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ARTIFACTS

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Hauntings of the Hudson Valley: Landscapes, and Ghosts

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Michael Brassea is from Frankfort, Illinois. He'll be graduating May 2015 with bachelor in English. He is an avid Chicago Bulls fan rarely misses a game even here in Missouri. He also loves to run, co-founding the Mimosa Court Track club with his former roommates here. He wrote "Hauntings of the Hudson" for Dr. Luanne Roth's American Folklore. Working with Dr. Roth in multiple classes has been a great experience for him. His interest in the Hudson Valley comes from working with a former MU masters student and now Florida State University department of Religion PhD candidate Andrew R. McKee.

The Hudson Valley is an area of one hundred and fifty miles that encompasses a large section of New York State, from Albany to downstate New York. Over the last few centuries the Hudson Valley area has become to many a very haunted place. These hauntings are seen through various literary sources, local stories, and folklore. The hauntings of this area have been said to influence such early American short stories as *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving. Not only do the atrocities against Native Americans linger in the minds of Americans and the literature written by early American authors, but cause feelings of regret that keep the ghosts in style.

Hauntings are also seen in places such as Columbia County New York where the original landowners try to regain their old lands even after death. The landscape of the area also gives a sense of eeriness to all who enter the vast region. The landscape creates a sense of fear that is closely associated with human psychology. Many of these hauntings transcend through time to shape how the ghosts, and hauntings are shaped. The majority of early American literature regarding Native Americans uses a process of removing the Natives to try and forget about the terrible treatment of early Indians.

Part I: Landscapes

Many of the early hauntings came to the European settlers through the harsh, and often times stranger environment of the Hudson Valley. The landscape is seen as haunted to many early colonizers because they have the need to personify nature. Judith Richardson notes this in her book *Possessions*, "The shapes and contents of this landscape have proven fertile for hauntedness in several ways. The landscape itself has resonated with fears and associations rooted deep in both human psychology and

cultural history. Human beings have an ingrained habit of anthropomorphizing nature” (Richardson, 2003, p. 13).

When the early settlers were exploring the new land, they felt fear in many of the natural landscapes such as mountains, and trees. Many people in history have thought of mountains as “active and ominous powers” according to Richardson. With this landscape it struck fear into the hearts of men who were new to this world. This idea of personifying nature is demonstrated in Dale Nicholson’s *Mystic River*. Nicholson writes, “One of my earliest boyhood memories is of the time when my parents pointed out to me that if you look at the Catskills from our eastern perspective in a certain way on a very clear day, it is quite easy to discern a series of adjacent peaks and valleys resembling the profile of a recumbent human figure from right to left, one peak resembles the head, the next, the knees, and finally, the feet” (Nicholson, 2005, p. 7).

What Nicholson saw as a boy is what many Europeans saw in their first encounters with the land. With these mountains seemingly alive, the fear would strike deep down into the hearts of the explorers. These fears were further exacerbated when the settlers would hear falling rocks, or thunder banging off the mountains, adding the violent sounds disheartened many early settlers. Some of these areas were even given names that would strike fear into the hearts of weary travelers. One area that Paul Wilstach describes is the Hudson Highlands, he writes “twelve miles beyond is the north gateway guarded by two other mountains, Storm King on the west side, only a little off perpendicular to its summit at nearly fourteen hundred feet, and Breakneck Ridge on the east side” (Wilstach, 1933, p. 235). Names such as Storm King, and Breakneck Ridge really give the area an eerie feeling to landscape that soars high into the sky. Here is where thunder would roar loud and put the fear of the almighty into the people unfortunate enough to be in the area at the time.

Other than mountains, places such as swamps and hollows appeal to the ghostly nature of the Hudson Valley. In these spook hollows, and spook woods, a certain feeling of supernatural power is always present. Judith Richardson writes, “forests more broadly, along with swamps, have been construed as dark and foreboding places where things might lurk, as places containing a bewildering power of their own, something suggested in the numerous designations of “spook woods” and “spook hollows” in the region” (Richardson, 2003, p. 15).

The idea of spook hollows and woods took off in the mid eighteenth century; many wouldn’t dare enter these areas. The supernatural powers like in the mountains came from the new landscape that many were discovering. This is how people perceived the space they were in adding a sense of fright to their new surroundings. Richardson notes one variant of these spook hollows and woods, she writes, “it was commonly believed that cattle, driven through these woods, would scatter and run wild before the spooks. The road was quite likely to close upon a traveler. Similarly, speaking of a dismal fearsome swamp in Dutchess County which almost swallows the Albany post road” (Richardson, 2003, p. 15).

With new sounds and landscapes in the Hudson the settlers were often susceptible to finding fear, and ghostliness in these areas. The unease of the people is something that would help add to the eeriness of the area. With rumors of spooks chasing cattle’s around early inhabitants of the area would now find reasons to avoid these spots in the past.

Richardson (2003) notes another variant of landscape hauntings, she writes,

Down the post road, on still autumn nights, belated wayfarers sometimes heard the sounds of hoofs. A madly galloping horse seemed to approach, but no horse or horseman was visible to the keenest eyes. A few reported that they had seen a formless gray shadow whisk by in the neighborhood of the swamp that lay by the side of the highway, and other declared that the word “halt” had been pronounced in the soldierly tone just before the galloping ceased. All agreed that the hoof beats stopped as though the rider had reined in suddenly, and that they were never heard further south than the immense old tulip tree, known as Andre’s tree, that spread its gaunt, ghost-like arms in the moonlight (p. 146).

This tree was haunted because of the hanging of a British spy who was caught by American forces during the Revolutionary War. The tulip tree was struck down by lightning the day Benedict Arnold was murdered for his treason, but this proved to be false. Andre’s tree was so haunted to the people of the Hudson because they did not feel liberated from the British even after the war had ended. Andre’s tree was as well as other historical landscape hauntings of the Hudson were brought back into popularity when romanticism, and tourism swept the nation in the early 1800’s. With new areas to explore and new landscapes the European settlers of the Hudson found fear in almost every aspect of the land. With this ghostly connotations came through the spooky landscapes, some which even resonate in the Valley to this day.

Part II: Native American Ghosts

Before the European settlers arrived in the newly discovered North America numerous tribes of Native Americans dominated the land. The early Hudson was primarily Algonquian and Mohican Indians living along the Hudson River. During the early days of European settlement the relationships were mutually beneficial through trading of furs, and weapons. The relationships quickly deteriorated as Europeans began to settle the land permanently. As wars began between the Puritans and Native Americans, it was clear what the early Americans were seeking to do. Bergland (2000) writes, “The goal, both physical and metaphysical, was to secure America’s borders, to define the national territory and hence the nation. US citizens struck out into the unknown western wilderness, hoping to map it, document it, write titles for it, and grant themselves possession of it” (p. 50). The unmapped landscape was already frightful enough to the early Europeans, but bloody battles cemented the ghosts and spirits that would haunt the Hudson Valley. With defining of the borders between the Natives and early settlers, ghosts were believed to haunt the frontier of the land. This happens because the Europeans wanted to establish a sense of self without the Natives.

Bergland (2000) notes the importance of this; “ghosts haunt the frontiers between the visible and the invisible worlds, partaking of both, belonging to neither. In some sense the ghosts can be understood as frontier beings. Arnold Krupat defines frontier as a shifting space in which two cultures encounter one another” (p. 50). Here in these frontier lands the ghost is dealt with not by choice, but by necessity. The ghost of the Native American must be dealt with because the Europeans have moved the Natives to lands that they only encounter when they must explore new territories. Here the ghost transcends the visible and invisible worlds because the deeds of evil that many Europeans had casted on the dead

Natives come to the forefront with ghosts, while they still have to associate with the Indians who are still alive who have been displaced.

American acts such as the Indian Removal act passed by congress in 1830 by congress, relocated many of the Natives of the Hudson Valley, but their ghosts still linger in the literature, and spirits of the displaced Indians. The Native American ghosts linger to this day because early Europeans, and now Americans still feel a sense of anguish for the sins they committed against the Natives. Judith Richardson mentions one ghost that shows the fear of repossessing the lands the Native Americans once owned. Richardson (2003) writes, “in the projections of a Croton fisherman. . .When he comes to the open space where in old times the Indians used to camp he begins to think, maybe they had a scalp dance, too, and other goings on. The unsettling threat of aboriginal repossession through haunting is apparent” (p. 138). Just the idea of the Natives coming back to the land they once dominated scares the fisherman into intense fear of scalping, and murder of new Americans to the land. With these fears the Natives were became even scarier because they could live amongst the Americans.

One particular area that these ghosts linger is the literature of the early America. Renee Bergland (2000) notes, “Native American ghosts haunt American literature because the American nation is compelled to return again and again to an encounter that makes it both sorry and happy, a defiled grave upon which it must continually rebuild the American subject” (p. 22). Authors of the Hudson Valley such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and James Fenimore Cooper have similar traits in removing Native Americans from the stories to show them as ghosts, or to haunt the local areas they once inhabited. This is clearly shown in some of Hawthorne’s early short stories.

Bergland (2000) notes, “Hawthorne’s ambivalence toward ghosts mirrors his ambivalence towards the racial politics of the early nineteenth century. He seems to fear ghosts, and also to seek them out. Hawthorne’s writing holds out the erotic and artistic pleasures of the Indian Removal along with its horrors” (p. 148). As Hawthorne wrote about Native ghosts of the Hudson he removed the horrors of what had happened to them with the removal acts. This fits in with many of the writers of the time to only mention the Native people in ghostly terms, adding the fear in the Valley. The process of removing Native Americans from their lands is seen clearly in the literature and ideals of the time.

Part III: Columbia County House Hauntings

Columbia County New York is located on the west banks of the Hudson River and was founded in 1786. The county grew quickly and became a booming destination for artisans and as a trading post. With affluent men and women in this part of the state, many decided to build massive homes on giant plots of land. And even after they died some say that the ghosts are still in the homes, trying to claim what is rightfully theirs. Matthews (2006) notes the historical influence the county has given on ghosts, “The Hudson Valley has long inspired tales of the supernatural, set in Columbia County, east of the river some 30 miles south of Albany. The area fed the spook-seeking imagination of Washington Irving, who gathered material for *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (Matthews). *Sleepy Hollow* one of America’s first great literary works was created while in Columbia County due to its eeriness in the homes and surrounding areas. This influence would lead to the ghosts new tenants of the homes would see because the original owners never wanted to leave. Kathryn Matthews (2206) notes this phenomenon,

A French guest was roused from a deep slumber at dawn despite wearing earplugs by repeated rapping noises on his bedroom door, though no one had knocked. A visitor staying in an upstairs bedroom awoke to a startling vision of African slaves working in fields. And a close friend, the New York florist Helena Lehane, cut a visit short after being beset by torturous nightmares; her screams described by Mr. Knott as bloodcurdling.

These visions to the guests in this particular home in Columbia County New York are attributed to the old homeowners desire to have the house belong solely to them. These visions such as the Native American visions of some are used to try and remove intruders out of the lands and homes of ghosts.

Since the discovery of the Hudson River, and its valley the Hudson has been noted as one of the most haunted destinations in the United States. Here the atrocities of the early settlers to the Native Americans come to light as they linger in the lands they once lived on for centuries. With newcomers moving into old homes in Columbia County the homes remain haunted because the people want to reclaim what they believe is still theirs even after they have died. The landscape of the Hudson Valley is also something that strikes fear into all who enter it. Jagged cliffs, human shaped mountains, and Andre's tree is still visible today. These areas strike so much fear because they seem so foreign in a very modern part of the United States.

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