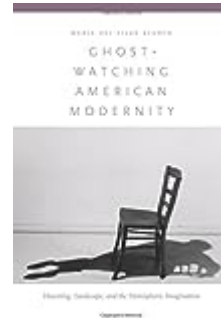


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

María del Pilar Blanco. *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. ix + 225 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-4214-6.



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Published on H-Memory (November, 2012)

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The transcultural turn that so dominates literary and cultural criticism today has been one of the most incisive and useful theoretical models for understanding our globalizing world. Attuned to the complex shifts, relations, and interconnections of today, the transnational has proven to be a decidedly useful tool across disciplines and places. In her 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin suggested many routes that the transnational turn could take. For example, she noted that we should “pay more attention to figures who have been marginalized precisely because they crossed so many borders that they are hard to categorize” in addition to paying “more attention to places hard to categorize as well, such as legal borderlands both inside and outside the United States.”[1]

María del Pilar Blanco’s *Ghost-Watching American Modernity* fits into this analytic project by connecting texts from the United States and its southern hemispheric neighbors in Spanish America, particularly in landscapes of doubt and uncertainty. Wide ranging—geographically and otherwise—Blanco’s text oscillates across and beyond borders to understand the minute shifts within landscapes and representations thereof that bear witness to the variety of forces in American modernity. The elusive, restless, and enigmatic ideas of landscape are, in

Blanco’s thesis, the ultimate sites of haunting. Blanco’s text attempts to account for the “spatiotemporal coordinates that merge to produce a site of haunting,” thus figuring ghosts not as traditionally ethereal, but as manifestations of the array of modern landscapes in both spatial and temporal senses (p. 1). Blanco therefore resists the knee-jerk interpretation of ghosts in a psychoanalytic or generic sense: that is, as abstract and uncanny, suggestive of “occluded pasts” and “buried secrets,” and seeks to ground her ghosts in specific locations (p. 7). “They are embedded in a story about place” (p. 8).

Questions, and stories, of place are thoroughly unpacked and unraveled by the transnational turn, decentering and deterritorializing place in addition to pluralizing it. Before addressing the problems raised by Blanco’s book, I want to outline its structure, illustrating how her chapters work. After introducing her theoretical mode, the first chapter insightfully and fully explores the existing historical methods of reading haunting and ghosts. At the core of Blanco’s argument here is that models of genre reading have long heeded our understanding and conceptions of ghosts. Whether it be notions of the fantastical or Gothic in the United States, or the magical realism of South America—a term Blanco finds disturbingly homogenous in its usage and axiomatic without suf-

ficient grounding—the principle question this chapter raises is: “Why must we rely on piling up one literary category over another in order to read ghosts in literature?” (p. 56). In contradistinction to this categorizing, Blanco’s text attempts to traverse such limited (and limiting) interpretations of ghosts according to genre and open up the possibilities for reading haunting in its various guises. Rather than resolving ghostly meaning (as in a typical analysis), Blanco understands haunting as moments of questioning, of seeing ghosts as part of ongoing narratives that are unfinished. Indeed, the futurity of landscapes is somewhat central to their hauntedness.

Across the following chapters, Blanco’s ghost-watching firstly centers on two geographical loci that are rife with haunting, and then works more metaphorically to compare two authors for their use of “shadows” as figures for—even materializations of—more pervasive ghostliness. Firstly, in a chapter called “Desert Mournings,” Blanco combines readings of Juan Rulfo’s short novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and Clint Eastwood’s film *High Plains Drifter* (1973) to understand the various ways that deserts have been depicted across the hemispheric Americas as sites of modern haunting. Distancing herself from a reading of deserts as generally—metaphorically—haunted (or even as mythic locations of “Manifest Destiny” and the like), Blanco asserts the importance of seeing the “fictions of this landscape as historically specific figures, and not simply as eternal archives” (p. 68). This specificity predominantly exists in a reading of ghost towns as bearing the imprint of modern expansion (and its failure), dispossession, and violence. Their ghostliness comes from the abandonment of them, yet they are in continued conversation with the movements of modernity that created them. The next chapter shifts geographical attention to urban spaces to understand the complexities of haunting in cityscapes across the Americas. Incomprehensible, ever-expanding, ever-shifting, the modern city is built on a sense of movement and constant unfolding that can only but, in this chapter, illuminate a haunted sense of space.

The final chapter moves beyond the geographies of the desert and city to a more metaphorical realm of place. Blanco here uses the image of the shadow as a figure for the hauntedness of the cartographic project (implicit in the other chapters) of the Americas. In this way, she looks to the construction of places and nationality through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries more generally, but posits that this was, from the start, a haunted activity. The narrative mapping of nations is intimately caught up in a web of shadows—ghosts—that

as much define the narrative of place as haunt its edges. Blanco brings into dialogue Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and W. E. B. DuBois to bear this reading out, looking to understandings of Argentina and the American South respectively through a lens of shadows “that cannot be made to disappear, because they already outline and are embedded in, the (narrative) maps of these nations” (p. 160). Crucially, in each chapter, Blanco returns to the term “simultaneity” of landscapes because it acutely, for her, identifies the nature of place in modernity. The notion, “although grounding one observer in a specific landscape, [also] forces an imagination of others in other locations” (p. 26). This is an important observation and theoretical necessity—especially in our globalized world—nonetheless, this brings me to my central problem with Blanco’s text. In some ways analytically indispensable, Blanco’s understanding of place in a transnational context partially works against her.

George Handley argues, in “A New World Poetics of Oblivion,” that many critical works have begun, a la the transnational project, to connect the United States to its global neighbors, particularly Central and South America. Finding connections and historical parallels in the regions, he argues, can concomitantly pull together locations problematically. Similarities across nations should not, Handley writes, “become justification for assuming that one can find facile homogeneity in the Americas” and “the leap from the local to the hemispheric will effectively result in an elision of important regional differences,” thus warning us against the instinctive analytic method emerging from the transnational turn.[2] Thinking about this in relation to *Ghost-Watching American Modernity* is useful because Blanco’s study falters most noticeably in the yoking together of discrete texts from different places. While her theoretical mode is both rigorous and deft, Blanco’s discussions work better individually; that is, her readings of American and Spanish American texts seem to hold more weight and value in and of themselves, rather than together. When she pairs such writers as Henry James and José Martí, the parallels she draws are convincing and worthy of exploration, but ultimately they have the habit of seeming forced and unnecessary. The landscapes of American modernity may be haunted due to their continuous shifting and simultaneity, but I would have found discussions of each writer in separate circumstances more engaging and worthwhile.

Blanco’s project aims toward the specificities of haunting, but, as I have suggested, her wide-ranging methodology and geographical reach can often mean that

the particularities of location and place are lost. Thus, the haunting that arises from these sites—even if the ghosts emerge from the ambiguity of landscapes—is relentlessly “simultaneous” and globally reaching. Place is, in this view, always continuous and diversely populated with the Other places. Conversely, place still has to be configured, I think, in local terms as well as transnational ones. There are a number of references to the American South in *Ghost-Watching American Modernity*, and these led me to consider Blanco’s work in relation to a contemporary of hers in southern studies, Patricia Yaeger. Her fantastically astute and intellectually exciting book *Dirt and Desire* (2000) is a staple in current scholarship of the South as it explores the grotesque and distorted bodies that litter Dixie’s landscape. More pertinent here, however, is Yaeger’s article “Ghosts and Shattered Bodies” for it explores similar theoretical territory to Blanco, if not geographically so. In this article, Yaeger looks to literal scraps and fragments in southern texts as the “remnant introduces a moment of fracture when something unexpected opens up—when insights emerge that may or may not be sayable.”[3] The remnant for me illuminates the precision and particularity of ghostliness that Blanco also values, but it analytically (and figurally) is more useful for understanding haunting. It embodies the model of the particularity of ghosts, but does not falter by attempting to globalize this haunting.

Ghost-Watching American Modernity is important because it forces us to acknowledge that places are always in dialogue with other places and these vocalisms are often the sounds of ghosts whispering through the land-

scape. Hemispheric analyses, therefore, such as Blanco’s are necessary to understand the long-standing and ongoing narrative of place that has so complexly defined the American nation and its neighbors. Nonetheless, to return to Yaeger, these ghosts *must* be read in their specificity, and that sometimes means, I think, to focus our attention on individual places. This does not have to mean neglecting the trails of haunted landscapes that lead to other places, but it does mean that we have to acknowledge that our richest engagement with the ghosts of America may just require the closest of attention lost in a global lens. “We live in a world that is haunted,” Yaeger tells us, “knows it is haunted, and denies its own hauntedness,” yet the question remains: “What do we do when we see a ghost?”[4] Blanco has insightfully suggested one forward-looking strategy; however, there are many more ghosts calling to us, haunting in myriad ways.

Notes

[1]. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 31, 30.

[2]. George B. Handley, “A New World Poetics of Oblivion,” in *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 25.

[3]. Patricia Yaeger, “Ghosts and Shattered Bodies, or What Does It Mean to Still Be Haunted by Southern Literature,” *South Central Review* 22, no. 1 (2005): 97.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 87.

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Citation: Chris Lloyd. Review of Blanco, María del Pilar, *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination*. H-Memory, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

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