

## Introduction

This volume of *Refract* investigates the power dynamics of (in)visibility through “haunting” and the “trace.” A form of way making, the trace offers itself as an object, subject, and action, as both a remnant and a becoming. Haunting similarly defies legibility in that it occupies a discomfiting space between something/somebody and nothing/nobody—not simply a vestige of previous realities but an active force that unsettles life-and-death worlds. As a journal of visual studies, *Refract* is drawn to the power dynamics inherent in the zone between the visible and the invisible: a zone that the haunting and the trace both inhabit. This introduction does not seek to define hauntings and traces per se, but hopes instead to offer spaces for their forms to emerge. One starting point is the tension between absence and presence instantiated by the terms *haunting* and *the trace*.

Absences and presences index each other: for something to be absent, something else must be present. This issue of *Refract* is interested in the tensions between the material absence of the trace and the material presence of the haunting. We ask, what might a close engagement with *both* reveal about memory, kinship, historical narratives, and power? How might we employ this principle in the study of visual and material culture? How do we study the materiality of the invisible, the remnant, the always-becoming? How might we locate power in the creation and mobilization of the trace, and how are knowledge regimes formed and deformed by hauntings? And finally, how might these terms be considered in other cultural and historical contexts that operate outside colonial ways of being?

Akira Lippit writes that the trace is an “erasable sign and sign of erasure that erases as it signs and is in turn erased already.”<sup>1</sup> The trace therefore gives itself to this sort of enfolding logic—an erasing erasure—because the material form of an absence is difficult to describe, to sense, and to access. Anything material

necessarily has a presence, but in the case of the trace that presence is no longer in the here and now. The agential force that created the trace has already been and gone, such as in Montana Torrey's contribution, "*Floodplain (126)*." This installation explores the material and affective remains of Wiang Kum Kam, an ancient city in northern Thailand that was flooded by the Ping River and subsequently abandoned over seven hundred years ago. Treating the archaeological site not only as a trace of the city but also as a trace of the river path itself, Torrey re-creates the bricks used to construct the city, but renders them weightless by hanging them in uniform suspension. The video of the installation captures the slight movement of the bricks to evoke the movement of water as it flowed throughout the city, a reminder of the past even while its material presence is lost to history.

Seb Wigdel-Bowcott's essay, "Mining Things: Confronting Loss and Flux in the Slate Industry Ruins of Northwest Wales," similarly engages with issues about recovering the past by discussing an eerie encounter at an abandoned slate mining site in Wales. By combining affect theory with Bill Brown's thing theory, Wigdel-Bowcott explores the simultaneity of deeply personal and social facets that go into the remembering and memorializing of the past. By analyzing the ways in which sites of remembrance create a multiplicity of lingering sensations and impressions, the author shows how they defy the odd impulse to create a grand narrative out of their histories.

To further unpack the complexity of historical narratives and memory, we invited Professor Christina Maranci to contribute a photo essay titled "In the Traces: Reflections on Fieldwork in the Region of Ani," which features photographs from recent visits to a few of Armenia's medieval monuments. Maranci describes the traces of the past and markings of the present on the churches and other structures usually off-limits to visitors. Her photographs capture the vicissitudes of time and political and religious change inscribed in and around the buildings. The photographs are both intimate and didactic; they convey the beauty of the buildings and remind us of the lives spent erecting, using, and reusing them since late antiquity.

The contributions by Torrey, Wigdel-Bowcott, and Maranci each engage with the material remnants of history, or what this volume might term the traces, the material absences, of the past. Other contributions deal with memory and belonging as another kind of trace, one that is embodied, affective, and lived even while its material trace is less apparent. For instance, we invited a contribution from Professor Boreth Ly, whose recently published book *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2020) focuses on contemporary Cambodian visual culture that addresses the lasting trauma of the civil war, secret bombings by the United States,

and the Khmer Rouge genocide. For her contribution to the present volume, Ly was interviewed by three of her PhD students at the University of California, Santa Cruz: Catherine Ries, Michelle Yee, and Christina Ayson Plank. Their thoughtful interview touches directly on the concept of the trace, which encompasses the Khmer word *snarm*, meaning “a scar and footprint,” as well as the Khmer concept of *baksbat*, meaning “broken body.” In these iterations, the trace is securely situated in local and continental Cambodian theories, but the interviewers open up the conversation to understand how the residue of trauma exists in many facets of contemporary life globally, from Cambodian diasporas to the Black Lives Matter movement to the role of museums and monuments.

The contributions by Maranci and Ly engage with the personal histories and identities at stake in engaging with the past. Other contributors are even more explicit about this, sometimes using their own family photos or genetic data in their work. The multidisciplinary artist Hilary A. Short, for instance, presents two projects that interrogate heteropatriarchal definitions of genealogical relationships. One of the projects, *Bloodlines*, visualizes the artist’s own familial data (accessed through Ancestry.com) horizontally in Microsoft Excel to form an oozing bloodline down a long sheet of crisp paper. This visualization disrupts the metaphor of the family tree and seeks to eschew the more familiar arboreal marker in order to destabilize the impulse to organize ancestry visually through heteropatriarchal relations. Instead, Short’s visualization links the viscosity of blood with raw data in order to reveal and visualize traces of familial data in our ancestries, as shared through blood, and to problematize the familial bloodline as the mechanism of making kin. How might we revisualize and reimagine making kin in ways that position collectivity and connectivity as superseding biological ancestry?

Ellen Takata, whose series of diaristic reflections titled “My Love to Be Defused: Beginnings of an Ethics of Belonging through Negotiations of a National Socialist Image in Daily Life, from Infancy to Adulthood,” interrogates the complexities of collective identities and the problematics of traumatic cultural legacies. Takata’s palimpsestic entries chronicle an ongoing internal dialogue with fictional versions of Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels, Jesus, and mid-twentieth-century German actor Rudolf Schündler, each of whom represents aspects of Takata’s personal and familial history as linked to her evolving perceptions (both visual and intellectual) of historical figures in her daily life. In conjunction with the snippets of text, the accompanying images render visible the very impossibility of capturing the intangible, affective cinematic spaces through which she negotiates a sense of belonging. Takata’s “conversations” act as a liminal space in which to safely and critically ruminate on our attachments to the visual as a way to position ourselves in relation to others; to question the trace as reappropriated in the present; and to confront

the banality of the monstrous and the ambivalence of familiar aspects of our own identities.

Like Takata, Ana García Jácome considers her own family history in terms of absences and presence. In the photo essay “It’s Like She Had Never Existed: The Family Story and the Assembly of Disability,” García Jácome meditates on the intersections of disability and Latin American studies, memory, translation, and personal history. Through a collage of narrative and material pieces, including photos, self-portraits, and medical documents, the essay excavates the silence around her aunt’s cerebral palsy, her Mexican family’s relationship to illness and caretaking, and García Jácome’s own disability. The space carved by mobility—between countries, languages, and discourses—causes García Jácome to reflect on disability’s private and public lives and its entanglement with the English language, US politics, and UN development initiatives. Conjuring her sister’s ghost and unfolding the layered histories of her memory, the artist finds her own traces and the grounds of her artistic practice.

In a different approach to issues of family, memory, and belonging, Whitney Lea Sage renders suburban Detroit through monochromatic ink paintings titled in “Traces, Fragments & Voids: An Artist Representing Detroit’s Vanishing Homeland.” In the artist’s *Homesickness* series, lush landscapes of overgrown foliage crowd aging house foundations or the white space that marks the erasure of built environments. The series meditates on the history of industrialization and suburban migration in the Rust Belt and the material and psychological ghosts they leave behind: empty storefronts, architectural skeletons, scarred plots of land, emotional longing, and nostalgia for place. In a reflective artist’s statement, Sage notes that Detroit’s Black and minority communities disproportionately shouldered the burden of stereotypical representations of Detroit as a city in decline. Informed by her own coming-of-age and adult nostalgia for the suburbs, her work attempts to hold these misrepresentations accountable and knit conflicting perspectives of outsiders and insiders together through the documentation of site and memory.

For Short, Takata, García Jácome, and Sage, memory and genealogy are continually present, perpetually haunting them through photography, genetic data, the built environment, or an amorphous feeling of belonging. Just as the trace is a material absence, so the haunting is a material presence—a doubling or layering, a thickness of time and space. As Karen Barad puts it, “Hauntings are an integral part of existing material conditions.”<sup>22</sup> In turn, Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Collective write, “Haunting is a mattering.”<sup>23</sup> As the physical sciences have taught us, matter is neither created nor destroyed but only ever transformed. As a “mattering,” hauntings and traces are not coming out of (or

disappearing into) “nowhere”; they emerge from something and are constantly being constructed, co-constructed, and de-constructed so as to act with and on the world(s) they possess and cut through. They are transfigured as they come into being and are made (in)to “matter.” This process manifests itself as a haunting or trace in various, mutable, and constantly emergent ways.

It is because of this mutable, emergent nature that they have the capacity or potential to bridge past, present, and future as well as to link disparate spaces, places, and structures of feeling to each other. But the transformative character of both hauntings and traces also makes them difficult to identify, name, or locate. Laura Ann Stoler writes, “To be haunted is to be frequented by and possessed by a force that not always bears a proper name.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, that force is a kind of power, one that acts sometimes insidiously or invisibly because of its very creation through transformation and continual emergence and reemergence. In other words, hauntings and traces are effects and affects of power.

It is in relation to power that we see the key difference between traces and hauntings: while traces can be (re)possessed, haunting has its own animacy that can never be contained in the service of power. Hauntings are a (re)presence, a “something-to-be-done” or a “rememory,” to borrow from Avery Gordon and Toni Morrison.<sup>5</sup> Hauntings may come from what has passed, but they refuse to exit the present tense, as Eve Tuck and C Ree state:

Haunting doesn't hope to change people's perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop. Alien (to settlers) and generative for (ghosts), this refusal to stop is its own form of resolving. For ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs to be resolved.<sup>6</sup>

The trace, on the other hand, *does* have the potential to change people's perceptions, for instance when it is mobilized by those in power to construct national narratives in the service of military control, imperial expansion, or capitalist exploitation (to name a few). Traces can also hope for reconciliation, such as when they are made manifest in monuments, memorials, or archives. For instance, JB Brager's “The Trophy and the Appeal: Colonial Photography and the Ghosts of Witnessing in German South West Africa” is concerned with the racist violence of colonial German photography in South West Africa, particularly as it exists in the present-day archive. The essay discusses how these images circulate as trophies—the pornotropic evidence of racist violence—and appeal, the belief that witnessing violence implores viewers to make it stop. Contemporary antiracist and decolonial discourse demands that these trophy images be continually repurposed for human

rights appeals, yet these images are always haunted by the horrors of German colonization, both insidious and outright. Because of this, the author questions their own archival research, asking whether we should look at all. Instead, Brager implores us to consider new decolonial methodologies of looking that can only be learned from the Herero peoples of South West Africa, who are brutalized in the archive. When forced to be subjugated witnesses to racist violence, they instead refuse to look as an act of resistance. Similarly, when confronted by violence in the archive, scholars may choose to divert their gaze elsewhere and instead scrutinize the perpetrators.

Similarly, in her reflective essay “White Shoals, White Shrouds: Reflections on the Ethics of Looking at Captive Bodies,” Axelle Toussaint considers the violence of looking at French colonial photographs of Comorian children. As she outlines her affective response to these images, and her own relationship to their circulation in academe, Toussaint suggests the “shoal” as one way to stop the perpetuation of colonial violence. As articulated by Tiffany Lethabo King, a shoal is a geological formation/place of shallow water that forces paused reflection on both the production of the black body as an object of inquiry and the demand for its visibility. As an experimental feminist decolonial intervention, Toussaint cuts out the Comorian bodies, leaving only a white shoal that traces the outline of their forms. Such a trace forces viewers to reflect on their own bodies, now diverted from the racist image. In this way, the author suggests tracing is a decolonial praxis that disrupts the replication of colonial violence.

The material absence of the trace has the potential to render the hand that wields power invisible and to obscure already marginalized experiences to the void of history. Yet, once created, the trace as a material absence has its own power: a negative force that complicates any containment within a singular, static narrative. Haoran Chang’s contribution engages with the multiplicities inherent in public space and how they simultaneously uphold and complicate state narratives. “Photogrammetry and Zhongshan Pavilion: Reconstructing Urban Memory of the Wenxi Fire” discusses how digitalization and 3-D modeling through photogrammetry can offer more complex narratives surrounding memorial sites, where nationalist and political narratives run the risk of obscuring the heterogeneous experiences that structure public memory. The site in question is the Zhongshan Pavilion in Changsha, China, the only surviving building after a devastating fire in 1938 destroyed the city. Chang uses photogrammetry to create digital models of the pavilion and argues that this digitalization enables new stories and new memories to be told through the site.

“Power Geometry in Urban Memory: Reading Taksim Square through the Concept of Representation of Space,” by Ceren Göğüş and Asiye Akgün Gültekin,

similarly interrogates the relationship between state power, official memory, and public space. Through an analysis of Istanbul's public Taksim Square, the authors argue that searching for traces in official spatial histories reveals which memories are consistently marked as historical truth and whose memories have been deliberately forgotten. By reading the spatial organization of Taksim Square through its social, political, economic, and cultural layers and relying on the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, the authors treat the public space as a record of both the memories of state power *and* the histories of resistance.

The pieces by Brager, Toussaint, Chang, and Gögüş and Gültekin all engage with the archive and historical narratives as a kind of haunting presence, while the previous contributions capture the absence marked by the trace. But despite their differences, hauntings and traces are not antithetical to each other, and in fact one may take on the qualities of the other. Hauntings, for instance, are noticed at times through material echoes, while traces might be immaterial and in turn do the haunting. Avery Gordon claims that "to study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. Its confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production."<sup>7</sup> Thinking with Gordon, we posit that to study the visual, one must confront that which haunts it. Addressing what Gordon calls the "ghostly aspects" of social life, Nicholas Mirzoeff writes,

When visual culture tells stories, they are ghost stories. . . . The ghost is not a retreat to the margins, whether of art history, aesthetics or cultural studies, but is rather an assertion that the virtual is in some sense real, and the paranormal normal, as what was formerly invisible comes into visibility.<sup>8</sup>

If absence has a material dimension, how does that push the limits of our approaches and methods in the field of visual studies? How can visual studies work alongside art-historical inquiry to explore these new questions about in/visibility? Tara Allen-Flanagan, in "The Face of an Empire: Cosmetics and Whiteness in Imperial Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I," exemplifies such an approach by analyzing the ways in which images of Queen Elizabeth I demonstrate, to an Elizabethan audience, colonial power and dominance through the pronounced paleness of her skin tone. This skin tone was achieved through cosmetics, although the appearance of her pale skin was often ascribed to her inherent and enduring natural beauty. Since many of the material components of the queen's cosmetics originated in colonized lands, their use and display in portraits strongly constitutes an assertion of whiteness-as-power in the New World.

Hana Nikčević similarly pushes the boundaries of art-historical inquiry in “Mere Image: Caravaggio, Virtuosity, and *Medusa’s* Averted Eyes.” In this essay, Nikčević explores the reproduced gaze of Medusa in the work of Caravaggio. She outlines the precedent of images of Medusa throughout Italian Renaissance art, especially those images created by Leonardo da Vinci and other contemporaneous artists like Benvenuto Cellini. Nikčević also draws on contemporaneous literature, poetry, and ancient imagery that Caravaggio may have encountered in the homes of aristocrats. Using these sources, Nikčević argues for the significance of Medusa’s averted eyes in Caravaggio’s rendering, suggesting that they subverted the distinction between referent and representation and, by extension, constitute an assertion of Caravaggio’s artistic skill.

In “The Televised Apocalypse,” Justin Kever complicates previous readings of Jean Tinguely’s *Study for an End of the World No. 2* by pointing to the importance of transience in the televisual, arguing it is only those texts whose forms lack closure that can reveal the traces of nuclear destruction, rather than “freezing” it into a singular, isolated event. Kever asks the reader to consider that images designed to be transient nevertheless “continue to resonate in ways lost when the world is transformed into atemporal objects.” In “*Douce Mélancholie: Sonic Negotiations of Absence in the Works of Susan Philipsz and Félicia Atkinson*,” Jenny Wu examines the affective potential of sound by bringing the experimental music of Félicia Atkinson into conversation with Susan Philipsz’s installation work. Wu highlights how both modes of expression engage the listener as an active, embodied participant, and suggests that sound can function as an index of the absent body to haunting effect. While her interest in what may be termed the presence of absence is familiar to anyone with an affinity for images, her essay draws attention to the sensory experience beyond the visual.

The contributions by Allen-Flanagan, Nikčević, Kever, and Wu all demonstrate the ways in which *Refract* is invested in pushing the limits of visual studies. Not only does the theme of hauntings and traces incite new questions and methodologies in the study of art and visual culture, but our “Voices of Visual Studies” feature also provides a window into the diverse array of scholarship that exemplifies such approaches. This feature appears in each volume of *Refract* to highlight thinkers from the interdisciplinary, amorphous, and emerging world of visual studies. For this third volume, we invited Professor Katerina Martina Teaiwa, whose book *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate from Banaba* uses images and visual culture in a way that exemplifies the methods of visual studies. One chapter in the book is made up of what Teaiwa calls “fragments” from her archival research and fieldwork. This “remixing,” as she calls it, serves as a methodological tool for exploring the similarly fragmented story of Banaba,

which was mined for phosphate by British, Australian, and New Zealand companies between 1900 and 1980. Since 2017, Teaiwa has been transforming this project into a traveling exhibition/installation in collaboration with the esteemed Samoan Japanese artist Yuki Kihara. Teaiwa's contribution to *Refract* meditates on the continued role of visual storytelling in her research, which for *Refract's* editorial board exemplifies a visual studies approach that blurs disciplinary boundaries and challenges the very production of knowledge through academic writing.

\* \* \*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 54.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Remembering, and Facing the Incalculable," *New Formations* 92 (2017): 74. <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:92.05.2017>.

<sup>3</sup> Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Collective, "Before Dispossession, or Surviving It," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 12, no. 1 (2016): 3.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Ann Stoler, *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1. <https://doi-org.oqa.ucsc.edu/10.1215/9780822387992>.

<sup>5</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 179; Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 36–37.

<sup>6</sup> Eve Tuck and C Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in *A Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, Carolyn Ellis (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 642. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315427812>.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Ghostwriting: Working Out Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 239. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F147041290200100206>.