"There's an App for That"®: Ghost Hunting with Smartphones

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Almost everywhere we go these days—airports, subways, highways, stores, and classrooms—we see people using cellphones. Many of these qualify as "smartphones": tiny computers that perform an amazing variety of functions. With smartphones, we can send and receive messages, check the Internet, take pictures, and make videos. Because of their fantastic versatility, smartphones have their own kind of magic. Jeff Stahler's widely-circulated cartoon shows the wicked queen from "Snow White" holding a smartphone on a selfie stick and gazing at its surface, asking "Smartphone, smartphone on a stick, who has the fairest profile pic?" (Stahler 2015). This cartoon wryly recognizes the smartphone as an arbiter of status and places it in the long tradition of oracle consultation that scholars have documented for many years (Stoneman 2011).

If the smartphone is a source of magic, its applications, downloadable programs for mobile devices known colloquially as "apps," provide a cornucopia of wondrous possibilities. Apps, obtainable from "app stores," offer access to delicious food, comfortable hotels, quick transportation, and other pleasing commodities. Unstinting in their provision of choices, they remind us of the genie that emerges from a bottle in the *Arabian Nights* (Mahdi 2008). There are apps for courtship, weddings, pregnancy, and other life crises. In 2010 the Apple Corporation registered a trademark for its slogan "There's an app for that," which appeared in its 2009 commercials. Gradually, this slogan has proved its validity. In June of 2016, Apple's app store offered two million apps and Android's app store offered 2.2 million ("Number of Apps" 2016).

Besides satisfying people's practical needs, apps respond to their spiritual needs and interests. A few examples of spiritually-oriented apps are Archangel Oracle Cards, Buddha Mantra, Wicca Spells, and Dialing God. Ghost hunting is one of the many expressions of interest in life after death. A broad range of ghost-hunting apps—Ghost Radar, Phantom Radar, Spirit Story Box, Ghost Hunter, and others—makes ghost hunting easier than ever for those who want to take legend trips to haunted places.

This essay will explore how smartphone apps have influenced legend trips during the second decade of the twenty-first century. Since the late 1960s, folklorists have recognized that visitors to legend-related sites tend to follow a certain sequence: telling stories during travel to the site; participating in ritualistic, possibly rebellious behavior; and telling stories during travel home (Dégh 1968, Thigpen 1971, Ellis 1982-1983). When smartphone technology becomes dominant, does this sequence change in any way? Because it seems important to consider both long-established and more recent aspects of legend trip behavior, both will receive careful consideration here.

All the four legend trippers whose adventure I will analyze in this essay are college students. In *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses*

(2007), I explore reasons why late adolescents who are attending college may have a strong interest in taking legend trips. Intensely interested in learning, both in and outside the classroom, they may choose to enter "a mysterious realm filled with sensory stimulation and ambiguity" (2007:182). Older adolescents' reasons for visiting legend sites include "desires to understand death, probe the horror of domestic violence, confront racism, and express the uneasy relationship between humans and technology" (2007:182). But of course, college students' legend trips are not just attempts to learn; they also combine fear with excitement, allowing for thrills under safe circumstances.

Important insight into late adolescents' legend trips comes from Simon J. Bronner, whose *Campus Traditions: Folklore from the Old-Time College to the Modern Mega-University* (2012) analyzes college students' folklore in depth and detail. In the "Legend Quests" section of his chapter about "Legendary Locations, Laughs, and Horrors," Bronner notes, "On these playfully framed trips, students talk to one another about frightening scenarios under the cloak of legend, and they experience for themselves the reality of the spooky sites, even as they confront their own cloudy fears and doubts" (2012: 323). Emphasizing the centrality of late adolescents' own fears and uncertainties, Bronner reminds us that play provides a frame for trips to legendary locations. Like other forms of play that late adolescents and young adults enjoy, legend trips are spontaneous, exciting, creative, and fun. After graduating from college, people tend to cherish their memories of legend trips, as Bronner does in recalling his trip to visit a rural graveyard with friends from Indiana University on a foggy summer night (2012: 319). Both playful and meaningful, these trips offer intriguing ambiguities that provoke reflection long after the experience ends.

Hypermodern Ostension

As Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi explain in their article "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling," ostension is "presentation as contrasted to representation" (1983:6). Dégh and Vázsonyi identify three forms of ostension: pseudo-ostension (hoaxing), proto-ostension (appropriating a legend as one's own experience), and quasi-ostension (misunderstanding something that happens in a legend) (1983:18-20). In relation to Slenderman, the fictive bogeyman created on the Internet in 2009, Jeffrey A. Tolbert identifies reverse ostension, which "weav[es] together diverse strands of 'experience' (in the form of personal encounters with the creature, documentary and photographic evidence, etc.) into a more or less coherent body of narratives (2013:3). Tolbert's recognition of reverse ostension on the Internet shows that this medium of communication is making further forms of ostension possible.

According to sociologist Avery Gordon, author of *Ghostly Matters*, some of the most "dominant and disturbing" aspects of American culture are "the commodification of everyday life, the absence of meaning and the omnipresence of endless information," as well as "the relentless fascination with catastrophes" (1997:14). Gordon characterizes our information-overload era with eerie precision; during the years since her book was published, we have seen the rise of fake news and other phenomena documented by Russell Frank in his study *Newslore* (2011). The ubiquity of Internet rumors and legends about politics, health, and other important subjects makes ostension even more meaningful than it might be otherwise.

For legend trips involving significant use of smartphone and Internet technology, a new kind of ostension emerges. In *Putting the Supernatural in Its Place: Folklore, the Hypermodern, and the Ethereal*, Jeannie Banks Thomas introduces the term "hypermodern folklore": "lore that emerges from, deals with, or is significantly marked by contemporary technology and media (including the omnipresent Internet) or consumerism (with all its accessible excesses and its ability to generate pleasure mixed with anxiety)" (2015:7-8). This term works very well for folklore related to digital technology. During legend trips influenced by smartphone apps, hypermodern ostension takes place. Presentation of legends during these trips relies upon smartphone technology and popular media, as well as consumerism.

"Accessible excesses" of consumerism appear during hypermodern ostension. People who want to use their smartphones to find ghosts can choose among a dizzying array of ghost hunting apps, including Phantom Radar, Ghost Radar, Ghost Hunter, Haunted House, Ghost Locator, Ghost Communicator, Ghost Detector, Ghost Observer, Spirit Story Box, and many others. App stores generally offer multiple versions of ghost-hunting apps that have become popular. Because such apps tend to cost very little, it is easy for people to download multiple apps to try out. Many ghost-hunting apps cost ninety-nine cents, and many are free. Evaluative articles on the Internet such as "We Tested Every Ghost-Hunting App in the Haunted Buildings of NYC" (Crowley 2014), encourage consumers to try out new apps. As a result of low prices and high praise of new products, experimentation with numerous apps has become very common. This experimentation involves both hunting for ghosts with apps and posting videos of ghost-hunting experiences on YouTube.

The first ghost-hunting app for smartphones was Ghost Radar, introduced by Spud Pickles in 2009. Ghost Radar Free, developed for iPhones, became known as Phantom Radar later; Phantom Radar was the app that the four students used in the ghost hunt analyzed in this chapter (Phantom Radar 2017). Ghost Radar has an "FAQ" (Frequently Asked Questions) page that gives consumers helpful information. The question "Is Ghost Radar real?" is followed by the reply, "It is as effective as an EMF detector or a KII [electromagnetic frequency detector]. The theory of what is happening is that intelligent energy can be made aware of their ability to influence the sensors of the device. You must decide for yourself if the readings are indicative of actual paranormal activity" (Ghost Radar® 2016). It is important to note that the app developer encourages the consumer to trust his or her own judgment. As Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi demonstrate in "Dialectics of the Legend" (1973), a wide range of beliefs keeps legends alive; skepticism is one reaction that keeps both narratives and descriptions of legend trips circulating.

Ghost Radar's developer, Jack Jones, welcomes questions submitted online. When I asked him how successful his apps have been, he answered, "The apps have simply been more successful than we ever anticipated. The Ghost Radar® apps have been downloaded tens of millions of times.” Jones also mentioned that this app appeals to “people of all ages” (Jones 2016). He did not, however, answer my question about the role of stories in usage of Ghost Radar. Although his website does not emphasize app users’ stories, the websites of many other ghost-hunting apps do. For example, Spirit Story Box’s website encourages app users to submit stories about their own experiences. Spirit Story Box’s homepage includes a running feed of users’ personal experience stories that describe their successes using the app (Spirit Story Box 2016). As Lynne McNeill notes in “Contemporary Ghost Hunting and the Relationship between Proof and Experience,” placement of personal experience stories on ghost hunters’ websites can make the website seem more persuasive (2006:105).

No personal experience stories appear on the download page for Phantom Radar, the app chosen by many college students I know. Available on iTunes and in other app stores at no cost, this app has been popular among young people. Its developer, Inner Four, Inc., understands the appeal of easy availability. Phantom Radar has received enthusiastic reviews in YouTube videos (e.g. Blast Process 2014).

There are, of course, other factors besides cost. How much does use of ghost-hunting apps depend upon narration of legends and personal experience stories? Answers to this question vary according to the app and its user or group of users. People can use ghost-hunting apps anywhere, not just in places known through legends, but legends attract visitors to promising places and encourage hope for having a similar experience. In “The Commodification of Culture,” Diane Goldstein observes that in belief tourism, “the *real* sought-after experience [is] the potential for one’s own supernatural encounter” (2007:197). Although using one’s own smartphone to hunt ghosts is not the same as participating in belief tourism, the goal is the same: experiencing something supernatural that can become an exciting story to share with others.

Roots in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism

Ghost hunting with smartphone apps derives from American Spiritualism, which began in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1848 two teenaged sisters, Margaret and Kate Fox, claimed that spirits were contacting them by making rapping noises in their home in Hydesville, New York. News of their claim spread rapidly through the media of that period: telephone, telegraph, and newspaper. The Fox sisters gave many lectures and psychic readings, becoming international celebrities. Even though Margaret admitted in 1888 that the spirit rappings had been a hoax, she recanted her confession afterwards, and most of the sisters’ followers remained loyal to them (Weisberg 2005:1-4).

By the 1870s there were Spiritualist churches in both the United States and Great Britain. Members of the Spiritualist church believe that the dead can send messages to the living through psychic mediums and by other means. Lily Dale Assembly in western New York, founded in 1879, is one Spiritualist village that has remained active up to the present. Visitors to Lily Dale consult psychic mediums, attend lectures, and view paintings and writings said to have been generated by spirits.

They also hear stories about the Fox sisters' experiences in Hydesville and see pictures of early mediums' contact with spirits through table tipping (Tucker 2015).

The first efforts to record spirits' voices involved long-playing records in the 1940s; in 1982, Sarah Estes founded the American Association of Electronic Voice Phenomena. Frank Sumption created the Ghost Box, also known as Frank's Box, in 2002. This box generates white noise and captures bits of sound from an AM radio receiver. Smartphone apps that are supposed to respond to sound patterns and electromagnetic frequencies belong to the tradition established by Frank's Box. Through generation of words and symbols such as dots of different colors, these apps offer messages from nearby spirits.

Legends of Old Dickinson

Users of ghost-hunting apps tend to bring them to places that have a reputation for being haunted. Old houses and hotels make especially good legend trip sites, as do cemeteries hospitals, schools, colleges, and universities. Institutions whose existence began some time ago have an intriguing connection to the past. For college students, haunted places have a particular appeal. While pursuing their educations and preparing for future careers, students may feel a heightened sense of their environment's possibilities. Legends that tell of statues coming to life and students walking through a gate that marks the mouth of hell or flunking out because they have stepped on the wrong spot contribute to the impression that the college campus is a strange, enchanted place. Many campus legends tell of hauntings in residence halls, viewed as liminal places because students both study and sleep there. In the liminal zone between alertness and sleep, ghosts become non-living residents of the campus environment. As I discovered when doing the research for my book *Haunted Halls* (2007), it is common for each campus to have its own haunted places. Simon J. Bronner's *Campus Traditions* documents an intriguing range of haunted locations on college campuses (2012: 277-332).

A well-known haunted place on the campus of Binghamton University inspired the legend trip that four of my students took on May 2, 2014. Mike, Amy, Jack, and Simon, all of whom were residents of Newing College, decided to venture into the dark, semi-deserted basement of Old Rafuse, a former residence hall that now holds administrative offices and a couple of classrooms. Old Rafuse is part of Old Dickinson, a complex of eight former residence halls that has gradually begun to serve other purposes. Across the street from Old Dickinson stand the current Dickinson Community and Newing College.

Old Dickinson no longer functions primarily as a residential area at Binghamton University, but it has an invisible network of legends about which students quickly learn. Many of these legends focus on the sub-basement, where a student supposedly hanged himself back in the 1970s. Students have told the story of this suicide with minor variations, including the names of two residence halls in which the suicide took place. In *Haunted Halls*, I explore several variants of this legend, one of which describes a female student seeing the face of a male student in the mirror of her room. After going down to the sub-basement with a friend to try to figure out what she has seen, she realizes that this was the face of the student who committed suicide by hanging from a pipe many years ago (Tucker 2007: 98-99).

There have also been legends about a cleaning lady fainting in the sub-basement and refusing to clean there again. This legend is based on an upsetting experience that a member of the custodial staff went through. When she was reaching up to clean a light fixture, she fainted and fell off a stepladder. Upon awakening from the faint, she declared that she had felt the spirit of a student named Michael pass through her body. Both students and staff members were troubled by the report of this incident, but staff members did not worry about it for long. Students, however, found stories about what had happened to be very intriguing. Some of them brought Ouija boards down to the sub-basement to see if they could find any ghosts there. Once a small group of students tried to summon spirits in the sub-basement with a Ouija Board and claimed that handprints of little baby ghosts had appeared on the surface of windows there. This claim would sound familiar to anyone who had heard a legend about a "gravity hill," including the one that Carl Lindahl examines in his "Ostensive Healing: Pilgrimage to the San Antonio Ghost Tracks" (2005). As Lindahl explains, legend trips to the San Antonio train tracks inspire a sense of wonder; similarly, students who explore Old Rafuse's sub-basement approach their destination with excitement and awe.

When Old Rafuse still functioned as a residence hall, the sub-basement contained a room full of washers and dryers. One legend tells of a demonic face appearing in the glass windows of washing machines, frightening students who had nervously come down to the subbasement alone, late at night, to do their laundry. A small room that contained an incinerator did not inspire legends while students still lived in the building but gained a reputation for being haunted once the students moved out. When people perceive a building as abandoned or semi-abandoned, ghost stories tend to multiply. The comforting routines of daily life no longer make the place seem familiar, so legends about ghosts become more common. Such was the case at Mansfield University, when a temporarily abandoned building inspired many rumors and legends (Glimm 1983:120-22).

Down to the Depths of the Sub-basement

At the beginning of their adventure in Old Rafuse on May 2, 2014, Amy, Mike, Jack, and Simon felt excited and curious. Their first attempt to enter the building failed, because the doors were locked when classes were not in session. On their second try, however, they entered the building holding two smartphones: one for making a video of the trip and the other for using the Phantom Radar app. Bright-colored dots appeared on the screen as they walked down the two flights of stairs that led to their destination: the sub-basement. Simon shouted, "We got a shiny blue dot and a big red dot! Oh, yeah! Red, that means something!" On Phantom Radar, red means a strong ghostly presence; yellow means the presence is less strong, and blue means it is weak. Going beyond those explanations, one of the male students wondered whether the color red showed how the ghost was responding to their visit: "Red on the thing, I saw it! Maybe it's angry!" His mention of anger coincided with their arrival in the dimly lit, shadowy sub-basement, where they saw pipes protruding from the walls. Mike said, "There's a story about a guy hanging himself on a pipe" and Simon replied, "Oh God, creepy!" Then they took a quick look at the laundry room, where students had seen scary faces. With these reminders of the building's invisible, inherited story structure, the legend quest moved forward.

As dots appeared on the screen, words also came up. The first two words, "Height" and "Introduce," got no reaction from the students, but the next, "Maria," fully engaged their attention. "Are there any stories about a ghost named Maria?" Amy asked. The others shook their heads as they entered one of the sub-basement's storage rooms, which contained old music stands, books, boxes of old clothes used by a group of performers, a few compact discs, and other castoffs jumbled together.

Mike plunged his arm into a box of women's clothes and blankets, shouting, "Oh, my God, it's some girl's bed stuff! It *smells*!" His reaction reminded me of a visit to the boys' unit of a camp with my Girl Scouts in the late 1970s in southern Indiana; the sights and smells of the boys' tents and bathrooms at the camp fascinated the girls. Although this group of students was much older, three out of four of them were young men who seemed eager to find clues about a mysterious female ghost, so gender was a factor in their quest.

One of the clues they discovered in the storage room was a video, "The Little Princess," which Jack pulled out of the bottom of the box of clothes. Holding the video up, Jack asked, "Could this be Maria?" Amy had seen the movie, but the three male students hadn't. As I watched their video I remembered that the 1995 film *A Little Princess*, based on the 1905 novel by the same name by Frances Hodgson Burnett, shows the quasi-magical transformation of a dreary boarding school bedroom into a luxurious, delightful place to live. To some extent, that transformation resembled the one that these four students were experiencing: a change from a dull basement to a space haunted by significant ghosts from the building's past.

The next two words that appeared on the screen were "July" and "Sunday." As soon as they heard "July," the students got excited. "I was born in July!" shouted Jack; Amy said, "So was I!" Mike commented in a sepulchral voice, "Jack, you're going to *die*." Amy added ominously, "It's really *cold*." With a little help from Phantom Radar, they were establishing the time frame of a possible story and predicting a grim denouement for their own legend trip. Their prediction may have been influenced by *The Blair Witch Project*, the 1999 film in which all three student filmmakers die, or, more generally, by the many horror films in which visitors to creepy places do not survive. One prototype for this expectation is the legend "The Fatal Initiation," in which a fraternity initiate spends a night in a graveyard and dies of fright.

Right after Mike's prediction of Jack's demise, the four students walked into the scariest room in Rafuse's sub-basement. They could see it was the scariest room, because a few years ago someone had written a message on its door: "Rumor has it that a ghost haunts this room." Maintenance staff kept the door closed, so anyone brave enough to go into the room had to push the door open. The room was small and did not contain much: just a pile of trash, a plug surrounded by soot, a dirty sink with a red spot that looked like blood, graffiti, and an incinerator. Part of the pile of trash was a heap of broken glass. The room looked as if it had been abandoned and left to fall apart for many years, even though students had lived in the building just a few years before.

No wonder someone had designated this creepy room with the closed door the haunted room! As Sylvia Ann Grider observes, basements of houses have a "subliminal association…with castle dungeons and torture chambers" (155). This association comes through even more strongly in the basements of residence halls, which belong to campus legend landscapes involving stories of suffering students who commit suicide, get possessed by spirits, and experience other kinds of misery. The longer a residence hall basement is left mostly unoccupied and the dirtier it gets, the better it works as a setting for a legend trip in which seekers confront decay, suffering, and the presence of a ghost. And a room within the basement that seems to be secret is particularly intriguing, as the well-known folktale "Bluebeard" suggests (Tatar, 2006).

Who was the ghost in this strange, uncomfortable room? As they stood there, the four students saw two new words pop up on Phantom Radar: "couple" and "forget." At this point they did something they had not done before: they started talking to the smartphone as if it were a Ouija board. Jack asked, "What does Sunday mean, and who is Maria? Are you Maria? Do you have anything to do with a Sunday in July?" Mike asked, "What do you want us to forget? What does this word mean?"

No more words appeared on the smartphone, but something else happened: the students heard noises that scared them. Some of them heard water dripping, and others heard broken glass crunching on the floor. Maybe a ghost was signaling its presence, as it did in so many folktales, including those that contained the motif E402, "Mysterious ghostlike noises heard." "Run!" said Jack. "Run for your lives!" They scrambled up the two flights of stairs and exited the building.

Once they were safely outside, Mike summed up what had happened: "Looks like this was a pretty productive ghost hunt. We found out something about this girl, Maria, and a Sunday in July. It was probably in the sub-basement, where it said there was a ghost and something having to do with a couple. It could have been a summer program when they were in high school. Maybe Maria was a girlfriend with a boyfriend. That's all we know. There were a bunch of noises in that room. It sounded like water dripping, something on the floor. There was a lot of broken glass. We are NOT going back there!" Feeling good about having made it through their descent to Rafuse's sub-basement, he and the other students posted their video of the trip on YouTube (Old Dickinson 2014).

Conclusions

This exciting ghost hunt followed the classic legend trip sequence identified by Dégh, Thigpen, and Ellis in many respects. The four students discussed Dickinson legends before choosing Old Rafuse Hall and making their way down into its dark, spooky sub-basement. With some trepidation, they entered the laundry room, the storage room, and finally the furnace room that earlier students had identified as a haunted place. When they heard strange noises, they got scared and ran back up the stairs, exiting the building as fast as they could. Immediately after the hunt they told a story about what had happened; then they ambled across the street to their well-lit, comfortably-furnished residential community.

There was, however, an important change in the older pattern. Besides recalling details from the stories they had learned from oral tradition, the students used a smartphone app as their guide for the hunt. Phantom Radar supplied a tantalizing series of colored dots that told them where ghosts might be; it also gave them words that became a story. To some extent, these words facilitated reverse ostension, defined by Jeff Tolbert as creation of a story through combination of digital elements. The words that appeared on Phantom Radar's screen could be recognized as a narrative, although this narrative's disjointedness made it seem unlikely to become part of Old Dickinson's enduring legends.

The most significant change was the students' use of hypermodern ostension: representation of legend elements that demonstrates reliance on the contemporary era's "accessible excess" (Thomas 2015:7). Using one smartphone to record their trip and another to run Ghost Radar, Amy, Simon, Jack, and Mike made constant use of digital technology. They used Ghost Radar as both a guide and an oracle to which they could speak directly, as people would speak to a Ouija board. They planned to upload their video to YouTube and did so immediately after their ghost hunt ended. Because of this plan, they were aware of performing for an audience throughout their search for ghosts. Their video might have "gone viral" and reached many viewers; most YouTube videos do not become that famous, but one never knows which way the fickle finger of fame will point.

Mike's summary of his group's hunt shows that he wanted it to be "productive." The students would have been disappointed if nothing much had happened and they had simply left the building. Using the Phantom Radar app helped them put together a scenario in which something exciting would take place. A name, a month, a day of the week, and other information gave them ingredients from which a narrative could grow.

Significantly, the story about mysterious "Maria" did not matter as much to the students as their own experience did. Mock-seriously predicting their own death, hearing scary sounds, and feeling uncomfortable in the dirty, haunted room scared them enough that they ran away from the basement. Although the dots and words on Phantom Radar intrigued them, what they saw, heard, and felt in the sub-basement affected them more deeply than messages received on the machine. They were proud of having experienced something frightening in that spooky place underground and enjoyed posting their video for others to view on YouTube.

Information flows constantly from Phantom Radar, Ghost Radar, Spirit Story Box, and other ghost-hunting apps that we can buy for low prices or download for free. These images and sounds not only offer guidelines for locating ghosts; they also represent our current era of semi-reliable electronic communication. At the center of each college ghost hunt stand young people whose eagerness to confront their own fears motivates them to move forward. As long as they keep daring to undertake such quests, their stories deserve to be told.

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