1999, p. 2). Marx conjures ghosts in his analysis of the inheritance of the past and his manifesto for an as-yet-unrealized future. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), two sentences after his oft-quoted 'Men make their own history but they do not do it just as they please', Marx tells us that 'The traditions of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living' (p. 134). In other words, our agency, or own making of history, is a condition of inheritance, and 'is *in the condition of the other* and of the dead other… a generation of the dead' (Derrida, 1994, p. 134).

Derrida recasts these nightmarish figures as a source of learning and of ethical guidance to the living. In doing so, he also enlists Horkheimer and Adorno's (1944) exhortation not to banish the dead from our minds in a quest to be forward-looking or up to date. In their 'On the Theory of Ghosts', Horkheimer and Adorno suggest a certain spirit in which we might think about ethical practices, and avoid the danger that 'Individuals are reduced to a mere sequence of instantaneous experiences which leave no trace, or rather whose trace is hated as irrational, superfluous, and "overtaken" in the literal sense of the word' (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 216). They describe our 'disturbed relationship with the dead' and treat as problematic the modern social context in which the dead, forgotten and embalmed suffer ' the worst possible curse: they are expunged from the memory of those who live on'. Mindfulness of ghosts therefore can be a source of ethical guidance.

Derrida plays with the literal and non-literalness of ghosts, describing them as paradoxical incorporations, or carnal forms of the spirit. In a state of becoming, a spectre both unsettles us and challenges the bases of our claims to knowledge:

> There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reapparition of the departed… this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge… One does not know if it is living or if it is dead… this thing… comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy. (Derrida, 1994, p. 5)

For Derrida, therefore, when we see a ghost we don't know if it is – or we are – coming or going. Ghosts maintain the action, the learning, in the spaces between life and death. Derrida exhorts us to learn to talk with and learn from spectres, to live more justly in the commerce of ghosts. Living with ghosts is part of 'a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations' (Derrida, 1994, p. xviii). Acknowledging ghosts, learning to talk with them, to give them voice, helps us to rethink our relations with others, with time and place, our situated relations.

In contrast to Derrida's belief that learning occurs at the shadowy boundaries between pre- and post-mortem, Abraham and Torok (1994) portray the phantom which returns to bear 'witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other' (p. 175), identifying ghosts who rise from a traumatized past, intent on hauntings designed to confuse and mislead their subjects, and committed to the prevention of the past coming to light. Unlike the conventions of many ghost stories (revelation and intercession), these ghosts work to maintain the concealment of shameful and prohibited secrets. For Abraham and Torok, the task becomes one of forcing the ghost to disclose its secret so that the ghost can be banished or returned to the order of knowledge (Arias & Pulham, 2010; Davis, 2007). Similarly, Freud (1919) is keen to demystify the uncanny and to render it explicable as the residual traces of 'the animistic phase in the development of primitive peoples' (p. 147).

In his complaint that 'a traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts', Derrida alludes to Freud, but also more widely to the Enlightenment aim of putting to an end all such superstition. For Marx, ghosts mark the existence of the world, spectres which cannot be dispelled. Freud challenges the existence of ghosts, and the uncanny, in order to recategorize them as aberrations, misapprehensions and fictions. Freud confronts ghosts with a view to explaining away our mistaken belief in them (Davis, 2007, p. 17). For Freud, and Abraham and Torok, the encounter with the ghost should be, as quickly as possible, the end of the story, for Derrida it should be the beginning. Dialogues with ghosts are not to be undertaken in order that the ghosts – ingenuously or otherwise – will disclose secrets (as per Abraham and Torok or the ghost story genre) but so that we become open to generative encounters with the other.

Recent writers take a lead from Derrida. Gergen (2009) encourages academics to consider ghosts as more than a metaphor or poetic symbol, and writes about the day-to-day 'imaginal conversations' or internal dialogues with what she calls 'social ghosts' (Gergen. 2009, p. 62). For Gergen, social ghosts 'remind us of our own embedded existence in the social realm; but also our existence beyond the immediate context, in historical moments, as well as in the present. In all our present relationships, we carry the essences of the past' (p. 62). In sociology, Gordon (2008) engages with the politics of memory and haunting. For Gordon, haunting is a socio-political state which raises spectres, and changes the experience of being in time. The confrontation between the future and the past represents 'the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done' (Gordon, 2008, p. xv). Castricano (2001) suggests that 'a revenant is both a legacy and a promise, this thinking of haunting always points towards a past and a future' (p. 133). Ghosts therefore represent an unholy holism: a bridge between the past, the present and the future.

In line with Derrida's emphasis on the ethics of discoursing with spectres, these writers have connected an interest in ghosts with a potential to enhance the exercise of human agency. An interest in haunting is linked to an ethical capacity to change things for the better, or acts of emancipation. Ghosts are not to be dismissed as an example of individual psychosis or pre-modern superstition; instead they are a significant constituent element of modern life – the task therefore is to look at enchantment in a disenchanted world. Gordon (2008) identifies haunting as a mediation: 'the process that links an institution and an individual, a social structure and a subject, and history and a biography'. Similarly, Carsten (2007) focuses on the complexity of interconnections among everyday social relations, memories of the past and their wider political contexts: ghosts and memory are an inherent part of situated relatedness. As Bell (1997, p. 831) suggests, 'Although we generally experience ghosts as given to us, it is we that give ghosts to places', and therefore it is what we do with them, and the consequences for social life of this action, that matters.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The six vignettes suggest that the local government demotic is filled with a multiplicity of ghosts. These include chain-bearing dignitaries fixed in oil, disembodied heads dominating the council chamber, managers coming together around a table to read the runes of the performance indicators, to keep a close watch and ward off danger. There are hauntings which alert us to the rigging of performance management. There are friendly ghosts and watchful ghosts and there are figures who are 'doomed but not yet departed' (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1147). There are examples of counter-conjurations being accomplished to spook unsuspecting auditors or elected members. Some ghosts can appear to offer an uncanny source of learning or a stimulus for a heightening of strategic

anticipation: 'active ghosts who return at the other's time of need to forewarn of imminent danger' (Davis, 2007, p. 7).

Local government chief executives are enmeshed with a parliament of ghosts. They are figures who practise, as Levinas (1987) has it, in the face of the other. Attention to ghosts lets us understand leadership as entailing intensive relations through which, as Maddern and Adey (2008) describe, space and time can become 'folded, allowing distant presences, events, people and things to become rather more intimate' (p. 292). Such enfolding of the past and the present can pull into the mind's eye family members, departed colleagues, role models, or a lurking sense of spectralized authority that means 'we feel ourselves watched, observed, spied on, as if by the law' (Derrida & Stiegler, 2002, p. 135).

Returning to the first of this paper's research questions, thinking about ghosts helps us fathom the organizational politics of this milieu insofar as council chief executives emerge as providing a bridge between the legacy of past decisions and competing manifestos for the future. In doing so, they both experience, and inflict, hauntings. They absorb political intelligence, public criticism, private pain and the strain of holding the ring; but they also transmit information, warnings, inside knowledge and strategic tip-offs and can visit unsettling perspectives upon colleagues. In these respects, and like the final reveal in genre films such as *The Sixth Sense* (1999) or *The Others* (2001) – where the protagonists come to realize their own spectral status (and that they are both themselves haunted *and* apparitions who haunt others) – these vignettes identify chief executives as actors who themselves mirror the figure of the ghost inasmuch as they straddle boundaries, and work across the betwixt and between of traditions, interests and agendas. As Mrs Alving says to Pastor Manders: 'I'm haunted by ghosts… But I'm inclined to think that we're all ghosts' (Ibsen, 1881, Act 2, p. 61). Likewise, the chief executives initiate new peers by telling of their hauntings: revealing your organizational ghosts – and underlining your facility with the uncanny – is a sign of mature knowledge. Existing in a state of non-apprehension marks you out as wet behind the ears. The inheritance of ghosts is a price of admission, a condition of leadership action.

Leadership is thus an intimate role; and yet paradoxically it can involve strategies of distancing, compartmentalizing, delimiting, excluding, maintaining boundaries and the putting up of barriers, and, at all times, of maintaining the game face – exuding control and calm and communicating one's own imperturbability and very un-spookedness. These chief executives are capable of reducting complexity and, by imposing silences and exclusions, and the timing-out of speakers, minimizing the organized spaces for polyvocality and debate. Yet, inevitably, these strategies are limited: the concept of ghosts highlights that in our organizational endeavours we are always subject to hauntings. It is not as if some ghostlike creatures decide to visit us in the dead of night. Rather perhaps the burden is there all the time, only we pretend not to notice it until events force us to do so or when, like Freud's feeling of the uncanny or Scrooge's awakening in the night, we detect an icicle in the works.

How does the concept of ghosts enable an appreciation of the action at the boundaries of politics and management in these organizations? Ghosts maintain the action in the spaces between, whether between self and other, the past and the present, the present and the future; between leaders and opposition, between the officers and the members, and between the current chief executive and her or his predecessor. Ghosts are to be found at the borderlands between alternative traditions of practising and organizing. They are an animating force for action and help to frame fateful choices about continuity or transformation, highlighting the role of organizational actors in managing confrontations between the past and present. 'A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts' (Derrida, 1994) but a scholar interested in the continuity and transformation of traditions of organizing might choose to take their presence seriously.

Finally, how is mindfulness of ghosts linked to chief executives' ethical choices? The idea of actors temporarily occupying the space between the past, present and future can be a source of ethical guidance. We who are now present were once at best blurry figures in a sketchy future-scape produced by now-dead generations. Councils preside over places in which, as Edensor (2008) observes, 'Traces of the past linger in mundane spaces by the side of the road to renewal, haunting the idealistic visions of planners, promoters and entrepreneurs' (p. 314). In turn, living, breathing council managers currently occupying positions of power and prestige will themselves become at most part of the organization's afflatus, ghosts in the state machine. The ambition of organizational actors to do good or to do no harm is often set against the demands of the present. Acknowledging this idea – recurrently reminding ourselves of the future inheritors of our current actions – is unsettling in so far as it decentres our own lives and yet emphasizes the fatefulness of our choices.

The point of this paper is to work towards a theory of organizational ghosts, a concept that accounts for the liminality of leaders, conveys the idea of leadership as involving both haunting (of others) and feeling haunted (by others), and situates leadership practices as a bridge between the past, the present and the future. Organizational ghosts have histories, biographies and legacies and they 'demand a certain treatment as social beings' (Ladwig, 2013, p. 428). As Derrida (1994) says, 'everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her ghosts' (p. 139). However, the specificities of ghosts discourage the consignment of spectres to a wasteland of the metaphorical. Instead, understood as being more alive than dead, rather than vice versa, ghosts are figures demanding and deserving of respect and an appreciation of their role as ubiquitous, mediating, social presences in organizational life. The vignettes illustrate the spectrum of ways in which chief executives live with their everyday ghosts.

However, ghosts are not merely strategic figures who can be controlled and enveloped in managerialist project, their decisive secrets harvested and the ghost returned to the order of knowledge. Though they populate the managing change strategies, meaning-making and political management of council chief executives, and offer tantalizing promises of learning or intercession, the uncanny quality of hauntings and the ineffability of spectres mean that organizational ghosts are not reducible to a set of resources for managers to command and deploy in all-knowing, secure and cleverly strategic ways. The unhomely resists being made homely. Organizations are permeable and prone to rupture, populated by transgressors, visionaries and exiles, whose twists and folds are shadowed by ghosts, spirits and traces of the past (Ciuk & Kostera, 2010; Gabriel 2003; Linstead & Thanem, 2007). The haunted air of local government suggests that our understanding of managers should extend to a curiosity about their dealings with ghosts and their accounts of hauntings, and to further inquiry which explores the potential of a spectral turn in organization studies.

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