



THE GHOSTS  
OF SAILINGS PAST

A Multimodal Essay on the Hauntings of Ferry Mobilities

Text by Phillip Vannini and Rhys Evans  
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## The Ghosts of Sailings Past:

A Multimodal Essay of Ferry Mobilities.

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### It is common for islanders of the world

to shoot the breeze about island life, and ferry boats. Through these conversations islanders perform their identity and contribute to creating the roles that islands and ferries play in their day-to-day lives. These conversations punctuate the days, weeks, and seasons of islanders' lives, year after year.

In the spring of 2010, we, Phillip Vannini and Rhys Evans, met in person for the first time in Victoria. By sharing our stories Phillip learned that Rhys had called home the mainland of British Columbia and then Vancouver Island, having lived in Victoria and Nanaimo, as well as Gabriola Island. When Phillip told Rhys about his research Rhys immediately began to share stories and memories about catching the ferry, both as an islander and as a truck driver. Phillip reciprocated with some stories and memories of his own. Our conversation seemed to zero in on the spectral geographies (see Holloway and Kneale, 2008; Maddern and Adey, 2008) of mobility technologies.

### 🔊 'Memories' (1:00)

What to make of all this? Speaking in basic sociological or anthropological terms it would be easy to say that in sharing these narratives we are performing a collective memory, a sense of time and place, but it seems simplistic to explain it like that. There is something mystic about these performances, something sort of evanescent which keeps coming back over the years, something we can't help controlling.

A slightly more imaginative way to interpret this is by saying that all of these

stories are hauntings which emerge from people living their lives, individually and collectively. Hauntings are traces of the past that you can't let go. These hauntings are emergent in the sense that they occur in places where people, technology, and mobility intersect in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways.

### 🔊 'Leveler' (2:30)

According to non-representational theory if we are to understand place as a truly lived space, then we have to go beyond words and representations to find ways of understanding more fleeting entities like feelings, sensations, and affect. Thrift (1999) says that places are haunted by these things and that these hauntings constitute what places are and what they become, including what they mean to us, and indeed, who we are in them. These ferry stories are a pretty good example of this.

Think of a haunting as an effervescent memory. It is like a bottle of pop. First there is the liquid. Then you add the gas. But it takes an action, a spark, popping the lid off, to make the bubbles come. Here we have the place, the machines, and the people, but the meaning of all this only begins to come up when something happens within and between all of these.

Haunted memories bubble up out of the intersections of people's lives and livelihoods with the machines they use to move between places. They take the shape and carry the meaning that they do out of the particulars of all the here's-and-now's which constitute them.

### 🔊 'High Priest' (3:00)

Thrift says that place is haunted by 'the world of things' (1999:312, original emphasis), and by three 'full-bodied competences': 'emotion,' 'memory,' and 'language' (314). 'Things' are technics like the ferries. And our stories show plenty of emotions: the feelings of coming home, going away and all the other ways in which we respond to the particulars of our journeying.



Further, Thrift says that 'places are passings that haunt us' (1999:310). And here in our account, the BC Ferries are indeed 'places.' And we both 'haunt' them as our past experiences imprint them, and they 'haunt' us in the same way. Our stories are memories, re-constituted and arisen with the yeast of individual experiences. And by telling these stories, we are using language in the way Thrift means when he says that language is 'performative, a virtual structure achieved through use, not a potential structure actualized by use' (1999:315). That is, we create the realities the stories tell, and the stories create the realities we experience. So, in a funny sense, we create them and they create us.

Now, we don't believe in ghosts per

se. But we don't really believe in the veracity of any stories either, no matter how seemingly factual. So, ghosts might as well be 'real.' Stories are stories and ghosts and ghosts. We are the voluntary and involuntary creators of apocryphal stories and our memories (Anderson, 2004; Edensor, 2005), as much as we are the creators of our journeys, and our ships. Nothing is quite factual, everything is ephemeral, contingent, relational. Ghosts too.

Ghosts are nothing special, nothing spectacular (Edensor, 2008). Like deCerteau (1984, p. 108) says 'haunted places are the only ones people can live in.' In the stories we share about our places and our ferries, but in general in the stories that all people everywhere else share about their places

and their technologies of mobility, there are performative characters. These characters play all kinds of roles.

 'Gambin' Truckers' (4:50)

James Carey (1989) for example talks about technology as playing the role of a trickster in much of the industrialized world's discourse about it. You know how photo-copiers tend to break when you badly need them to copy a document? Or how computers crash right before you've had a chance to back up your files? In the same sense technologies of mobility seem to love messing with our relationship with travel, making it feel routine-like and uncertain at the same way.

So ferries are a particular kind of ghost, in a way, not the uncanny or scary type, but more like a trickster. Like an alchemist, a magician, a wizard. Obviously it depends on the particular story. But BC Ferries very often play the role of conjuring up long, forgotten memories (Maddern, 2008). Like many other material objects (Van der Hoorn, 2003) they awaken our memories of 'unacknowledged lives' of fellow islanders, of 'old habits and dead routines' (Moran, 2004) from their slumber and animate our relationship with our past. Like 'intrusions' into the mundane they 'reveal the powerful, affective, sensual and imaginative effects' of vestiges of the past, 'which, like the figure of the ghost, are amorphous and slippery' (Edensor 2008:15).

 'Coming Home' (1:30)

In writing about cities Amin (2004:38) says that that they 'must be summoned up as temporary placements of ever moving material and immanent geographies, as hauntings of things that have moved on but left their mark.' And that applies so perfectly to ferry boats, and to all technologies of mobility in general. The hauntings of mobility technologies remind us of the material power of obduracy.

So, conjuring, for sure. But enchanting too. Think of the bond we build with



them, as in the story of people coming back from a long trip. Like art and technology, ghosts have an enchanting function, a dissimulative power which makes things appear for what they are not, confusing the lines between being and not being, past and present, absence and presence (Gordon 1997; Holloway and Kneale 2008). Ferries, for example, are not our homes. Yet, so many of us feel as though they were. We make love on them, we cuddle up and go to sleep on them, we consume meals and play together on them, we often find the same kind of bodily comfort we feel in the comforts of our own home in them, so it makes sense to also feel at home on them after a long trip, well before walking on the doorstep. And ferries are hexing too. There are times when boats themselves seem the victim of a hex,

like the Queen of Victoria and the Queen of the North. But they themselves are capable of hexing in turn.

 'Consistency' (1:20)

The key function of performance is transformation (Schechner, 2003). Technologies of mobility transform space, travellers, and everything in between. Their key power is haunting, in a way, because we do not immediately recognize their power, their transformative agency. Most of us view technologies of mobility as deprived of agency, as having nothing but the mere instrumental functionality we endowed them with. So in a sense, our shortsight, our inability to understand unintended consequences and our inability to understand the totality of rela-

tionships they are embedded in, is the very origin of their 'animation.' They are ghosts who haunt us because we ignore them for who they are, because we have given them birth without acknowledging their existence.

Hence their effervescence. The haunting power of technologies of mobility is a bit of a genie in a bottle type of phenomenon. It's the energy with which 'the debris of shipwrecked histories' 'raise up' and 'burst forth' to our conscious awareness (deCerteau and Giard 1998:138).

Our collective ignorance about the way in which technologies are animated, through the multiple relationships we have with them and they have with us, is like a pressure cooker. The more we ignore the transformative power of technology, and the more we turn a blind eye to its unintended consequences and multiple roles, and the more we relegate technology's agency to the stigmatized category of anthropomorphism, the more we jam energy into the pressure cooker. All this energy builds up and finds performative release through all the narratives we share with one another. In short, the more we ignore it wilfully, the stronger it comes back to haunt us, and the stronger its various transformative powers.

 'Crash!' (2:55)

Effervescence is then like measure of the haunting potential of a technology. The more we ignore its power by taking it for granted, the more it bubbles up, and the more vivacious it acts when left unconstrained through the stories we create and share with other.

In a way this might explain why all of our ferry stories are always met with a common response when we hear them and tell them to each other. We always respond with a burst of recognition: 'Yah, I know!' We tell each other stories we're familiar with, stories that contain characters we've seen or

heard of, but never fully acknowledged, like a ghost of sorts. The cold metal boats and the warm lives which fill them have a reality that emerges out of their mutual encounters. What we call BC Ferries; what we call Islanders; these

**They are ghosts who haunt us because we ignore them for who they are, because we have given them birth without acknowledging their existence.**

places we call The Islands', they all take the specific realities they do only in their intersection, in their enactment. But that enactment isn't pre-ordained. It's a matter of mundane encounters, but also the result of a constellation

of deep currents which flow both below and across the surfaces of our lives, bubbling up in momentary meanings which are effervescent yet which somehow adhere to become the realities we recognize and share. We are haunted by the sights, the sounds, the smells, the feelings they engender. And in the movement lies the stability. Which is why ferries are 'good to think with' whether you are a social scientist or an old truck driver passing the time with some buddies until the solo part of your journey begins again.

 'The Hexed Queen' (1:30)

Ferries, in a way like all technologies of mobility, are the ghosts of those dreams: characters outside of our control who, through their passages into place and in and out of our lives, 'emerge to rekindle the past through unexpected confrontations with sights, sounds, smells, and atmospheres' (Edensor 2008:327). And love them or hate them, like dreams and nightmares, we can't get rid of them; we can only learn to live with them as the material media, and the performative mediums, which transport us to lifeworlds we couldn't reach on our own. ■



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