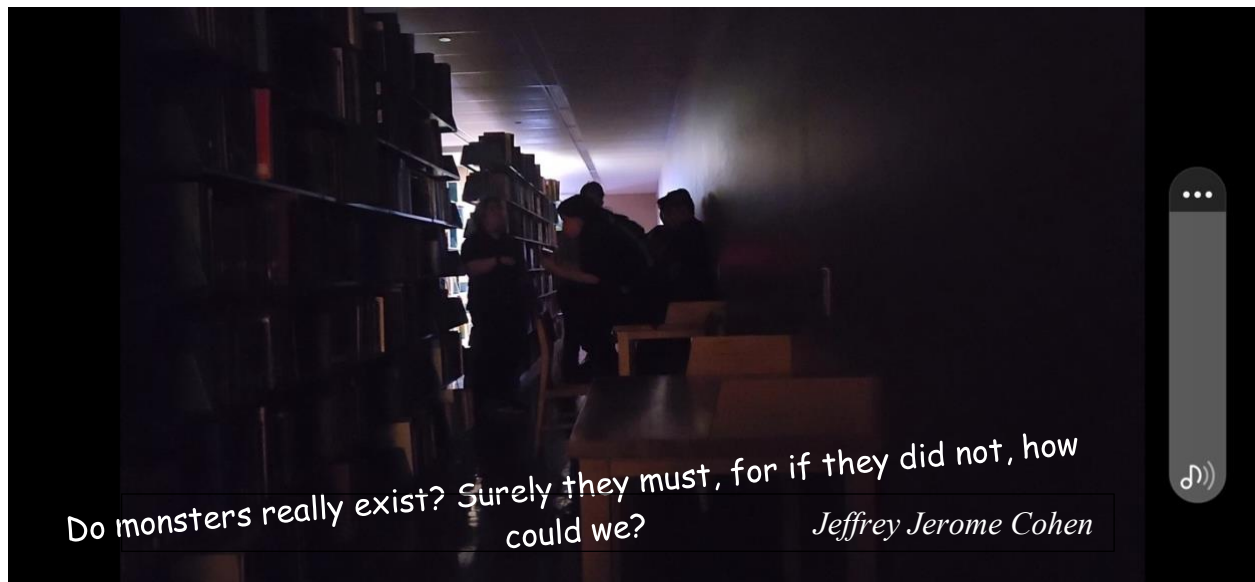




Hunting Ghosts in a College Classroom

by Shelley A. Ingram

When I first received the email asking for proposals for a small humanities education materials grant, I knew I wanted to do something that would benefit our undergraduate folklore students. I just needed to figure out what. My mind first went to a class I had been teaching regularly since 2014 called, with apologies to Avery Gordon, “Ghostly Matters: Folklore and the Literature of Haunting.” It is a literature-based course for graduate and advanced undergraduate students, but one that takes the work of folklorists, anthropologists, and other cultural theorists as the lens through which we read, understand, and interpret books about ghosts. I decided to base my grant proposal on this course.

The class as designed explores the kinds of formal and epistemological topics that I have often structured my own research around: What does it mean to write a haunting? What does it mean to represent ghosts and their hauntings in literature? How does this representation affect the form of the fiction? How does this reflect on the audience? Ghosts tend to crop up in “places rife with wrongs, with traumas that must be seen in order to be expelled and injustices that must be exposed in order to be redressed” (Miles 2015, 16). Haunted literature pushes us to think not just about a world outside the everyday but also about history, violence, unresolved cultural trauma, unexamined injustices, and the power, however fleeting, of a transcendent communion with things unseen. In ghost stories, Colin Dickey reminds us, we find “something crucial to the way we understand the world around us” (2016, 5). The course is therefore about how *fictional* ghosts function as literary mechanisms for moving about a haunted world, for dealing with the trauma of historical existence, for expressing anxieties about modernity, and for reckoning, as the sociologist Avery Gordon argues, not with the return of the past but with the repression of the past in the present (2008, 183). This class is not supposed to be about the actual ghosts that haunt us.

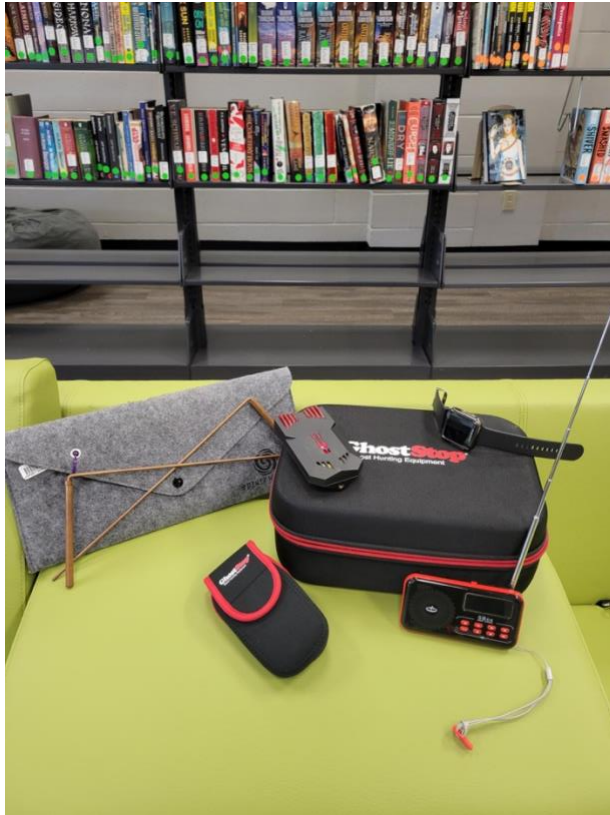
Students attempt to speak with spirits in Dupré Library on the UL Lafayette campus. February 2024. Photograph by author.

And yet, it almost always is. The shift began because I asked each student to tell the class a ghost story. I told them that it didn't matter where the story came from, whether they read it in a book or heard it at summer camp or if it was a story their grandmother told them. I just wanted them to tell it; I called them our "campfire tales." This was not meant to be the sort of collection assignment that students did in an Introduction to Folklore class, nor was it a lesson in proper interview technique. They had to turn in a copy of the story with a simple paragraph explaining where it came from. They did not even have to tell it in real time. They could read it or they could bring in a recording of themselves or someone else telling the story. I just wanted us to have a "back-up" collection, so to speak, to complement what we were reading in class—largely because, as my own literary interests skew away from the traditional and canonical, we were not going to be reading many "classic" ghost stories.

I was following the lead of the folklorist Jeannie Banks Thomas in telling the class that our interest should not be discerning the factual existence of ghosts. Instead, we as folklorists, and students in a folklore class, should care more about how we tell "*stories* of ghosts" (Thomas 2007, 25). Two important readings I assigned toward that end were Ilana Harlow's "Unravelling Stories: Exploring the Juncture of Ghost Story and Local Tragedy" (1993) and, crucially, Bill Ellis' *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults*, as they each look closely at narrative construction and storytelling conventions. Even more, I stressed that we were going to take a literary approach—this was a literature class, after all—and, again as Thomas argues, explore the "varied interpretive wealth" of a ghost legend, whether that legend was in a novel or told as a campfire tale (Thomas 2007, 229n2). Ours was not to decide the existence of ghosts.

That lasted all of about two days. Because as the students began to tell their stories, they were *their stories*. The majority—14 of 20 campfire tales—were memorates, first- or occasionally second-hand personal experience narratives about encounters with the uncanny. Another curious thing that I didn't plan but that happened anyway was that we discussed the stories. A lot. I could count on the first 15 minutes at least of the 75-minute class to be devoted to a discussion of the tale, and often that discussion went longer, 20, even 30 minutes. One consequence of this activity, added to the fact that we were almost always in a circle with the lights low or off, is that the class quickly became *safe*. Ellis notes that "many supernatural experiences ... are told, if at all, under extremely restricted circumstances" for "fear of ridicule" (2001, 95-6). The sharing of their stories, some of which students had never told anyone but those closest to them exactly because of this fear of ridicule, disbelief, or worse, fostered a kind of trust that I have rarely experienced in the college classroom. The atmosphere of intimacy and the openness with which the stories were received by the cohort made telling them a supported, communal activity. While I did manage during our discussions to sneak in questions about things like narrative construction and performance keys—like, for example, the prefacing of the storytelling event with disclaimers—the conversation would inevitably be drawn back to "So exactly how old *is* your house?" or "Did somebody die there?" or "But what did the ghost want with *you*?" I tried never to let these lines of inquiry go too far, because I didn't want the questions to lead to armchair psychoanalysis or to do actual harm to the teller ("Does this angry child ghost mean I'm going to be a bad mother?" was one such conversation). But, on the other hand, how do you treat them like *stories*? How do I say, "as a folklorist, we aren't trying to decide whether or not the story is true" when so many students were *asking me to believe them*?

But this course is not, ultimately, the one I want to focus on here. When Jeffrey Jerome Cohen first posited his seven theses for monster studies in 1996, he sought “a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender” (2007, 3). As I was sitting there brainstorming possible projects to fund through the humanities grant, I realized that what I wanted to give students was a chance to think about ghosts not only as an expression of culture and all of its repressions and returns but also as an experience that they could have and a communion they could experience. I wanted to allow students to embrace ghosts as *real*. So I wrote a grant asking for \$500 to buy two ghost hunting kits.



One of our ghost hunting kits, currently housed in Dupré Library. Photograph by Andrea Broussard.

In each prepackaged kit was a flashlight, an electronic voice phenomenon (EVP) recorder that stores audio, an electromagnetic frequency (EMF) detector, and a spirit box. I purchased dowsing rods separately to add to the bundle.¹ To increase my odds of receiving the grant, I partnered with two staff members from our university's Edith Garland Dupré Library who had keen interests in all things ghostly. We decided that, once my ghost class was over, the kits would be stored in the university's "Library of Things" and made available for any student to check out and use. Our grant was funded and the kits were purchased, ensuring, in a way, a continuing connection between past, present, and future students: the kind of folding of time the ghostly precipitates.

Because of the timing of the grant and our curriculum planning, I could not teach my usual section of "Ghostly Matters." Instead, I developed a new course aimed at a general undergraduate population. Simply called "Ghost Hunting," this course centered paranormal media and, perhaps more importantly, the experience of asking ghosts to speak with us. One of the big

cultural trends of the last 20 years has been the "ghost hunt," with Karen Renner calling it a "new American pastime" (2013, 202). We see this in the proliferation of supernatural hunting TV shows like *Destination Fear*, *Buzzfeed Unsolved*, and, of course, *Ghost Hunters*. I thus designed this course to be about both the act of ghost hunting and its representation in media. Situating ghost hunting as a *practice* that seeks to engage, manage, measure, and even domesticate the monster revealed the many interpretive and analytical paths the course could open.

I believed that having students participate in actual ghost hunts would serve two main purposes. First, it would immerse students in *ostension*, an activity foundational to Folklore Studies about belief and ritual. The second purpose I imagined was to get students to learn about the UL campus and the Lafayette community in an interactive, personal way. Listening to people tell their stories,

visiting local historical sites, and learning about UL history through a search for the supernatural would, I hoped, initiate a connection between students, the place, and the community. After all, as Dickey says, “If you want to understand a place... go straight to the haunted houses” (2016, 3). Amy Lawrence argues that this kind of historical purpose in ghost hunting reality shows often takes a back seat to the exploits of the “talent,” and that “reduced to exposition or backstory, history merely establishes the ominous setting into which our heroes boldly go.” But she also says that despite such decentering of history, “through the use of historical documents, photographs, and even moving images, the past is made vivid” for the audience (2022, 22). I anticipated (or hoped?) that this would hold true for our class as well.

The class was to cover a variety of materials, all focusing on how and why people like to “hunt” for ghosts, including an interrogation of the term itself. We would read a mix of fiction, history, first-person accounts, folk tales, and legends; read scholarship about hauntings and the ethics and history of “hunting;” meet with representatives of a local supernatural society; and watch a variety of digital media centered on ghost hunting. Students would be responsible for a campfire tale, site reports covering the ghost hunts, and a reflection essay. The final project was their own multimedia “ghost tours.” Key to the course was that we would get out of the classroom and into potentially haunted spaces. My plans were set; once registration began, the class was full in less than a day.

To Believe or Not Believe Was Never Really the Question

It was good to have plans. It was even better to realize that my plans could not anticipate or account for the actual work of the course. I will echo one of my students, who wrote in her end-of-term reflection essay that “Little did I know this class would pretty much change my life.” Much like I believed that the campfire tales told in the previous iteration of the course would come from literary instead of personal sources, I thought that students in this class might approach the “ghost hunts” as more of a lark than as a legitimate learning experience. In fact, I was worried that they might find the course content trivial or even insulting. After all, as one student reported about halfway through the semester, her boyfriend told her, “This is the kind of class engineering students make fun of English majors for.” And, as Lawrence notes, “the world of the paranormal is often dismissed out of hand, those who deal in it branded as con artists, their customers superstitious and irrational” (Lawrence 2022, 4). These fears were mostly allayed on the first day of the class when, after announcing that I had received a grant to buy actual ghost hunting equipment, the class *literally* cheered. I had never had a class cheer on the first day of the semester. They were all in.

This all in-ness was no doubt a strength of the course. Ghost hunters, who move in with their “scientific” equipment and methodologies, “generally feel that they are the stalwart few who are giving the supernatural genuine consideration in a world of doubters” (McNeill 2018, 182). Once again, most students enrolled in the course had a pre-existing belief in the reality of the supernatural, with all but one professing to the existence of ghosts or spirits. They did not all believe that a person could *speak* with the dead, but they did believe that the dead existed in a realm that occasionally crossed into ours. In fact, at least two students took the class over the explicit objections of their parents—who objected not because they thought the topic was frivolous, but because they were afraid for the souls of their children. In class students felt free to talk about their most unnerving, uncanny experiences without fear of being judged or ridiculed. The class actually *required* it of them, as we once again began each meeting with the sharing of a

campfire tale. Like professional ghost hunters, students felt that their belief in the supernatural was finally being given serious attention. That does not mean that we didn't talk about belief and disbelief, cynicism and earnestness, skepticism and naivete. We did. But disbelief was not our common starting point. You will notice that in this essay I strive to avoid language of the "I believe that you believe" sort. Following David Hufford's guidance to acknowledge an experience as a truth, when a student says that she spoke with a spirit, she spoke with a spirit.

The course had five primary graded components: 1) the campfire tale, 2) in-class writing, 3) site reports, 4) the ghost tour project, and 5) the final reflection essay, from which I take most of the quoted student material.² We read Nora Fussner's *The Invisible World* (2023), which is a complex novel about a young couple who open their home to a ghost hunting reality show, plus multiple essays and book chapters about ghost hunting, ghost tours, ethics, and haunting. We watched episodes of ghost hunting shows and examined other forms of ghost hunting media. The main events, though, were the site visits. We ended up with five class trips to various haunted places both on campus and off; this is where the story of ENGL 370: Ghost Hunting truly begins.



Students working with dowsing rods in Maison Freetown. March 2024. Photograph by author.

Sites Unseen

When I first began planning this course, I knew our first visit would be to Harris Hall, one of the oldest dormitories still in use on our university campus. Lily is the Harris Hall ghost, and her story is our only well-known campus ghost story. Residential Life was happy to have us visit, although we were understandably only given access to the front lobby, and they equally were happy to have our photo for their social media. Our second site visit was to the Roy House, home to the Center

for Louisiana Studies and the UL University Press. This is the oldest building on campus and one of the oldest in the city. Again, the good folks of the Roy House were happy, if slightly bemused, by the visit, and we once again made it onto their social media. Our third trip was to the Edith Garland Dupré Library. I had heard a few stories of a weeping woman in the women's third-floor restroom, but I initially kept that bit of legendry from my students. We were granted permission to be in the building after closing and were joined by several of the library staff—one of whom dressed up like the ghost of Edith Dupré and scared the crap out of me by walking silently out of the stacks to join us. Once again, we graced their social media pages.

Our fourth visit was arranged after word of our activities made it into the community. We were invited to Maison Freetown, also known as the Maison Creole de Freetown, an African American history museum and cultural center. Erica Fox, the owner and proprietor of Maison Freetown, once described Freetown as “a place where the history is screaming from the pavement, hoping someone will listen” (Fontenot 2024). One of Lafayette’s historic neighborhoods, Freetown is “situated on property that was once part of Louisiana Governor Alexandre Mouton’s Ile Copal sugar plantation, and just around the corner from Good Hope Hall—a Black-only gathering place and venue during the Jim Crow era, where Louis Armstrong performed dozens of times, while white audiences listened outside” (Fontenot 2024). The house itself had been many things in its time, including a convalescent home and a home for orphaned children. When Fox invited us to visit, it was with the intention to learn about the ghosts that haunted her establishment. Finally, we visited the Burke-Hawthorne Hall Theatre. There were several theater students enrolled in the course, and they had many stories to tell about the supernatural goings-on there. We were granted permission to visit the theater at night and given free rein of the space.



Students use the spirit box and the EMF reader outside a room called “the dungeon” in the Dupré Library. February 2024. Photograph by author.

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock has said that a monster is “that which unsettles or challenges established cognitive categories,” which “threatens understandings of the world, the self, and the relations between the two” (2020, 3). Ghosts blur the lines between categories of life and death, between presence and absence, firmly situating them within the realm of monsters even if ghosts don’t always act monstrosly. Ghost hunting tries to stabilize those categories using scientific language and instruments: EVP, EMF, Estes Method. Much like traditional ritual allows its participants some amount of control over seemingly uncontrollable situations, the ritual of ghost hunting positions ghosts as ultimately knowable and measurable. During our first site visit, one student quickly volunteered to hold the EVP recorder. Later, she admitted that she “personally felt obligated to have these devices in my own hands. I needed that feeling of connection to prove to myself the reality of this concept.” Another student wrote that “This class solidified my belief in ghosts. I believed fully before, but now I know it has to be true. These experiences are too real, too specific to be some sort of confirmation bias or anything like that.” Another said explicitly that “The equipment that we have and their uses is backed by science and the environment. That is enough to convince me.”

Even with such fancy gadgetry, we still had to learn how to conduct a successful visit. Here is where I make a confession: Despite my interest in all things ghostly, I had only ever watched *Buzzfeed Unsolved*. I was simply not very interested in other shows. As Lynne McNeill argues, “the ghost hunters’ goals of proving or disproving the existence of something are not necessarily in line with those of a folklorist, who, while perhaps being personally interested in such a matter, would probably be more professionally interested in the cultural patterns expressed or dramatized by the beliefs” (2018, 181-2). But this means that I was also ill-prepared to lead a ghost hunt. Thankfully, we were visited by experts, Mark and Michelle from the Acadiana chapter of Louisiana Spirits. Our first visit to Harris Hall didn’t show much activity, and Mark and Michelle’s guidance helped my students understand why. We hadn’t been doing it right. With their help, and with the trial and error of our subsequent visits, we collaborated and eventually codified procedural and ethical guidelines for conducting a session, with the relatively simple guiding principle to do no harm to the spirit. One student notated and shared the guidelines via Google Docs:

Before the visit:

- Do your research on the place.
- Make note of different races and ethnicities that may have been at the site and do not use ANY language or slang that may be taken wrong or is outright racist.
- Note that ghosts may not know that they are dead and be mindful of how recent their deaths may have been.

During the visit:

- Introduce yourself and make clear that you are not a threat and that you do not want them to leave. Example: “Hi, is anyone here? My name is [Shelley]. I wanted to see if you’d like to talk to us today. Don’t worry, we know this is your home and we won’t ask you to leave.”
- Use the language of the time or language that is period appropriate. Example: Try to have a French interpreter for older sites. Don’t use too much new slang.
- Make clear the intent that we want to hear what *they* have to say.

- Build trust. Example: if you ask their favorite food or color, start by offering yours.
- Explain the devices so they aren't scared of them.
- Take your time.
- If one specific person is getting many responses, let them keep talking as the ghost may feel more comfortable with them.
- Leave when told to leave ABSOLUTELY NO EXCEPTIONS.

At the end of visit:

- Thank them for their time.
- Tell them to stay and not to follow you home.

I wish that I had time to describe in detail the results of our visits. Of the little boy who held the hand of one student and walked her up and down the stairs of Maison Freetown, asking her to play with him. Of Rosalie, the girl with the soft 3C curls who laid her head on the shoulder of a student who was also a wigmaker. Of Henri, the French-speaking ghost at the Roy House who correctly identified the number of people in the room. And of the unnamed ghost on the third floor of the library, who opened up to a small group of students about his queer identity, noticing that the people he was talking to were just like him.³ But those stories are perhaps for another time.

Of the experiences of ghost hunting, one student wrote:

I loved the idea of interacting with the dead, it's why I became a history major, so I could learn and study the past and remember those who passed. I never imagined I would talk to the dead, and I mean really talk. I wasn't expecting to learn so much from them, like how they felt or even what language they spoke or how they were feeling. There is a type of adrenaline that comes with it. I would feel like my skin was buzzing and my ears would ring. I felt alive after talking to the dead (Irony isn't it).

Cohen emphasizes that monsters provoke desire as well as fear. Ghost hunting makes that desire explicit. For the students in this class, the desires were varied: history, connection, communion, validation. With our ghost hunting kits, we were able to approach our ghostly visits as experiences *and* as revelations of culture and harbingers of meaning.

Theories of Monsters and Theories of Self

Perhaps Cohen's most cited thesis is that monsters institute a "category crisis" because "they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration," which makes them "dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (2007, 6). For the students in the course, the monsters, the ghosts, did not necessarily provoke a category crisis as much as they offered a point of identification. In addition to the events of the site visits, we examined other media portraits of ghosts and hunters. For example, we listened to an episode of the *History is Gay* podcast, "Lavender Apparitions: Interview with Joe Applebaum," and watched several episodes of the too-short-lived YouTube series *Queer Ghost Hunters*.

One student wrote that:

My favorite portion of the class was the discussion of how a lot of queer people relate to ghosts in media and frequently have an interest in ghost lore and exploration. This is a sentiment I express as a queer person myself. I feel a kinship with ghosts in I'm invisible until I'm not, feeling like a person internally but feeling like through people's perception of me I am only halfway human, and people that make no effort to understand and know me making snap judgements and thinking that my status as a queer person is the only thing to talk to me about.

This student explicitly references feeling perceived as only “halfway human” because of their queer identity, suggesting that they themselves are monstrous in their simultaneous invisibility/hypervisibility. We read an essay by Nell Stevens, who writes: “spectral presences, by being seen and not seen, by exerting energy where none was anticipated, spoke to the queerness I felt within me and didn't understand... I experienced my queerness as an unknowable force, something that might well try to lure me out into the cold, something that I tried not to look at directly” (2022). The experience of hunting ghosts—not to trap them, but to commune with them, to learn with them rather than about them—seemed to offer the student above a way to make sense of the perceived monstrousness of their identity and offer them a recourse from negative interactions.

Another result of the “category crisis” brought about by the monstrous is its “ontological liminality” (Cohen 2007, 6). We spent some time in class discussing ritual, with students reading notes I prepared about the ritual process.⁴ As is the case in most of my classes, students really latched onto ideas about liminality that came up during our discussion of this material. One student wrote:

I have ... been thinking about liminal spaces a lot more. I never heard of the term liminal, but after the one class where we started speaking about them, I always consider any place I am in as being liminal.

Here the student, who I will call Rita, conveys a feeling of “always” being in a state of liminality, in “any place I am.” Perhaps the very definition of “ontological,” Rita *is* present and therefore *is* liminal. She had disclosed to the class in her campfire tale that she had experienced several major interactions with ghosts in her lifetime, one of which was “the ghost of what appeared to be a Southern Belle walking in my grandma's hallway.” This revenant appeared to Rita as a decomposed corpse in a fine, handsewn gown (Rita was a theater major who noticed such details of costuming). I could draw connections here between Rita as a mixed-race woman growing up in the Deep South of Louisiana and the rotting corpse of a southern belle dressed in garments of finery, but I think more important is Rita's constant feelings of *liminality*, of being betwixt and between. She was able to give a name to that feeling as an outcome of the course—again, an identification with category crisis rather than a resistance to it.

One last example I'll give here is the final project. Students were to design their own “Ghost Tours,” taking into consideration the ethical, cultural, and historical concerns that arise from such activities. They chose a wide variety of haunting spaces to guide us through, and many focused

locally, borrowing a ghost kit and conducting more extensive investigations in haunted spaces around the region. Most of them, though, chose spaces that were important in some way to their identity. The English major chose haunted libraries, the history major haunted hotels, complete with a video of herself “switching hats” between ghost hunter (baseball cap) and historian (graduation cap). One student who was deeply immersed in issues of social justice focused on spaces of injustice in her hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana, including the courthouse and the “P-farm,” a former prison. One particularly quiet student researched Indonesian revenants as a way to connect to the culture of her immigrant grandmother and gave an outstanding presentation that managed to touch on themes of colonialism, displacement, and gender discrimination while still highlighting how awesome it is to learn about places you may have known little about. Finally, one student dedicated his tour to the people who had been enslaved by Madame LaLaurie in New Orleans. The subject of the popular third season of *American Horror Story*, Delphine LaLaurie is an historical figure famous for the torture and murder of people she enslaved in her household, and the spot where her home once stood is a popular site for ghost tours. This student was a fan of the television show, but he wanted to make sure that we understood that she was not just some monster on the television. She was a human who brought great pain and suffering to other humans. As a Black resident of New Orleans, this student returned the inhumanity, the *monstrosity*, of slavery to the story by reimagining the lives of the people she killed, most of whom remain lost to history.

Trauma, Uninformed

The intensity of belief with which most of the students approached the class turned it into an experience I doubt I can ever replicate, but it brought with it its own complications. First, students were worried that they might invite bad spirits into their lives or bring them home with them from class. This led to some acute anxiety that we mitigated by learning together ways to protect ourselves. By the end of the term, we had a pretty good system in place: a combination of holy water, blessed talismans, and a ritual taught to us by Mark and Michelle, in which we simply asked the spirits to remain in the place they were tied to. To go even further, some students believed that our collective ghost hunting had stirred the spirits in town, taking stories from their friends about increased paranormal activity as evidence that we were affecting the city’s spiritual balance. In future iterations of the course, I would include time and space to discuss and learn protective practices before the site visits began, offering students a way to protect both themselves and their loved ones. We as investigators entered liminal spaces at night, sometimes unintentionally provoked spirits, and always invited contact. Our ghost hunting tested the limits of perceived reality and destabilized our sense of safety because of the “category crisis,” to borrow from Cohen’s seven theses, it instantiated (2007, 6).

A second complication that progressed from the first was that there were moments in which trauma, both the students’ own and that of the people with whom they were speaking, became overwhelming. This was a situation that I did not anticipate, although I should have. In the “Ghostly Matters” course we were able to keep a distance between us and our literary ghosts. That distance was erased almost entirely in “Ghost Hunting.” For example, when researching haunted places for their ghost tours, they were also researching the lives and often tragic deaths of those whose spirits are said to abide there. When we visited Maison Freetown, we spent some time in class discussing the history of the site and planning a respectful approach to the space. However, I was not aware that the proprietor was also looking for people to tell her about her ghosts, as she

herself knew the house to be haunted. Students were eager to help. They bore witness to the home's history, to the lives that had lived there and been lost there, staying at the site for well over three hours. One student reported that "I got really emotional after [meeting a young female ghost] and honestly did not want to leave because I was reminded of just how young this little girl was" when she died. The students gave a lot of themselves, both physically and emotionally, even though one group felt a genuine threat from a spirit they encountered.



Students using dowsing rods in a room in Maison Freetown. Student reported being deeply unsettled in this room. March 2024. Photo by author.

Our last site visit was the most personal of all. One student spoke with her dead grandparents through the spirit box, while another group was in contact with a mutual friend who had been murdered years before. I was not with them during these sessions, as they were free to walk around the theater as they pleased, but when we came together at the end of the night students were visibly shaken and had clearly experienced something deeply emotional. And yet, when I spoke with each of the affected students privately, they were adamant that while the experience was overwhelming, it was also *extremely* positive. While I saw this experience as possibly detrimental to their health, they found it cathartic and healing. Again, Cohen connects monsters to both desire and fear, and one set of our desires and fears is to connect one more time to people who have passed on (2007, 16). Still, I remain troubled by the possibilities that I am now aware that I am ill-equipped to handle. Before I teach the class this way again, I will consult with our student health and counseling centers. Perhaps I can bring in a counselor to speak to the class about what it means to confront resurfaced trauma, and I will ensure that my pedagogy is more intentionally trauma-informed. We

will certainly work together as a class to practice more structured strategies for negotiating difficult topics and emotions. The only way this course really works is if we accept, even if only for the time we are together, the possibility that ghosts are real and that they will speak to us. And with that reality come truths of our history, our pasts, our deaths, our injustices, our unfinished business, our restless spirits, and our monsters.

A Communal Power

Despite my own misgivings about the emotional and mental toll this class took on the students, they remained intensely enthusiastic and committed until the end. While my concerns are legitimate and should be addressed, I discovered that there is tremendous protective power in the community the course created. This is perhaps the primary reason why, despite the heavy affective load of the class, students seemed to thrive. One student wrote that “One of my favorite things about this class was the fact that everyone allowed themselves to be vulnerable” during our campfire tales, sharing a personal story that let their classmates into a small moment of their life. Another student remarked that “the sense of camaraderie and community of the class was so memorable. Everyone contributed, commented, and offered to help each other and that isn’t something that you see often in college classroom settings.” Pointing to the site visits as a community-building activity, one student said they “tied everything together and, in my opinion, unified many of us as a class. The class was able to experience things and grow together in our research. I felt like we were connected on a more personal level, and we understood each other and the places around us and how to properly handle the experiences we were facing.” Another put it rather simply: he felt safe “because we all had each other’s backs and felt as one.”

Avery Gordon has said that “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” (Gordon 2008, 8). While we may not have been drawn against our will into the realm of the uncanny, the process was magical and often transformative. Through a multimedia, multi-modal course designed to be experiential, the monsters we encountered were real, and they were sometimes us. I will give the final word to a student, who said “This course has taught me so much about culture and what it means to be ‘human’ through the fascinating study of what it is to be a ghost.”

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End Notes

¹ The spirit box scans radio frequencies from existing FM and AM bands. As the bands cycle, you may hear voices or sounds coming through the static. This is the spirit's attempt to communicate. The EMF meter detects small changes in electromagnetic energy and alerts with lights and sound, while the EVP recorder is worn like a watch. Finally, dowsing rods are another way to communicate with spirits, and this is often the students' favorite device.

² The prompt for this essay was: "This personal experience narrative simply asks you to reflect back on the course and its ghosts. You can revisit a moment in class you want to think more about, an in-class writing assignment you want to revise or expand, a ghost story you heard or one that you didn't hear. What is it that haunts you?" All student writing except where explicitly mentioned is from their submitted reflection essays.

³ In the spring of 2025, I taught a course on folklore and the uncanny. While it was not the ghost hunting course, we did do one after-hours ghost hunt at the library. These students were not nearly as successful as the previous class in speaking to the dead. However, one group offhandedly remarked, "oh, and we think we found a gay ghost on the third floor." Chills, I had them.

⁴ I rely heavily on Catherine Bell's *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* for my notes (1997, New York: Oxford University Press).

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