

Ghosts Along the Mississippi: Clarence John Laughlin and the Southern Gothic

Although Clarence John Laughlin has been described as ‘Edgar Allan Poe with a camera’ (Kukla 5), he is not especially well-known within Gothic studies. Laughlin produced a body of work that documents his native New Orleans, Louisiana and occasionally, further afield. He is best known for his book of photographs and accompanying essays, *Ghosts Along the Mississippi*, first published in 1948, which documents the abandoned plantation houses that had been built along the river. The success of the book – which ran to several printings over more than ten years – was a small redress for Laughlin, who, in his artistic prime, struggled to maintain a reputation in photographic circles, perhaps in part due to his abrasive personal style, but also because of his insistence that his photography be accompanied by his often voluminous textual interpretations, a practice often regarded by his peers as a grotesque disruption of his photography (Meek 25).

The photographs in *Ghosts* are of two sorts; those which artfully and simply document the houses, and those which offer something more than the real through some manipulation of Laughlin’s – double exposure, collage, the use of a model who does not quite belong amidst the collapsing architecture. Laughlin wanted to extend ‘the individual object into a larger and more significant reality’ (Laughlin ‘Some Observations’ 2). Often these images suggest some other plane or presence, a condition Laughlin termed ‘hyper-reality’. In conjuring this hyper-real, Laughlin often sees ghostliness in sites already haunted by the forces of American history.

Laughlin’s photography, especially the material collected in *Ghosts*, records and dreams around the architecture, spaces and places of the plantation era South. The houses mark the aspiration and agency of the men and who built them, and the powers of the plantations they sat at the heart of, as is made clear in Laughlin’s accompanying essays. But they also represent the appalling cost of those dreams and the plantation system, for they are surrounded by the fields in which slaves laboured, and the tiny houses in which they were installed. Laughlin’s photography examines the remaining structures of the antebellum while at the same time recording the collapse of the houses and the culture. Some of the houses Laughlin photographs are maintained, but more often, they are in the early stages of ruin – crowded at the edge of Laughlin’s frames by swathes of Spanish moss, brickwork poking out from behind plaster finishes, gardens in riot about and through them; the houses are the ghosts that line the Mississippi.

It is often remarked that the house – and especially the collapsing house – sits at the centre of the Southern Gothic. Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ is sometimes regarded as the text that establishes both the motif and the regional genre (Moss 179), the source of a failing plantation mansion like Sutpen’s Hundred in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* In Faulkner’s novel, the plantation’s founder, Thomas Sutpen is the house he raises up, just as the Ushers are their lonely mansion; Laughlin, too, tends to identify the houses with their builders. The collapsing house is the place where the disintegrating family unhappily attempts to reside. Laughlin’s pictures might recall Poe, but, more particularly, *Ghosts* sits alongside the Southern Gothic of authors such as Carson

McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote and especially Faulkner in its interest in the collapse of places and the lives lived there, and in its description of the ways in which past of the South haunts its present.

Sherry Truffin notes that in the wake of the Civil War, the South became a sinister landscape, associated with 'aristocratic pretensions... ghastly abuse of slaves, and... ruined monuments to an unenlightened past,' so that 'the South is America's analog to the barbaric European medieval' (Truffin 186). In this way, the South becomes an imaginative resource for a nation looking to consider and critique its history. As Teresa Goddu observes, the South is often 'depicted in gothic terms... a benighted landscape, heavy with history and haunted by the ghosts of slavery. The South's oppositional image... has served... as the repository for everything the nation is *not*... the imaginary South functions as the nation's "dark" other.' (Goddu 76) In this view, the Southern Gothic's concerns move beyond the borders of the states it depicts and it becomes a national genre; but in doing so it risks offering only the shadowed history of slavery and various Southern miseries, potentially losing its status as a regional genre. An unresolved tension remains in the genre here. As Flannery O'Connor famously complained, 'I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.' (O'Connor 815) O'Connor's point remains a provocation for readers and critics of the Southern Gothic; how does the genre connect to realist and documentary urges, and where does it drift into Gothic hyperbole? And are these co-ordinates shifted when we read it as a regional literature before we read it as a national one?

Laughlin's *Ghosts Along the Mississippi* drift between history and the imaginary, pointing towards the slavery and the war, although Laughlin is sufficiently familiar with the history of Louisiana and the plantations to recognise that the houses aren't *only* symbols of the dark history that concerns Goddu. Laughlin is interested in presenting a wider history and a more expansive sense of life about the Mississippi. Early plates record Creole dwellings and figures, slave cabins and the descendants of slavery, black churches and Latino graves, while his text returns to the international contexts of the South, particularly its associations with France and Spain. In this, Laughlin predicts the more recent turn in Southern studies, so that it moves 'beyond a close focus on place and the recollection of the Civil War' (Castillo and Crow 1), and into a description of a significantly internationalised region.

Insert figure 1 here.

Figure 1. 'The Massive Columns'. Clarence John Laughlin. The Clarence John Laughlin Archive at The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1981.247.1.851.

Plate 70, 'The Massive Columns' – the first of three plates depicting the Uncle Sam plantation house – is representative of the documentary aspect of Laughlin's photography. Uncle Sam is poised between the visible and the invisible. To the right of the frame, we can see the detail of one facing of the house; but to the left, the facing of the house disappears into shadows behind the whiteness of the columns, the house itself falling into darkness.

Close your eyes a little, soften your gaze, and you can almost miss the marks of decay. In fact, Laughlin perhaps too often undertakes a similar kind of softening in his textual accompaniment. He writes in praise of the life of Uncle Sam, imagining that its builder, Fagot, ‘never knew the dead world of numerals, of paper profits’ and instead produced wealth that was of ‘the life of the earth, the riches of the soil’. Laughlin seems to suggest a fall into modernity follows the antebellum. The life of the plantations has vanished; indeed, from the first line of Laughlin’s text, we know that the house has since been swallowed by the river. The photograph is a ghost, but also a memorial.

There is none of the manipulation of the image that characterises Laughlin’s hyper-real, although even without this, the house is one of those that, in Laughlin’s words, has been ‘abandoned to time, and to which ruin has imparted a captivating, and almost eerie quality.’ (Laughlin *Ghosts* np). This quality chimes with Mark Fisher’s observation that eeriness ‘seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human. What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance?’ (Fisher 11) The eerie suggests some kind of power, agency, history that does not fully present itself; in the case of the plantation houses, this unseen history suggests the rise and fall of the plantation families, but also the humbling of the South and the horror of slavery.

The idea of a Gothic photography is seldom considered within Gothic studies. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to trace what such a photography might be (in the American context, might this include William Mortensen, Diane Arbus, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Joel-Peter Witkin, Francesca Woodman, Gregory Crewdson?) However, Susan Sontag describes the qualities that might connect photography to melancholy and even the Gothic, noting that the ‘effectiveness of photography’s statement of loss depends on its steadily enlarging the familiar iconography of mystery, mortality, transience.’ Photography is very good at offering its viewers a sense of the ephemerality and already-pastness of the scenes it captures, and at memorialising what has been framed. This alone is not necessarily Gothic, although it touches on the potential of the photographic frame to be haunted. Sontag goes on, ‘More traditional ghosts are summoned up by some older American photographers, such as Clarence John Laughlin, a self-avowed exponent of “extreme romanticism”’ (Sontag 67). Although the Southern Gothic, in its literary form, initially tended to avoid literal ghosts while recording the disturbing hold of the past over the present, Laughlin, working in a visual rather than a written medium, often depicts the spectral directly.

Insert figure 2 here.

Figure 2. ‘Elegy for Moss Land’. Clarence John Laughlin. The Clarence John Laughlin Archive at The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1981.247.1.888.

‘Elegy for Moss Land’, the first plate in *Ghosts*, is a good example. It is, says Laughlin’s accompanying text, an image that carries ‘the book’s whole intent’ (Laughlin *Ghosts* np.). An instance of Laughlin’s more heavily manipulated images, ‘Elegy’ is the result of a double exposure. A figure stands in the midst of two landscapes – in one, she stands in swampland, between ooze and sky; in the other, between a plantation house and the house’s reflection in water. The double exposure suggests – enacts, really – a relationship between the two landscapes. In the image they literally share space; but the image infers that they might relate to each other through time also. Does the swamp precede the house? Is it the landscape on which it was erected? Is it the landscape to which it will return, once ruin has finished with it? The figure stands, a little awkwardly, her arms out before her as if she were a witch calling something up from the watery earth, or perhaps trying to lay a spirit. We can’t tell if she’s conjuring the invisible forth or setting it to rest. It is, says Laughlin, ‘an image of those who seek to completely summon the past; those who fall beneath the magic spell of memory’ (Laughlin *Ghosts* np.). It describes the concern of the book and the plates that follow. Is the house being called up out of the swamp, or returned to it? Is the figure an enchantress – holding power over these landscapes – or under the enchantment of place, her hands held out together as if bound? The human figure – the memorialising figure – is spelling and bespelled.

Although the image is, obviously, static, the individual scenes from which it is composed never settle into one another; the eye shifts between one image and the other, one then the other prominent, each image disrupting the other, moving through it. The figure – which loses solidity towards the bottom of its black robe – becomes unmoored in place, but also in time. We don’t know if she belongs in the historical moment of the house, or in the time of the swamp; we can’t tell if she comes before or after. Laughlin’s double exposure speaks of a hauntology, the way ‘the twists and turns of haunting manifest as a layering, a palimpsestic thinking together, simultaneously, rather than a thinking against or after...’ (del Pilar Blanco and Preen 32). Laughlin’s own writing recognises this function of haunting. He argues that there is a ‘poetic’ dimension to his work, and that poetry offers a view of its subject ‘*more extensive in time* than that reality which is immediately apprehensible... elements of the past and of the future play equal parts with that of the present’ (Laughlin *Ghosts* np). The palimpsest extends, opens out the moment in images like ‘Elegy’, indeed, in almost all of the images included in *Ghosts*. Sontag is right to note photography’s connection to transience; but she also notes its mystery, and part of the mystery of Laughlin’s shots is the way they prolong the ephemeral, but not exactly by freezing the moment. Time plays back and forth inside the frames. This isn’t history in a linear sense.

We can see a similar reconfiguration of history in some of the novels and stories associated with the Southern Gothic. Consider Faulkner’s story ‘A Rose for Emily’, which describes a town’s almost affectionate relationship with the aging murderess and necrophile, Emily Grierson. At Emily’s funeral,

the very old men – some in their brushed Confederate uniforms... talk[ed] of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the

old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road, but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years. (Faulkner, 'Rose' 189-90)

The Southern Gothic isn't characterised simply by the history which it recalls, but by a particular relationship to that history, past events lose chronological exactitude while remaining closely present. Esteem and affection is expressed for histories, places and figures that are troubling, that are difficult to love.

Sontag notes that '[p]hotographs turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgements by the generalized pathos of looking at time past' (Sontag 71). It is clear, looking at the photographs and reading the accompanying essays in *Ghosts*, that Laughlin cares deeply for the South and this feeling sometimes holds judgements that ought to be made on plantation culture – particularly its use of slavery – in abeyance. The photographs valorise the beautiful ruin of the houses, making an argument on their behalf. A curious romance emerges from the history. Faulkner describes this feeling for Southern history in *Absalom, Absalom!* as 'a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory...' (Faulkner *Absalom!* 297). In that book, Quentin, who might have been an heir of the South but instead has escaped to the North, unhappily confesses he cannot hate the place where he was born and raised (Faulkner *Absalom!* 311). Leslie Fiedler noted Faulkner as a proponent of a mode in American fiction that is 'non-realistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic – a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation' (Fiedler 28). But Faulkner – and Laughlin, along with many of the other twentieth-century writers in the subgenre – offer something more complicated, something approaching an affirmation of the darkness described.

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