A Phenomenology of Haunting: Transgressive Identities, Proxy Memories, and Authorship in Alvin Lu’s *The Hell Screens*

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I. Introduction

In clinical psychology, there are cases of patients who suffer from traumatic memories that are in fact of alien origin. Nicholas Abraham introduces a peculiar case that exhibits such traits, wherein a young man who suffers from traumatic memories of a shameful familial history, which later prove to be his father’s rather than his own. Observing this enigma of a memorial heritage, Abraham imports the metaphor of the “phantom” (Abraham 173): memories of another’s past that are so strongly embedded in one’s consciousness that they incessantly return to haunt and impact the present. However, one cannot help but wonder whether a separate entity’s psychic wounds could possibly cross over the tight and private boundaries of individual consciousness to exert such a strong influence, even granting that a certain degree of emotional transference or projection may be possible. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an “overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events” (Caruth 181), the aftermath of which ranges from nightmares to, in extreme cases, suicidal impulses that lead to self-destruction. If this definition is to be accepted, the question immediately arises as to whether one can truly have so much empathy for an *other* to the extent of risking one’s own psychological and physical welfare, by so thoroughly embracing and internalizing such life-threateningly painful memories.

The question becomes further complicated when alien memories penetrate the boundaries of what we generally consider to be “lifeless” objects, such as material possessions or locales, as in Alvin Lu’s novel *The Hell Screens*. In Lu’s eerie vision of a ghost-infested modern Taipei, dead legacies stake their claims across wide gaps between individual consciousness, socio-historical contexts, and even geo-cultural boundaries.
The haunting memories of others prey upon one’s mind despite a lack of, or even resistance to, prior knowledge about them or any intentional act of recollection. In this essay, I propose the concepts of “residual haunting” and “reference points” in an attempt to understand how the intricately intertwined traumatic memories of the I and the other, the subject and the object, and the living and the dead come together to reflect on and affect one another, and are subsequently used to construct a collective, yet again very private selfhood. By examining how the boundaries between memories and identities are reconfigured to create a synthetic consciousness, we may understand the phantoms that exercise their agencies over not only generations as in Abraham’s transgenerational phantoms but also socio-historically and ontologically disparate entities, as portrayed in Lu’s world. While Taipei’s modern history strongly gestures to colonial traumas and imperialist upheavals that underwrite the convoluted character dynamics in the novel, this essay primarily focuses on the phenomenon of haunting without venturing too deeply into the historical context. Given the limited space the article format affords, a more thorough examination of ghost stories and tales of haunting at large cannot be sufficiently incorporated. Rather, the following observations serve as a “reference point” for reading into the authorship of literary hauntings in their limited capacity. The colonial legacies of Taipei’s cityscape and their inhabitants meanwhile, which strongly inform the authorship of residual hauntings in The Hell Screens and therefore deserve further scrutiny, will be reserved for an expanded project that builds on the current essay.

II. Morphic Boundaries: Doubles, Reincarnations, and Phantoms of Repression

The motif of boundary infringement functions as a general backdrop for Lu’s narrative throughout The Hell Screens. The title of the novel, which can be seen as a reference to Akutagawa Ryunosuke’s short story “Hell Screen” (1918), is in itself a metaphor for the tenuous “screen” that divides the real and the unreal, the worlds of the I and the other. “Hell Screen” is a particularly apt point of reference not only because of its supernatural setting and emphasis on the mediatory significance of artistic representation, but also because of its focus on the fractured psyche of the modern subject, in conflict with the absurdities of precedent systems (the feudal system, in the case of Akutagawa’s story, and Taiwan’s colonial