Haunting the Future

I want to tell you a ghost story.

In 1842, during a regular visit to the Boston Athenaeum's quiet reading room, Nathaniel Hawthorne saw the Reverend Thaddeus Mason Harris. This was not remarkable; Hawthorne often encountered Reverend Harris here, and while not well acquainted the men were bonded in their Athenaeum patronage. Later that evening, Hawthorne learned that the reverend had in fact died the previous day -- the man he saw earlier had been a ghost.

The details of the encounter are found in Hawthorne's story "The Ghost of Doctor Harris." This is a ghost story in the most literal sense: it is about a ghost. But it is not a *scary* story. In fact, Hawthorne marvels at his own detachment from the experience. He recounts his "equanimity," his "indifference," the "careless way in which [he] glanced at so singular a mystery." Beneath this benign screen, though, you sense a current of regret. Hawthorne recounts that this ghost seemed to have a message, perhaps of great importance, that he could have related if only Hawthorne had engaged him (the dictates of supernatural law stipulating that ghosts can speak only if spoken to, of course). Hawthorne did not engage the ghost. When reflecting on why, when he knew that the ghost's message was of some urgency, he does not describe being afraid of the spectral presence itself, but rather of a burden, of being saddled with a "disagreeable task."

Hawthorne narrates this story more than a decade after the encounter, with some gentle chiding of his hard-hearted former self. If he had not been afraid of burden, if he had engaged the ghost, what might have happened? In the present of the story's telling, Hawthorne is realizing that the very act of recounting it to an audience shakes him from his former detachment, awakens him to the marvel of a paranormal encounter. He concludes, "Now I am made sensible of its strangeness chiefly by the wonder and incredulity of those to whom I tell the story." Communicating about the ghost has begun to set it free. We can read Hawthorne's story and wonder what was lost when the ghost stayed silent, and we can consider whether we might engage any ghost we are lucky enough to encounter.

But this isn't the ghost story I want to tell you. I want to tell you about the ghosts that are conjured by the images in this book.

Kristina McComb's *An Archive of Time: A Life Lived in the Boston Athenaeum* is a close reading of the space. It is a portrait of a place through the impact of time on the objects that define it and constitute its lifeblood: books. But look closer and there is spirit photography at work here: when I look at these images, I see ghosts. I see, first, the ghosts of the people who handled these books, who purchased them, who cataloged them, who shelved them, who repaired them, who finally left them to settle. I do see, more faintly, the ghosts who once read and perhaps created knowledge from these books, but I choose to ignore them and their glamorous intellectual labor

in favor of the more mundane wage labor of library employees. In these cracked spines, warped pages, and peeling leather you can read a history of the humans whose names are obscure but whose work endures, for now, sinking and crumbling.

If we listen to these ghosts, they might tell us about their lives. We might learn what Beacon Street smelled like in 1900, before internal combustion engines replaced horses. We might come to know what the Athenaeum's reading room looked like at dusk in 1860, lit by oil lamps. Taken together, these individual stories might start to form a narrative, and slowly, different kinds of ghosts take form. It is *these* ghosts, finally, I want to tell you about.

When I look at the photographs in this book and hunt for a spectral presence, I am most immediately rewarded by images where handwriting is present. It is not, though, the ghost who once formed these letters I am looking for, but instead collective ghosts. And these collective ghosts *haunt* -- they haunt the Athenaeum, and every library, and the library profession as a whole.

When I see handwriting in these photographs, I peer past the hand and see straight back to a meeting of the American Library Association in 1885. Here, the seeds of what became known as "library hand" were planted -- since most card catalog entries were written by hand in the late nineteenth century (the typewriter still being a rather new invention with a steep learning curve), there was a need to ensure uniformity, and thus legibility, in the penmanship of the people creating these cards. Out of this meeting came a strictly defined handwriting style, taught well into the twentieth century to library workers.

One of the architects of library hand, present at the 1885 ALA meeting, was Melvil Dewey. We know Dewey. *Do* we know Dewey? The library profession is steeped in his legacy, and the words "Dewey Decimal System" have a ring of familiarity even for those who may not be able to describe what it is. He made it possible to wrangle and classify knowledge and to more easily train a workforce, largely female, that staffed libraries as they were becoming in the nineteenth century: open, accessible to all, free. Dewey believed that women could supply cheap labor for the growing number of public libraries in the United States, and that librarianship could be a proper profession for a certain kind of woman -- middle-class, educated, white. Dewey's reforms, once innovative, are today hardwired into the very idea of a library. The profession owes him a debt.

Now, did you know that Dewey has another legacy? He preyed on the women he brought into the modernized library workforce. He used his position of power to make unwanted sexual advances on his subordinates, in several documented and untold undocumented cases. He did this repeatedly, and without public remorse. I urge you to seek out the story of Adelaide Hasse; it is sinkingly familiar to anyone who follows current events. Another aspect of Dewey's legacy is his racism, manifest in his refusal to admit racial or religious minorities to a private club he owned. While this behavior did not go entirely unpunished in his lifetime -- some people did

publicly decry his treatment of women, and as a result he was eventually forced out of the American Library Association that he had cofounded -- time has been kind to Dewey's image. Biographers have ignored or downplayed his personal odiousness, presumably because it is deemed superfluous to the "real" story, or because it complicates the picture of a man who also did good and important things. I'm not having it. Dewey's misogyny and racism are *essential* to his story, and to the story I am telling you now. They are ghosts, and they haunt, and however disagreeable the task we need to engage them.

If haunting is a way that something suppressed and unsettled reminds us of its presence, what might we begin to confront by engaging ghosts? Demographically, librarianship is haunted by the overall inequality that exists in the United States. It is a female-dominated profession -- according to a 2010 demographic analysis by the ALA, women comprise 82.8 percent of working librarians -- and yet 40 percent of library directors are men and women earn only 81 percent of what men are paid. As trends continue toward racial and ethnic diversity in the country, librarianship remains a white-dominated profession. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 86.3 percent of librarians identify as white, while according to the 2010 census 72.4 percent of the overall population does so. And as we've seen, librarianship is haunted by what's been suppressed about one of its founding fathers: the Dewey Decimal System, a key way that we organize information -- which impacts the very notion of what knowledge is and shapes its creation -- was developed by a white man with deeply held biases that manifested in ugly treatment of people without power. How many of these biases haunt what we take to be neutral classification systems and thus reify power structures in ways that are no less insidious for their invisibility? Listening to ghosts illuminates the problems of the past in the present.

One of the Boston Athenaeum's core values is accountability: "We acknowledge and confront the problematic aspects of our past to inform a better future*." An Archive of Time* looks toward this future by looking backward. Its images startle because while they confront us with decay and seeming neglect, they are haunting and beautiful. They should also startle because of their spectral presence, as they are populated by the people who shaped *this* library and the very notion of *a* library. If we, unlike Hawthorne, take up this task and engage the ghosts, what more will they tell us? Which problems will we acknowledge and confront, and what kind of future will we build? A paranormal encounter is a wondrous thing, and it leaves us with profound responsibilities: talk to ghosts, believe what they say, learn their lessons. Make it better and set them free.

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