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# Book Review: Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature by Karen Brogan

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Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature by Karen Brogan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 228pp., \$39.50 hb., \$16.50 pb.

In *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*, Karen Brogan argues for recognition of a new 'pan-ethnic' literary genre, 'the story of cultural haunting'. In close readings of six contemporary novels by markedly ethnic American women, Brogan notes the pervasive presence of Gothic elements in such works and finds in each a reiteration of her new genre's masterplot, in which characters come to terms with their ethnic identities by confronting their 'haunted' pasts. The 'cultural ghost story', Brogan writes, consists of 'a paradigmatic movement from possession to exorcism or more accurately, from bad to good forms of haunting' (6).

Brogan devotes a long chapter each to Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1989), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992); and a final chapter further illustrating the utility of her interpretive scheme with discussions of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997), and Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* (1990). Buttressing her close readings of these works with succinct summaries of relevant concepts in anthropology, sociology, psychology, historiography, and Holocaust studies, Brogan introduces much that is new to critical consideration of these texts, and their authors. *Cultural Haunting* makes a convincing argument for a new genre of ethnically based ghost stories. In the process, Brogan also expands the notion of the Gothic to include novels that would not seem readily assimilable to it. In an extensive introductory chapter, Brogan details the parameters of the genre of 'cultural haunting' stories. Situating her analysis within the context of recent scholarship on ethnicity, Brogan nods most strongly to Werner Sollors as an avatar of 'the tradition-as-invented camp' (13).

Having established as a working presumption the by-now-commonplace notion of ethnic tradition as ever and always a reconstructed set of stories molded to serve the present, Brogan makes a strong claim that not only do ethnic stories that include ghosts of various sorts help to construct ethnic tradition, but the 'transmission of stories and most emphatically of ghost stories creates ethnicity. Historical meaning and ethnic identity are established through the process of haunting' (18). Brogan raises as well, but unfortunately does not pursue, the intriguing question of how the multifarious forms of 'haunting' that she examines might play out differently in stories by majority (white, male, middle-class, etc.) authors. Brogan outlines a standard trajectory for the central characters in such stories, from haunted 'possession' by a traumatized past toward liberating 'exorcism' of this past.

Her analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* provides an illustration. Labeling this particularly appropriate choice 'a historical novel in the form of a ghost story', Brogan begins with Morrison's extra-textual descriptions of insufficiencies in standard slave narratives. These narratives, Brogan writes, 'indicate that the authors elided [not only] the most repulsive details of their experience at least partly in deference to popular taste and literary convention', but also 'the interior, emotional life of the enslaved' (63). A fact-based account of Sethe, a former slave haunted by the ghostly embodiment of the daughter she killed in order to save her from slavery, *Beloved* depicts the efforts of former slaves to reformulate their identities by claiming themselves as their own property. Morrison's characters fight as well, Brogan writes, with the haunting of a traumatized past that 'can neither be properly remembered nor entirely forgotten, ... the desire to account for the dead struggling against the need to obliterate them' (63). In an extensive, solid reading of the novel's depictions of nearly exorcized traumatic history, ambiguously achieved mourning, and gendered communal binding, Brogan shows that like the other works she examines, *Beloved* 'parallels closely the temporal structure of what anthropologists call secondary burial', a 'funereal ritual in which the dead are exhumed and reburied' (65). Brogan also sees demonstration in this novel of the power memories of the dead have in helping to structure living communities. Drawing particularly well on analysis of recorded Holocaust memories, Brogan reveals how accurately Morrison portrays the details of traumatized consciousness. The broader thematic implication that Brogan reveals here (a point she effectively

builds toward in each of her other readings) is that the mourning finally achieved by ethnic characters tends to come about after recognition of an earlier, suppressed break with the past; salutary mourning thus consists of a 'secondary burial' of a selectively reconceptualized past.

Brogan's studies of other novels are equally extensive and helpful. In her chapter devoted to Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, Brogan provides a great deal of background information on such subjects as Cuban-American immigration and the disputes between that community's generations, and on the syncretic Afro-Cuban religion, Santería. Brogan shows that Garcia's Cuban-American characters work with widely varying degrees of success toward 'bicultural translation' of a formerly repressed, imaginatively reconfigured Cuban past. Brogan also considers the exorcism of haunting, disabling histories a central element in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, a process central characters again undergo by translating and reconfiguring an imagined past so that it effectively serves the present.

While the notion of 'cultural translation' does reveal some ways that these texts work, I missed further recognition of the difficulties others have examined regarding the translatability of cultural material and ethnic histories. For instance, as Doris Sommer discusses at fascinating length in *Proceed with Caution, when Engaged with Minority Writing in the Americas* (Harvard University Press, 1999), many minority texts, including at least several of those explicated by Brogan, register thorny, strategic resistance by their authors, characters, or narrators to efforts by cultural outsiders who seek understanding of their supposed ways and traditions. Brogan's general thrust resonates with much recent scholarship on race and ethnicity by challenging throughout the illusory rigidity of cultural borders and the homogenous purity of that which supposedly lies on either side of such borders. She also echoes recent tendencies to focus on subaltern tactics and strategies, rather than on manifestations of hegemonic repression (Brogan attends well to the differences that 'cultural haunting' can mean to different ethnic groups, but she displays little interest in the significant differences that different ethnic groups experience in relation to majority power).

While her approach is up to speed in many respects, Brogan's effort to establish a new literary genre may strike some as narrow, particularly in light of much other recent work in African Studies and its overlapping fields. In particular, *Cultural Haunting* tends to avoid or gloss over some of the more vexed, contentious issues that have arisen in these fields. For instance, while Brogan acknowledges the numerous, extensive disagreements written in response to Werner Sollors' work on ethnicity, she does so in only one paragraph, then collapses her summary of Sollors' ideas to 'the position that ethnicity is a cultural construct', a position with which very few of Sollors' critics would disagree (14). Nevertheless, *Cultural Haunting* convinces me that the 'cultural ghost story' is a viable literary genre, and that such a category could conceivably encompass all markedly ethnic texts because, as Brogan writes, 'The heart of ethnicity is to be found in what has been denied but still haunts' (12). Brogan demonstrates as well that notions of the Gothic should include variously 'haunted' works of contemporary ethnic American literature.

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