

# "Am I Going to See a Ghost Tonight?": Gettysburg Ghost Tours and the Performance of Belief

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Ghost tours, which purport to bring tourists into situations where they may encounter the paranormal, hinge on humanity's near-universal fascination with the spirit world. Ghost belief has been a contentious and ubiquitous feature of human culture through recorded time. The ghost as a theoretical construct has spanned continents and societies, surfacing in entertainments and rituals alike. In America, a tradition of paranormal belief dates to the early settlers, reaches through the fanatic and controversial mediums of the nineteenth century, and persists in modern-day psychics and paranormal investigators.<sup>1</sup> Ghost tours join the ghost hunter clubs, paranormal-themed television shows, amateur and ethnographic ghost story collections, and ever-evolving procession of horror films in contemporary culture's seemingly endless enthrallment with the paranormal. Gettysburg is one of many locations with a burgeoning ghost tour tradition. Salem, New Orleans, and Atlanta are among the myriad American towns and cities that feature ghost tours. And in Europe, it is not unusual for ancient castles or ruins to make their own paranormal claims to visitors.

This is not to suggest, however, that ghost tours and paranormal tourism are the central focus of these destinations. At popular historical tourism sights, like Gettysburg, ghosts are only rarely the main motivation for a tourist's visit.

They exist on the margins of more serious vacations, relaxing and entertaining tourists after a long day of museums and historical sights. But their marginal status does little to dissuade from their popular appeal. At the height of the tourism season in Gettysburg, scores of tour groups wander the main streets passing through dark alleys and fields and moving in and out of haunted buildings. Though many may relegate ghosts to the scrap heap of more serious ventures, people cannot seem to resist the draw to seek them out. To be sure, humanity's relationship with the paranormal is marked by a powerfully conflicted attraction.

Ghost tours provide a window onto the fate of ghost belief in the scientifically rationalized and technologically sophisticated West. Although Americans have largely exorcised the formerly omnipresent demons, angels, monsters, and poltergeists of the past, some part of the culture still holds tight to the possibility of worlds and truths that exceed material existence. Against her or his better judgment, the individual seeks out that sense of mystery that comes from an experience with the supernatural or paranormal. The fact that Americans do so in the context of a trivialized, touristic, and sometimes silly ghost tour speaks to the place that ghost belief has come to occupy in American culture. Entertainment is the veneer,

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hiding Americans' paranormal obsessions from themselves. Ghost tours, like roadside psychics and ghost-themed reality television shows, have become the refuge for an otherwise profound need to believe in ghosts.

Gettysburg is arguably the most mythologized spot in the country or at least the most mythologized Civil War battlefield. It has been constructed as "the turning point of the Civil War" and features more monuments than any other American battlefield.<sup>2</sup> It also bears the distinct reputation of being a place where roughly 11,000 men and boys died. All of these individuals died violently and, in many cases, horrifically. These deaths form the basis for the notion that Gettysburg's historic buildings, streets, and fields are haunted. Gettysburg's haunted status has given birth to no less than eight ghost tour companies in the borough. The sheer volume of ghost tours in Gettysburg make it an ideal case study for ghost tourism.

On a Gettysburg ghost tour, a tourist joins a group of other tourists who have been attracted to a roadside stand or souvenir shop by advertisements that ask "do you believe in ghosts?" and promise to take you to places where "the veils of the spirit open to catch a glimpse of soldiers and civilians long dead, who still reach across the barriers of time." At an appointed hour (usually between 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. at night) a tour guide, dressed in a costume reminiscent of the 1860s, steps forward from her or his place behind the stand and addresses the group. After a brief introduction, the guide takes her or his candlelit lantern in hand and leads the group on a tour of haunted spaces, that is, spaces said to be occupied by ghosts. In Gettysburg, ghosts are understood as the continued conscious presence of an individual after her or his death, independent of the individual's physical body. Many tour guides, in the context of their tours, talk about ghosts as existing in a separate plane that is spatially layered on top of the world of the living. The guide makes periodic stops where she or he tells stories of ghosts and ghost encounters. Frequently, the stories connect historical figures or circumstances from the battle of Gettysburg to some strange or

unexplainable phenomena, thereby attributing those phenomena to the ghosts of Civil War soldiers, officers, nurses, etc.

On the surface, ghost tours are a simple commercial entertainment. Tourists pay guides to bring them on a tour of Gettysburg's streets and fields and tell stories that will amuse them and hold their interest. The complexity of the ghost tour stems from the fact that tour guides perform ghosts as real or potentially real, that is to say a verifiable facet of the physical world. As an audience member and as a ghost tour guide, the question I most frequently heard before a tour began was some variation on, "Am I going to see a ghost tonight?" This question was only occasionally asked as a joke, and often implied: (1) the asker's willingness to believe in the possibility of seeing a ghost and (2) the asker's desire to actually see a ghost. Tourists scan the shadows, sniff the air, turn an ear to the wind, and snap scores of digital photographs in an effort to experience the paranormal.<sup>3</sup> The fact that tourists hope to encounter a ghost does not necessarily suggest that they are inclined to believe in ghosts. Colin Davis imagines the internal monologue of a ghost believer and disbeliever, respectively in *Haunted Subjects* (2007): "I know ghosts don't exist, but I still believe in them; or, alternatively, I don't believe in ghosts, but I don't entirely believe my lack of belief" (8). Even though the audience is inclined to doubt, their desire to have a paranormal encounter indicates that the closer they come to believing that encounter possible, the better they will enjoy the tour.

Ghost tour guides address tourists' desire to believe in the existence of ghosts by calling on their tour groups to activate their paranormal beliefs. Activating belief should not be conflated with suspending disbelief. A performance that calls for a suspension of disbelief has a fictional content, and audience members are asked to overlook the fact that the story's characters are being played by actors, for example, or that the events in the story are implausible. Audience members do not deny that the story is fictional but rather hold or suspend their awareness of the story's implausibility during its telling. The ghost tour,

on the other hand, asks its audience to believe that its stories are true and that ghosts are actually present on its tour stops. Do ghost tour guides create a performance that activates tourists' capacity to believe in the paranormal, and if so how is this achieved? How does the activation of belief interact with ghost tours' surface function to entertain?

The ghost tour guide is not only the central entertainment but also the central source of paranormal belief for ghost tour audiences. I will draw on my field research in Gettysburg in 2007: conducting interviews and surveys, attending tours, and training and performing as a guide myself. The guide's beliefs or performed beliefs stand in for the tour group's inability or unwillingness to openly confront the unknown. In *Cities of the Dead* (1996), Joseph Roach asserts that "performers are routinely pressed into service as effigies, their bodies alternately adored and despised but always offered up on the altar of surrogacy" (40). Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of sincerity and presentation of self as well as various theories of narrative performance, inform an argument as to how the ghost tour guide serves as a surrogate believer. Tour group members hide, huddled up in their own doubts, and must be guided out into the world of possibility presented by the ghost. They must take a "vacation" from their own nagging closed-mindedness and follow the guide both literally and metaphorically on this journey beyond death's door.

## Not Taking Ghosts Seriously

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It is beneficial to consider first how the context in which the guides perform establishes an environment in which they can activate belief. Richard Bauman (1977) argues that "[m]ost important as an organizing principle in the ethnography of performance is the event (or scene) within which the performance occurs" (27). Elizabeth Tonkin (1992) goes so far as to suggest that "in oral [genres] occasion is much more likely to be significant than form and style" (53). The context or occasion of the ghost tour determines the way the audience is predisposed to experience the tour

before it begins. In Gettysburg, the ghost tour is contextualized as a "mere" entertainment, a frivolous sideshow at an otherwise solemn historical tourist destination. Ghost tours are "not serious," insofar as they are not taken seriously by the residents, shopkeepers, and historians of Gettysburg. Numerous tours that I both attended and gave were heckled by Gettysburg locals, usually riding by in cars. Hecklers would shout out at tours, sometimes forming words like "boo," other times screaming incoherently. One sutler (a craftsman that creates nineteenth-century replica clothing) talked about a video that a local student had made mocking the tours (October 2007). In a discussion with several historians of the Friends of the National Park Service, the historians expressed their opinion that tours were mostly lies. When asked what ghost tour they recommended to tourists, the historians said "none" (October 2007). Shopkeepers and residents alike complained about getting around the sidewalks, being kept up by tours outside of their houses, and tourists' leaving litter on their lawns. But despite all of this ill will, there has never been any concerted effort to stop or remove ghost tours from Gettysburg's streets. This is perhaps the greatest evidence for the fact that the Gettysburg community does not take its ghost tours seriously. They are perturbing and an inconvenience, but not worth the effort to address as a real problem.

Ghost tours embrace their lack of seriousness and incorporate it as a prevalent theme on the tour. Many guides announce it from the outset, adding the "rule" that tourists "must have fun" to their introduction. Essentially, this forms the basis for the entertainment aspect of the tour. The most blatant sign that any performance is not serious is when that performance incorporates humor. Every tour that I attended utilized humor as a key component of the performance. One guide began his performance by giving accounts of tourists in former audiences who either did or asked something "stupid" (September 2007). Many guides incorporate "stupid tourist questions" on their tours: How come all Civil War battles were fought at national parks? Why aren't there any bullet holes in the monuments? What time does

the eight o' clock tour start? Ghost tour guide Ed Kenney renders characters in his stories as comical figures, like the girl who calls a local bed and breakfast to order a "room with a ghost" (tour, August 2007). Another guide, Nancy Pritt, engaged in physical humor when she bent a tourist over and used him as a table to demonstrate how a character in one of her stories shot at his enemies (tour, September 2007) (Figure 1).

The not serious nature of the tours is a large part of their appeal. Tourists come to Gettysburg for an experience with a bloody and cataclysmic segment of America's history. They tour cemeteries and battle sites, hearing about violent deaths, complicated military maneuvers, and political speeches and eulogies. Ghost tours offer tourists an opportunity to escape from the seriousness of the battle to the playful not seriousness of ghosts. This is not to say that ghost tours do not address very serious topics like war hospitals, battlefield massacres, and the horrific and tragic deaths of countless soldiers. In fact, ghost tours touch on all of these things in a very reverent tone. But the ghost tour juxtaposes the serious with the not serious in ways that history tours do not. In some ways, the not serious aspect of the ghost tour allows guides to go farther in conveying the true seriousness of Gettysburg's history. In the first place, the not serious entertains and holds tourists' attention so that they are more likely to be listening closely when a serious moment arises. In the second place, the juxtaposition of the serious



Figure 1. Nancy Pritt performs for her tour group in a field along the main street in town. Photo courtesy of Sleepy Hollow of Gettysburg.

with the not serious renders the serious that much more serious by comparison.<sup>4</sup> It is also possible to think of the not serious as having a kind of Brechtian distancing effect. The comic nature of the tour distances tourists from the tragedy so that they can gain a more intellectual appreciation of the scope and consequences of the battle.<sup>5</sup>

The not serious approach also allows tourists to maintain a certain comfortable distance from the tour's inherent call for paranormal belief. Ghost tour guides must assert the presence of ghosts as a possibility rather than an absolute. Tourists will doubt Gettysburg's ghosts, and so the guide must acknowledge that doubt and incorporate it into the performance or risk overloading tourists' capacity to believe. Paranormal belief has a certain stigma attached to it in the industrialized West. Depending on the circumstances, individuals who definitively assert their belief in ghosts are apt to be the object of ridicule and derision. If tours take ghosts too seriously, they will make tourists uncomfortable and limit their ability to accept ghosts as a real possibility. The not serious nature of tours allows guides to play with ghosts without demanding that tourists commit themselves to believing or disbelieving the paranormal.

In many ways, the guide's approach to the performance with ghosts at the center resembles Gregory Bateson's (1972) concept of play. Bateson theorized that play substitutes the "nip" for the "bite," which is to say play references something serious (the bite) in a nonserious or non-threatening way (the nip). Similarly, the ghost tour references something serious (paranormal belief) in a nonserious way (the ghost tour). If the guide openly asserts that she or he believes in ghosts without framing that assertion in the playful context of the performance, the assertion will prove threatening to the tour group. The ghost tour departs from Bateson's concept insofar as the guide's "nips" have a specific purpose, that is, to entertain. Bateson's play is done for its own sake rather than with any particular function in mind. Bateson's play does not require an audience and the ghost tour does; thus, the ghost tour is not play directly but a conscious performance of play.

## Setting the Terms

How does a ghost tour guide establish her or his function as a surrogate believer for the tour group and assert the premise that ghosts are real? According to Richard Bauman, storytellers set the terms of their performances through keying. Borrowing from Goffman and Bateson, Bauman defines keying as the "range of explicit or implicit message(s) which carry instructions on how to interpret the other message(s) being communicated" (15). Guides key their performances so that their tour groups will understand the conditions by which they are to experience, interpret, and evaluate the performance.

In the introductions to their tours, guides will often explicitly inform tourists that it is possible that they may encounter a ghost during the tour by listing the various ways in which tourists may have a paranormal experience. Ed Kenney recounts the sights, sounds, and smells that people experienced in Gettysburg during and immediately after the battle, implying that tourists may be subject to those exact same sensations should they encounter the paranormal during the course of the tour. Guide and tour manager Ray Davis is more direct. He lists the various ways that tourists have had paranormal or seemingly paranormal experiences on his previous tours (transcript, February 2006). The more or less explicit message in these introductory monologues is that ghosts are real, they are present in Gettysburg, and it is possible for a tourist to have an experience with one. In describing these potential paranormal encounters, the guide not only suggests her or his own belief in ghosts but encourages the tour group to believe as well.

Guides also key their performances in nonverbal ways, establishing an aesthetic through their props and costumes. All guides carry lanterns, including guides who do not dress in antiquarian clothing. At each tour stop, the guide places the lantern on the ground between her or himself and the group to tell stories. Guide Steve Anderson theorizes the import of the lantern to the ghost tour aesthetic: "And of course I must have my

candle lantern . . . 'cuz kids grow up hearing ghost stories around a campfire—I tell them the lantern is my portable campfire" (pers. comm., September 2007). The lantern is an important part of keying the notion of the paranormal or the "spooky story." It alludes to popular images of stories around a campfire and walks through haunted castles, dungeons, and houses with a lit torch or candle. They are part of what generates an atmosphere that welcomes the presence of ghosts both real and imaginary (Figure 2).

Guides' costumes serve a similar function. At all but one company in town, guides are required to wear a costume reminiscent of the middle of the nineteenth century. Female guides wear hoop-skirt dresses and male guides wear military uniforms or less formal antiquarian "civilian" clothes. The term *reminiscent* is perhaps the most accurate because there is a certain range in the style and antiquarian accuracy of the costumes. Ed Reiner, proprietor and sole performer for his own tour company, appears in painstakingly accurate antiquarian costume. One of his outfits is a Berdan Sharpshooter's uniform: a green coat and pants and matching hat with a maroon belt, white gloves, epaulets on his sleeves, a knapsack with gold and blue print, and black shoes (tour, August 2007). As a point of contrast, when I began giving tours for the Sleepy Hollow tour company, I was given a pair of wool pants and a checkered shirt



Figure 2. A stand advertising Haunted Gettysburg and featuring the standard ghost tour guide lantern. Photo by Katie Lesser.



from the Gap, a vest that vaguely matched the pants, and a straw hat. The total outfit alluded to an earlier period, but with far less attention to detail than Ed's complete Berdan uniform. Many guides fall between the extremes, often trading accuracy for practicality. Guides wear black or brown boots but almost never walk in antiquarian footwear. In colder weather, female guides will wear pajama or gym pants under their skirts. Guide Tara Leas wears modern glasses because she cannot afford antiquarian spectacles and "thought it best not to be walking blindly into traffic" (Figure 3).

Guides had much to say about how the costume contributed to their audience's experience. Guide Eileen Hoover said, "the dress is very important in setting the mood and staging the performance" (pers. comm., August 2007). In other words, the costume satisfies the audience's expectations and sets a certain tone for what is to follow. Guide and paranormal investigator Betty



Figure 3. The author in costume as a ghost tour guide selling tickets to a tourist before a tour. Photo by Lauren Thompson.

Roche stated that "folks want to see what ladies looked like then and I also feel that being in period dress gives you a great deal of credibility" (pers. comm., September 2007). Ed Kenney offered a similar idea: "I think it adds to the experience some as the guide is not just some Joe off the street but has probably got some experience" (pers. comm., November 2007). Both Betty and Ed seem to suggest that the costume is part of what authorizes the guide as a performer. The guide is set apart as someone with "credibility" and "experience," thereby providing the guide with the necessary platform to become a leader and performer within the tour group.

In his discussion of living history tour guides, Michael Mayerfeld Bell argues that "the visitor knows that the costumed guides are not ghosts, of course, but their presence assists in the mental construction of the apparitions of place" (829). The costume suggests that the tour performance will utilize Gettysburg's history as a backdrop or basis for its narratives. It also establishes the guide as an individual who has some connection to that history. The nature of that connection, however, is indirect. The costume is not intended to communicate to the tourist that the performance will be about history or that the guide is necessarily a source of historical knowledge. Gettysburg National Military Park's history tour guides, whom tourists are most likely to hire in the course of their daytime activities, are not costumed but rather uniformed, donning dress shirts and ties. Thus, in Gettysburg the costume suggests a more theatrical and playful exploration of history rather than the professional self-presentation of the battlefield guides. This is one way to account for the wide range of historical authenticity in guides' outfits. History is not their focus and so painstaking historical accuracy is not worth the effort and may give the wrong impression.

## The Performance Persona

Having set the terms by which the performance should be understood and judged, guides



Figure 4. Steve Anderson sharing a ghost story.  
Photo courtesy of Steve Anderson.

must proceed to satisfy the expectations that they have established. For guides to suggest that ghosts exist, they must assert the nonfictional nature of their narratives. To that end, guides eschew a theatrical character and perform as themselves. If a performer assumes a theatrical character, the implicit message for the audience is that anything the performer says or does is bracketed as fiction. Elizabeth Tonkin argues that "it is open to any storyteller to construct a self, but because the telling is 'in person' it may be risky to create a persona which deviates too much from what others think is one's personality" (48–49). The risk that Tonkin refers to is that of seeming disingenuous. Of the seventeen guides that I saw perform in Gettysburg, only one performed in character. The other sixteen guides introduced themselves with their own names and never took on a consciously "fictional" self. This removes a level of artifice and illusion from the outset. From the audience's perspective, guides are understood as being no different on tours than they are in daily life.<sup>6</sup>

If guides perform as themselves, then much hinges on the guide's self-presentation. In order for the guide to convey and activate beliefs that the audience is inclined to doubt, she or he must earn the audience's trust by appearing to be sincere. This particular use of term *sincere* is borrowed from Goffman who ascribes it to "individuals who believe in the impression fos-

tered by their own performance" (18).<sup>7</sup> Achieving at least the appearance of sincerity in the context of a ghost tour is a multifaceted challenge. Goffman says, "[s]ometimes when we ask whether a fostered impression is true or false we really mean to ask whether or not the performer is authorized to give the performance in question" (59). What authorizes a ghost tour guide? As performers, guides must demonstrate a particular set of skills that empower them to perform.<sup>8</sup> Asserting competence as a performer is the first step in the guide's assumption of authority (Figure 4).

Nearly anyone can attempt to be a ghost tour guide in Gettysburg. Among the eight companies, numerous jobs and positions frequently open up. Ghosts of Gettysburg invites applicants to attend as many tours as they need to before giving a tour to the company's proprietor, Mark Nesbitt. Nesbitt then decides if the guide is ready to tell stories to tourists. Sleepy Hollow, the company that I toured for, required that I attend three tours given by other guides with the company. Guides then give an "apprentice" tour, but there is no final audition. This is not to suggest that tour guiding requires minimal skills or that it is easily accomplished. Like acting or creative writing, anybody can be a ghost tour guide, but only select individuals can do it well. High-school and college students are frequently hired, but they rarely continue in the job for long. I talked with, toured with, and worked with nearly thirty guides during the course of my field research. Only one of those thirty was a high-school student, and only two were college-aged students. The remainder of my informants were adults who had been performing ghost tours for between three and eleven years.<sup>9</sup> What skills had these "veteran" guides developed that allowed them continue in this occupation?

Almost all guides displayed a certain preoccupation with capturing and holding their audience's attention. Nancy Pritt and Betty Roche talked about a guide's ability to "read" or "see if [the audience is] tuned in" as essential to a successful performance (pers. comm., September 2007). Tara Leas implied that a certain amount of technical skill aids in holding the audience's interest by indicating that she varies voice, movement, and

tempo in her performances (pers. comm., September 2007). Ed Kenney said that his tours are lacking when he has something else on his mind, and that he gives his best performance when he is focused on performing (pers. comm., November 2007). Guides have to give a conscious performance and the more conscious they are of performing, the better their audiences' experiences. An ability to entertain also demonstrates a guide's confidence in her or his performance and bolsters a guide's ability to persuade the group. Individuals are more apt to believe a performer who has mastered her or his performance than one who is stuttering and floundering over it. Sleepy Hollow proprietor Cindy Codori Shultz spoke directly to this issue when she told me that she had fired a guide for being "boring" and not having a "character" (pers. interview, August 2007). Cindy's use of the term *character* should not be understood to mean a theatrical character but rather a stage presence or performance persona. The performance persona is as much a requirement as it is an inevitable product of repetition. Guides' stories are rarely ever "scripted" word for word, but all guides have routes that they are comfortable with and narratives that they perform regularly. The more comfortable guides become with their routine, the more developed their persona becomes and the more capable and assertive they appear to their tour groups.

## The Paradox of Ghost Performance

The performance persona is an essential aspect of what authorizes the guide to perform, but it lands the guide in a difficult paradox. Goffman says,

We tend to see real performances as something not purposely put together at all, being an unintentional product of the individual's unselfconscious response to the facts in his situation. And contrived performance we tend to see as something painstakingly pasted together, one false item on another, since there is no reality to which the items of behavior could be a direct response. (70)

Guides must assume a performance persona in order to command the authority to perform, but

the persona betrays the guide's ability to persuade the audience of anything, let alone the existence of ghosts. Guides overcome this contradiction by maintaining their personal sincerity at the expense of their performance's sincerity. In other words, guides assert throughout the tour that they are sincere while hinting at the fact that their performance may or may not be entirely sincere. They achieve this by rendering their performance personae porous. Guides move in and out of the performance persona, blending it with their non-performed or "real" self.

Tourists are introduced to the "real" guide before the tour begins. They are asked to arrive between ten and fifteen minutes before the tour's scheduled start time. The purpose of gathering early is to assure that the tour begins on time, but this gathering phase has the unintended side effect of establishing the guide's sincerity. Tourists have access to the guide, but the guide is not performing. Although not physically in any "backstage" space, the guide exists in a backstage state. During the gathering phase, guides will often light their lanterns, adjust their costumes, or just hang around and wait for the tour to begin. Their interactions with tourists are entirely informal. They may talk about the paranormal or they may talk about their day job, the best restaurants to eat at, the weather, their costume, etc. Guides rarely address the entire group until the tour begins, and so these pretour interactions are usually one-on-one or with only a few members of the larger group. It is as if the tourist has walked backstage at a play and had a conversation with the actors before the show.

Guides return to this nonperformed state every time they move between tour sites. Guides almost never speak to the entire tour group while traveling between sites, and their interactions with tourists become informal and more individual again. Guides always encourage questions, and, because the audience's questions cannot be rehearsed for in advance, guides' answers both appear and often are uncontrived. Even during the course of a story, when the guide's performance self is most firmly assumed, an unanticipated occurrence may inspire the guide to momentarily



drop the performance. Loud noises, hecklers, and audience reactions are common opportunities for the guide to drop her or his performance self and respond.

An important metacommunication takes place in these transitions from the performance self to the nonperformance self.<sup>10</sup> In her analysis of metacommunication in narrative performances, Barbara Babcock argues that, "the storyteller must not only create an illusion of reality but must make certain that we are aware that it *is* an illusion" (70). Through breaking the performance, the guide essentially steps out from behind the performance self and winks back at the performance, revealing it as something less real or illusory. This is not to suggest that guides label their performances as blatantly false. Rather, through breaks in the performance, the guide reveals the performance to be less true than their own personal beliefs.

The guide's own sincere personal belief is the source of the tour's power to persuade tourists of ghosts' possible presence. The distance that the guide creates between her or himself and the performance by rendering the performance playful is an exercise in preserving that sincerity. As Gillian Bennett (1999) suggests, individuals in western culture are often ashamed of their paranormal experiences and reluctant to talk about them for fear of being ridiculed. Giving a personal account of a paranormal experience or asserting one's belief in ghosts is often accompanied by many qualifications and justifications because the speaker anticipates a derisive or dismissive response from her or his audience. The guide is never ashamed or reticent to perform her or his stories, but if the guide completely invests her or his credibility in a narrative that the tour group deems dubious or invalid, the guide loses all hope of truthfully asserting anything, let alone the reality of ghosts. Thus, nonpersonal narratives (in which the guide invests minimal personal credibility) tend to be more outlandish and personal narratives of the guide's own paranormal experiences (in which the guide invests a greater degree of personal credibility) tend to be more tame. Nonpersonal narratives involve mysterious deaths and dramatic

phantom sightings whereas personal narratives focus on subtle scents, sounds, and mysterious photographs. If the guide claims to have witnessed a mysterious death or come face to face with a full-form phantom, the guide risks appearing fanatical and delusional to the tour group. A personal narrative from guide Mike Lyons's ghost tour will help to illustrate this point:

I came out here last October with about 45 sorority sisters from the University of Maryland. I don't know where this job was when I was twenty and single but I had the wrong job man [audience laughs]. . . . They were freaking out on this hill. As soon as we got out here they asked me, "who would be digging down at the bottom of a hill on a Saturday night?" I said "what?" I couldn't see a thing. Half of them couldn't see a thing. But the other half were watching three men down there by the trees . . . . Three men digging away . . . . Well, what are we gonna do? What any sensible person would do: get their lantern and go check it out . . . . I started on down the hill. Didn't take about five seconds for them to catch up . . . . Nobody around, no picks, no shovels, just shadows moving inside the tree line. That's when one of the girls felt somebody grab her arm just above the left elbow. She said "what is that?" I said, "chances are one of them ghosts wanted to come and check you out." She said "lets go." I said, "alright, come on up the hill." By the time we got up here four more of 'em had been taken above their left elbow. (tour, August 2007)

Mike opens his story with a joke. His tale might be a bit much for his tour group to accept, and so he begins by implicitly informing them that he is not entirely serious about his story. Then, in the narrative itself, he dissociates himself from the paranormal experience. He does not personally experience the paranormal but rather experiences a group of girls experiencing the paranormal. The guide does not see the ghosts or feel them touch his elbow. That encounter rests entirely with the sorority girls. The guide suggests that this tale is strong evidence for the paranormal but keeps a safe enough distance from the narrative to maintain his credibility in the event that the audience is not convinced. The implicit message for the audience is that the guide can be trusted, but the guide's performance is suspect. This poses an interesting problem for the guide's objective to persuade tourists of the possibility of ghosts. If the tourist cannot trust the performance, the guide's own personal beliefs become increasingly important to the tourist's ability to believe or entertain belief. It also gives greater

weight to interactions between tourists and guides when guides are not performing.

## Ghost Belief

A question remains from Mike's sorority ghost encounter narrative. Although he carefully navigates his audience's capacity to accept his sincerity, why would he bother to introduce a tale that comes so perilously close to overstressing their ability to believe? The skill to confidently perform is essential to guides' authority within the tour group, but just as essential is their connection to what they perform. One would not accept a friend's diatribe on calculus, for example, if the friend had no training or experience with mathematics. Ghost tour guides presume to offer narrative truths about the paranormal, and so they must prove to their audiences that they actually know something of the spirit world.

Ray Davis tells several personal stories on his tour including one where he saw "hundreds of lights" in the distance while giving a tour. Tara Leas tells a story of a friend who managed to capture photographs of a ghost hovering near her on a Gettysburg battlefield. And Nancy Pritt carries an album of ghost photographs that she shares with her group during the course of the tour. When guides do not have paranormal stories of their own, they are encouraged to tell stories from tourists or other guides. Having a secondhand experience with a ghost is better than no experience at all. These narratives help to establish that the guide has a legitimate claim to knowledge about the paranormal and so is justified in her or his attempt to assert the reality of the paranormal to the tour group. Personal knowledge and experience validates the content of the guides' performances and bolsters the believability of her or his assertions. Personal experience is particularly powerful because, as Tonkin argues, "[i]f people say they've experienced something, and the personal quality of that experience is asserted, one cannot prove or disprove what was felt by the other" (40). If a guide has had an experience with

a ghost, that experience makes it that much more likely that the guide believes in ghosts and has some basis for performing ghosts as real.

Belief is inextricably intertwined with experience. On his tour, Ray Davis talks about tourists' interest in his beliefs: "people ask me all the time if I've ever seen a ghost. 'Ray have you ever seen a ghost, Ray do you believe in ghosts, even Ray are you a ghost?'" (transcript, February 2006). Cindy Codori Shultz told me that she expects her guides to believe in their stories enough to convey that belief to the audience. In other words, the audience should believe that the guide believes (pers. interview, August 2007). Nancy Pritt said, "I don't think it's necessary to believe in ghosts to give an effective performance if one is a good actor, but I think an audience can smell a 'fake' and will not tend to believe your stories if . . . you don't believe them either" (pers. comm., October 2007). Lack of belief requires that the guide fill the void by "acting," or assuming a false enthusiasm. Betty Roche suggested that, "unless you are a trained stage or screen performer—it's difficult to convey the eerie feeling they are looking for" if the guide does not believe (pers. comm., September 2007). Guides must convince their audience that they believe in ghosts if they are to assert the reality of ghosts' existence. The guide's belief (or performed belief) forms the basis for the activation of tourists' own beliefs.

And yet Nancy's caveat about the "good actor" and Betty's suggestion of the "trained stage or screen performer" suggest that ghost tour guides need not believe in ghosts in order to give an effective performance. A persuasive cynic might just as easily con the audience into believing that she or he believes. In that case, the truth of the ghost tour is not unlike that of the stage. The performer fabricates a belief in order to please the audience, but the belief is no reflection on who the performer really is or what the performer actually thinks. What, then, is the truth of the ghost tour? To what extent do guides believe in ghosts, or, to borrow Goffman's terminology, to what extent do they give a "sincere" performance? Is there a "tour" truth that guides ascribe to only while performing (much like actors ascribe to a

stage truth while in character) so that the tour essentially amounts to a convincingly performed fiction, or do guides more or less accurately represent their beliefs?

Some guides believe whole-heartedly in Gettysburg's ghosts. Nancy Pritt told me, "I do honestly believe that there are ghosts in the places that I take my tour groups. I have seen and felt evidence of the many lives lost here in the streets of Gettysburg" (pers. comm., October 2007). Nancy went on to relate her perception of ghosts at Gettysburg to feelings of "sadness and loss" at Washington, DC's Vietnam War Memorial and Holocaust Museum. Guide Bob Michels said, "I believe in spirits. . . . Most people when they think about it they probably realize there [were] some things that happened in their lives that they can never explain . . . And I think all of us being mortal we do at times ponder what's gonna happen next" (pers. interview, September 2007). Nancy and Bob define ghost experience in interestingly similar ways. For them, incidents that occur in almost every person's life are actually encounters with ghosts. When an individual feels sadness at a memorial site or experiences a strange flicker of the lights at home, he or she is apt to dismiss these events as natural in origin when they may be supernatural. The truth of Nancy's and Bob's ghost tours is then a matter of lens. Through the lens of the tour, normal experiences can be viewed as potentially paranormal.

Another perspective on ghost tours' truth comes from guides who identified themselves as skeptics but then proceeded to qualify their skepticism. In a personal communication, Ed Kenney told me, "I consider myself to be a skeptic, but as I tell folks on my tours, there are a lot of things that I have encountered on the walks that don't really have another credible explanation at this time. I think that helps the storytelling experience" (pers. comm., November 2007). Steve Anderson made a similar argument:

As for me, I'm skeptical but willing to be convinced. So if you show me a picture with "orbs," my first thought is going to be that there were some little drops of water on your lens.<sup>11</sup> But if half a dozen people's cameras all show an orb the same size outside the same window of the same building at the same time, as has

happened at the Old Schoolhouse on East High Street on three separate tours this year, I start paying more attention.

(pers. comm., September 2007)

Ed and Steve suggest that they believe something inexplicable or mysterious is happening on the streets of Gettysburg, but they are unwilling to definitively assert that ghosts are the only explanation for those phenomena. The truth underlying these guides' tours is perhaps best characterized as one of open inquiry. They do not perform ghosts so much as possible ghosts or phenomena that might be interpreted as paranormal. Their performances of belief are explorations of the unexplained, and they leave open-ended any final understanding of the strange events they narrate.

It is important to note that neither the true believers nor the open-minded skeptics understand the content of the ghost tour performance to be entirely genuine. They may say that the ghost of this soldier or that officer haunts a particular building by appearing to its residents, but they do not necessarily believe the entirety of the story to be true. Rather, they believe that there is an element of truth to the story. For example, they may believe that a ghost manifests itself in less startling ways or that something inexplicable happens that should neither be dismissed nor blindly accepted as evidence for the paranormal. The permeability of the performance allows tourists a glimpse at the complexity of the guide's relationship to her or his narratives. Tourists see that there is a "real person" within the performance persona whose opinions and thoughts do not necessarily match up with those of the persona. The fact that this real person either believes or is willing to openly question the existence of ghosts is what gives credence to the persona's more outlandish assertions and allows tourists to explore and activate their own beliefs.

## Conclusion

A nuanced understanding is required to grasp the kind of belief that underlies ghost tour

guides' performances. Goffman says, "[w]hile we can expect to find natural movement back and forth between cynicism and sincerity, still we must not rule out the kind of transitional point that can be sustained on the strength of a little self-illusion" (21). It may be that guides indulge in a certain degree of self-illusion in order to convincingly engage in their performances, but they make no effort to hide this from their audiences. Nancy Pritt is one of many guides who tells her tour groups that they can feel free to ask any questions they like during the course of the tour, and, if she does not know the answers, she will make them up. Although this may seem to undermine the ghost tour's objective to convince tourists of ghosts' existence, in fact it typifies the basis of tours' persuasiveness. By openly confessing that she will sometimes exaggerate and fabricate elements of her performance, Nancy sends the almost paradoxical meta-message that she is going to be forthright with the group. She does not necessarily believe all of the outlandish ghost stories she tells outside the context of her performance, but that does not mean that she does not believe in Gettysburg's ghosts. It is simply that the ghosts she believes in do not always make for the most entertaining stories.

The ghost tour performance serves as a playful signifier for the signified ghost beliefs that underlie it. The guide's playful and ironic stance toward her or his performance allows tourists to entertain the possibility of ghosts without investing their credulity in the paranormal. But, as the tour progresses, and the guide's beliefs begin to surface in and around the performance, many tourists drop whatever irony they may have brought to their participation and commence to search for ghosts in earnest. They compare photographs, point off into the shadows, and even offer anomalous sensations with the guide and the group. By the end of the tour, some tourists grow so comfortable with the open environment that the guide has created that they share their own ghost stories: "I was poked by an invisible hand at a restaurant in town;" "a blue-tinted apparition in nineteenth-century dress crossed

through the room in the hospital where I work and disappeared through the wall;" "the hotel room that we stayed in was so haunted I wouldn't go in the bathroom."<sup>12</sup> These tales, and the beliefs that underlie them, might inspire ridicule in tourists' daily lives, but on the ghost tour they are accepted with an open mind. Often, these stories become part of the guide's repertoire and serve to inspire future tour groups to abandon their doubts and engage with the ghost tour's adventurous exploration of belief.

There is still more at stake in this quest for the ghost. What happens if a tourist encounters a ghost on a tour? What if the tour group happens upon the translucent figure of a confederate soldier digging a ditch or hears the screams of the dying in a church that was once a Civil War field hospital? Paranormal belief sociologist Erik Goode suggests that, "if even a single instance of any one of these phenomena exists or works, the paranormal principle is valid" (58–59). Suddenly, ghosts become an empirical part of that tourist's or tour group's world. Suddenly, their conception of life, death, and the very nature of the universe is fundamentally altered. Perhaps that is why ghost tours choose to address ghosts in a playful and entertaining way. Perhaps people need this seemingly frivolous entertainment if they are to so much as attempt to address the great unknown of the paranormal encounter or the still greater unknown of death. It may be too frightening, too paralyzing to look the ghost straight in the eye and ask "what are you and why have you come?" If the individual were to address the unknown so directly she or he might lose her or his nerve, break down, and crumble in the face of the void. And so Americans tell stories, make jokes, and bury belief in the playful performance of the ghost tour.

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## Notes

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1. My argument is concerned exclusively with the industrialized West. Ghost belief is trans-historical and cross-cultural, but different cultures understand and interact with ghosts on widely different terms.

2. In *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* (2003), Thomas Desjardin argues that, although Gettysburg was a cataclysmic and important Civil War battle, the dominant understanding of Gettysburg as the most important battlefield sight is largely a construction based on the work of "a few novelists and journalists" (188). He writes that, "the nation in 1864 did not see Gettysburg as the pivotal event on which the entire war swung. Instead, this perception grew and developed into a common belief after the war ended" (199). Desjardin suggests that historian John Badger Bachelder invented the idea that Gettysburg was a turning point in the war based on Bachelder's agenda to locate "the war's decisive event" (86). The fact that the war continued for two years after Gettysburg serves as Desjardin's main point in debunking Bachelder's claims.

3. Ghost photography, based on the premise that although a ghost may be invisible to the naked eye it might still produce an image on a digital camera, is so popular that some ghost tour companies have based their business model on enticing tourists to photograph ghosts.

4. The ghost itself serves a similar purpose if one thinks about the seriousness of the mass deaths that happened during the battle of Gettysburg. Ghosts offer proof of an afterlife, reassurance that death is not the end of the individual. Without some hope or belief in an afterlife, the tragic and untimely deaths of roughly 11,000 lives is difficult to fathom and to justify. Ghosts offer a way to make these deaths more palatable.

5. Although there is a notable resemblance to Brecht's (1957) alienation effect insofar as the performer seeks to create a critical distance from the performance, the ends sought by the ghost tour are very different from those that Brecht theorized. Distancing is a technique that ghost tour guides use to persuade the audience of their personal sincerity. Ultimately, guides want to convince their audiences of the possibility of ghosts rather than inspire debate on the paranormal.

6. Guides in Gettysburg were mostly Caucasian. They were both male and female, with neither gender clearly predominating. They ranged in age from seventeen to seventy, but most of the guides that I encountered were in their twenties, thirties, and forties. Guides in Gettysburg were generally from the middle class and toured as a part-time occupation or "summer job." Guides were full-time college students, retirees, teachers, writers, hotel clerks, actors at living and natural history museums, history tour guides, sutlers, advertising executives, office managers, sales associates, and massage therapists. Avocationally, I encountered guides who are also paranormal investigators, Civil and Revolutionary War re-enactors, and psychics. Many guides had bachelor's degrees in a number of fields including history, theatre, and education. One guide had a master's degree in American History and another was pursuing a master's in Art Education. Guides were intelligent, well-spoken, and forthcoming individuals, and I had little difficulty getting them to talk at length about their jobs, lives, and experiences. Guides were often charismatic, engaging, and inclined to tell stories even when they were not performing for a tour group.

7. Although Goffman's study focuses on the more or less unconscious presentation of self, it applies to the ghost tour insofar as the tour purports to be a sincere performance of self. The guide's challenge, as I will address in a later section, is to overcome the consciously contrived nature of her or his performance in order to persuade the audience that the performance is sincere.

8. According to Bauman, "performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (11).

9. This is likely a product of the fact that I began my field research after the busy summer season in July, but it provides a more or less accurate reflection of those guides who perform most often and for the longest duration each year in the various tour companies.

10. The term *metacommunication* comes from Barbara Babcock who defines it as "any element of communication which calls attention to the speech event as a performance and the relationship which obtains between the narrator and his audience" (66).

11. Orbs are small white circles that appear anomalously in photographs. Orbs are said to be one of the many shapes that a ghost can take. Many guides will specify that orbs are subject to skepticism. Dust reflecting light, for example, will often appear as orbs in photographs.

12. These are all paraphrases of stories that tourists shared with me in my role as a ghost tour guide after the tour had ended. Some approached me with stories, and others came out with them on the walk back to center of town.

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