

Of Treasures and Earthquakes: The Material Ghosts of New Town, West Bengal

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Introduction

This article is about material spectres, the imagination of earthquakes and hopes of buried treasure and the possibility of considering them as knots of material ghosts. It is about how the development and planning of a new town, east of Kolkata, in West Bengal create conditions for imagination and articulation of material spectrality in everyday life. Through two ethnographic vignettes, the article foregrounds the weird and the eerie present in the city in plain sight, in the mundane and the quotidian. The article argues for privileging a materialist perspective of spectrality which allows locating hauntings in the quotidian. The supernatural city, I argue, need not only be teeming with traditional ghosts nor does a fieldworker need to chase otherworldly beings and phenomena to encounter temporal knots of material ghosts. Rather, the supernatural in the city can be found in imaginations, articulations, and relationalities of the material. Fears of earthquakes and dreams and hopes of treasures point towards another way of thinking and approaching the supernatural city and the lurking spectres of another time, from past and present. The presence of the immaterial across time and space is evoked through the material relationalities of the city. The city presented in the article is resolutely enmeshed with a range of immaterial imaginaries. The article is anchored around two ethnographic scenes developed from fieldnotes during a spell of intensive fieldwork in New Town, West Bengal, a planned developing town east of Kolkata between February 2018 and August 2019.

To argue that anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers have lived with ghosts in some form or another since the very early years would not be an exaggeration. In recent years, a body of work has grown that deploys the ‘ghost’ as a metaphor to address various traces of the past. Among these works, ghosts have been deployed by ‘linking the work directly or indirectly to Derrida and classic works in hauntology’ (Good 2021: x).

Amidst the growth of ‘the figure of the ghostly, the phantasmic, and the unquiet dead’ (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015:191), Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln introduced ‘a distinction between...primary and secondary haunting’ (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015: 192). They distinguish ‘primary and secondary haunting’ through a range of criteria. The following difference, among others, makes the distinction clear:

individuals afflicted by primary haunting recognize the reality and autonomy of metaphysical entities (i.e., those theorized as spiritual and minimally material beings) in relatively uncritical and unselfconscious fashion. Secondary haunting recognizes its “entities” in the sedimented textual residues of horrific historic events or, alternatively, as tropes for collective intrapsychic states and experiences, including trauma, grief, regret, repression, guilt, and a sense of responsibility for the wrongs suffered by victims whose memory pains—or ought to pain—their survivors. (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015: 200)

Lincoln and Lincoln make this distinction in response to the deployment of ‘the ghostly as a trope’ by authors such as Jacques Derrida (2011) and Avery F. Gordon (1997). For Lincoln and Lincoln, the ‘hauntings’ that authors such as Derrida and Gordon point towards must be classified as ‘secondary haunting’. Though one could argue that primary and secondary haunting remains a Weberian ideal type, such a distinction risks introducing anthropology’s ghost of colonialism, a point developed in the next section. But suffice to say, to argue for a

radical ontological difference between the ‘modern’ writer, researcher or academic and the ‘traditional’, ‘native’ of the field is a formulation which stands on tenuous grounds. As ideal types and analytical conceptualizations such a differentiation might have some methodological advantages in certain contexts yet in others, they fail to provide an adequate conceptual efficacy to make sense of the processes in the social.

It is important to note that for Lincoln and Lincoln secondary hauntings are not a merely an academic phenomenon. They argue for example about the presence of Ba Chúc Memorial in Vietnam as a case of secondary haunting as well. For Lincoln and Lincoln the primary difference between the two types of hauntings is a scalar difference wherein primary haunting is limited to when a ‘single spirit (or a small group) confronts and terrifies a small number of the living’ (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 210) while secondary haunting is exemplified by a “much broader in scope and scale: a process in which living authors recount to large audiences the injustices suffered by the victims of brutal regimes” (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 210). Following debates on scale (see Herod 2010), the article argues for doing away with such rigid scalar thinking and instead argues for an open-ended pursuit of material and spectral entanglements.

This risk of introducing the dichotomy of the modern and the traditional remains at the heart of Lincoln and Lincoln’s formulation. Dismissing secondary hauntings, they note, that ‘although the new hauntology bears some relation to the experiences and beliefs traditionally associated with ghosts and apparitions, only rarely does it directly engage such phenomena, advance new interpretive perspectives on them, or integrate them into its theorization’ (2015: 201). They argue against authors such as Gordon, a canonical figure in hauntology that ‘Ghosts qua ghosts...tend to recede in Gordon’s account, replaced by “ghostly” signals, matters, and traces’ (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015: 195).

In agreeing with Byron J. Good that such an ontological differentiation need not be pursued, I provide two ethnographic vignettes to demonstrate how we could appropriate Mark Fisher's conceptualisation of the eerie and the weird and deploy them in sites which are relatively mundane and quotidian. Fisher's notion of eerie and weird provides a typology for thinking about 'the strange' without introducing an ontological cleavage such as primary and secondary haunting. The vignettes demonstrate the presence of material ghosts which blur the distinction between primary and secondary hauntings and of scalar coherence. Fisher's approach towards thinking of the eerie and the weird enables one to locate and differentiate between types of hauntings without introducing an ontological rift between the modern and traditional. Fisher differentiates between the 'weird' and the 'eerie' to mark out two modes of 'the strange', 'a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience' (2017: 8). Fisher's conceptualizations of weird and eerie allow us to acknowledge what essentially tends towards the un-signifiable. As I will argue in the next section, the point here is not to remain true to Fisher's motive and intent of thinking with the strange that invokes the outside, rather the intent is to blur the boundary between the material and the non-material. To return to Lincoln and Lincoln, they note, "The question of...materiality admits no easy resolution insofar as ghosts mediate and corrode the conventional binary opposition of life and death, being and non-being, matter and spirit." (2015, 198). The aim is to hold on to this impulse to argue against chasing an 'outside' or positing multiple worlds. Instead, if the above statement of Lincoln and Lincoln is indeed taken seriously, the world that we encounter in our everyday lives appears to be filled with thresholds that challenge common-sensical scalar valuations of the world. The collapsing of conventional binary oppositions also has the corollary effect of the dissolution of fixed scales and boundaries. Simplistic boundaries between past, present and future as well as spatial distance falter when the world is brimming with such thresholds.

On the status ghosts and the outside

Before moving on to the two ethnographic vignettes a brief explication is necessary to situate the figure of the ghost and the relationship of our world with the 'outside'. Fisher's conception of the strange invokes the Lovecraftian notion of the 'outside' which has caught the fascination of a wide variety of thinkers over the past decade who are often clubbed under the tag of speculative realism. Writing about Lovecraft, Fisher notes how his stories are 'full of thresholds between worlds' (2017: 28), wherein the stories indulge in juxtaposing a mundane and quotidian world against an unspeakable outside. Similarly, speaking of David Lynch's work, Fisher stresses the presence of 'doorways, curtains and gateways' (2017: 28).

My intent of juxtaposing the two ethnographic vignettes in this article against the concepts of weird and eerie as developed by Fisher is to shed light on the presence of ghosts of futures and pasts in the quotidian. This is not to devalue or to discredit the ontological status of the 'outside' or the 'great outdoors', rather the intent is to present a relatively mundane narrative of the presence of material ghosts. Through these narratives, I demonstrate that appropriating Fisher's concepts of weird and eerie allow us to make sense of mundane entanglements of spectrality and the material in everyday life. On the other hand, the ethnographic vignettes are presented to demonstrate and argue for an open-ended approach to hauntings in the field wherein primary and secondary hauntings are resolutely enmeshed.

Lincoln and Lincoln's argument has emerged at a particular juncture in anthropology's history, termed the 'ontological turn'. In brief, the ontological turn reduces the question of difference and alterity to 'worlds and not worldviews' (Heywood 2012: 143) i.e., ontological, and not epistemological. Heywood (2012), who levied the most canonical critique of the ontological turn in anthropology, argued that such works 'have moved too far from the call to "take seriously" other worlds, and started positing worlds of their own' (2012: 144). Heywood

dismisses both the logical positivist route of defining a first-order ontology and the flooding of multiple ontologies as constructed worlds noting that the task of anthropology is not to invent and determine new truths. The dismissal of both sides is made in a swift breath where Heywood notes that ‘Anthropology is not the science of the ‘ontological autodetermination of the world’s peoples’ (de Castro 2011,: 128 quoted in Heywood) if it involves telling some people (even logical positivists) they have it all wrong right from the beginning’ (Heywood 2012: 149).

It is this logic of critique that helps situate the articulation that Lincoln and Lincoln make. Lincoln and Lincoln’s classification of primary and secondary hauntings, however heuristic, separates the two worlds of people who believe in traditional ghosts and spirits while researchers, artists and even states who invoke haunting in a metaphorical manner are reduced to the second group. This reeks of the ghost of anthropology’s own colonial past. Heywood traces the genealogy of the ontological turn to “1550–51, as two Dominican friars debated the humanity of Amerindians on the basis of whether or not they possessed souls” (Heywood 2012, 144). This is a particularly revealing genealogy. Because of the very framing of the motion, even if one agrees or disagrees with the motion, the ‘Amerindians’ in the above case can be claimed to be different either naturally or culturally. This has the effect of relegating them either to another natural world or another cultural world. Such boxing in of humans into different worlds has grave consequences as the humans in those worlds are suddenly deemed to be fit to speak of only their worlds. This has had particularly inegalitarian effects as over the years the native informants have turned into anthropologists (Arif 2021).

For this reason, I remain empathetic of Good’s rhetorical question directed towards Lincoln and Lincoln. Good asks:

Do primary hauntings belong only to very specific worlds, those in which ‘real’ ghosts are present, while secondary hauntings belong more broadly to all worlds, worlds

‘haunted’ by histories of violence and structures of inequality? Does all anthropology have to position itself within one “ontological” world or another?

(Good 2021: xii)

Lincoln and Lincoln are explicit in their endorsement of the ontological turn in anthropology. While critiquing the work of Gordon, they note that she never considers individuals or social groups who experience haunting as something consistent with and rooted in, their cosmology, ontology, and psychology’ (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 195). My concern is not to highlight the strength or validity of this claim. Rather, what interests me is their usage of the phrase ‘their ontology’, a clear endorsement of the ontological turn influenced by the claim of multiple ontologies. While the goal of the ontological turn is laudable—an effort to take seriously the worlds that various people inhabit—it is important to stress at the same time the risk of classifying people into different worlds.

Lincoln and Lincoln’s conceptualization of haunting is also limited to ‘their use of ghosts (whether in metaphoric generality or semi-concrete individuality) to arouse strong emotions (terror, dread, shame, and remorse) and reconnect the living and dead while advancing ends that are personal and social, political and moral, analytic and pragmatic’ (2015: 211). The article intends to expand the realm of spectres to include various other entities which do not resemble traditional ghosts.

Through the above detour of discussions on Fisher and Lincoln and Lincoln, it becomes evident that spectres of earthquakes and treasures are not particularly amenable to be thought of as spectres if one seeks a world outside *ala* Fisher, or if one seeks traditional spirits of the dead *ala* Lincoln and Lincoln. By drawing attention to thinking of earthquakes and treasures as spectres, as material ghosts, I aim to draw attention to temporal knots of pasts and futures which allow for flows of desire, fear, threat, and hope. These temporal knots might be mundane

and quotidian, but they attest to the presence of various non-human processes that constitute our present.

The article hopes to find a middle ground between Lincoln and Lincoln and Fisher. On the one hand, the aim is to move beyond a narrow focus on ghosts and the dead by expanding the scope of spectrality to include various non-human processes while not seeking the Lovecraftian world outside. On the other, the aim is to move beyond a distinction between so-called real ghosts and metaphorical ghosts by foregrounding the presence of material spectrality in the quotidian. Fisher's notion of the weird and eerie are appropriated to demonstrate the conceptual efficacy of moving spectrality into the quotidian without necessarily seeking an outside. Rather, by including ghosts such as dreams and hopes of treasures and fears of natural disasters and the presence of gods, the aim is to highlight the diverse range of hauntings that planning and development of a new town facilitates. Instead of reducing hauntings to either a small scale as in primary hauntings or a large scale as in secondary hauntings, the ethnographic vignettes evoke an immanent cosmology wherein the scales of the hauntings traverse wide time and space. This scalar ambiguity of the hauntings is something that the article wishes to retain, driven by a sceptical stance towards scalar valuations.

In moving beyond both Lincoln and Lincoln and Fisher, the point is not to suggest that 'they have it all wrong right from the beginning' (Heywood 2012, 149), but rather that the ethnographic material that is presented in the following pages doesn't lend itself easily to thinking of spectrality conceived in such terms, as either ghost of the dead or an unknown outside. Instead, the conceit of framing earthquakes and treasures as spectral processes is to foreground the entanglement of matter and affects that haunt the everyday lives of the urban.

Spectres of Earthquakes

Scene I: Stories of Earthquakesⁱ

After a ride from the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA) library to New Town Action Area III on a K1 bus, I got down at the Shapoorji *morⁱⁱ* and walked to the tea store on the left. Two elderly men and one younger shopkeeper (another older shopkeeper was busy watching videos on his phone) were talking about various concerns. I ordered a tea and a cigarette and sat down. It was towards the end of October and the weather was pleasant with a cool breeze blowing.

The two old men are deep in conversation.

‘There used to be a lot of water here before.’

‘Yes. Even after the rain, the soil could hold so much water but now it doesn't.’

‘Do you know, these massive drilling machines that they bring and keep digging can cause earthquakes. Haven't you heard the vibrations, the ground shake?’

The old man looks at me for validation.

‘Why do you think Japan has so many earthquakes? It's because of their tall buildings.’

‘Not really,’ I say. ‘Japan merely happens to be in a region where the earthquake happens.’ The other man nods in approval. ‘Yes.’

‘But don't you think an earthquake can happen if they keep drilling like this?’

‘Maybe.’

‘I have also heard from a person that this area is flood-prone,’ I said.

‘Yes. Could be.’

‘God has created the Earth in a certain way, right? He has made the mountains and the seas so that there is balance and harmony. If you keep cutting down mountains to bring soil for construction and other things, you are disturbing this balance. No?’ He looks at me again.

‘The books say other things. Mountains were not made by God, but they emerged when two plates (I didn't say this word but hinted at the movement of two layers of soil, objects with palms) collided. That's how the Himalayas were made.’ The other man started smiling.

‘Books say a lot of things,’ the man says, visibly not acknowledging my statement.

I got up to buy one more cup of tea and a cigarette. After I sat down and resumed listening to the men, the conversation had moved on.

The young shopkeeper said. ‘Do you know if we have to open stuff in the future, we will have to pay the municipality, the government, get permission and stuff? Here, on our lands.’

‘Really? Things are not going well.’

The conversation broke off at this point and became a little private, so I stopped following for a moment. I had wanted to ask what the villagers thought of the move towards municipalization, and this seemed like the perfect stream of conversation to do so. So, I got up walked around a little, smoked and approached the older men standing close to them.

‘I have heard that they will soon include the villages, and the panchayatsⁱⁱⁱ inside the municipality too, are you aware of this? This could be bad for the villagers, right?’

‘What municipality, it won't happen so quickly.’

‘It could reduce the vote share of the villagers though, right?’

‘Yes.’ He turned towards his fellow Muslim man and started speaking. ‘What will we do with the municipality? We don't have roads, no schools. Do we even have a single good college here? They take tax for those things. What will we do with it?’

‘True.’

‘Think about the development in Kerala. It’s so developed there.’

‘You have been to Kerala?’

‘Yes. All over South India.’

Cosmologies of mountains, gods and buildings

For the old man, the buildings growing on the horizon, the Himalayas, gods and earthquakes exist in a particular cosmological ordering, one where the rampant urbanization of the region through the planning and development of New Town disturbs the god-mandated equilibrium of nature. The disturbance of the god-mandated equilibrium is then followed by fantasies and predictions of earthquakes. The buildings disturb something unseen, something that was meant not to be disturbed. Lincoln and Lincoln’s distinction between primary and secondary hauntings falters in the above scene. The old man with whom I was having a conversation believed in the cosmological ordering that he invoked. He went so far as to disapprove of my bookish, ‘scientific’ and ‘modern’ interjection. For anthropologists like Lincoln and Lincoln, such a distinction would resemble a distinction between first and secondary haunting.

Yet, the old man’s cosmology is not as neatly classifiable as Lincoln and Lincoln would desire such articulations and cosmologies to be. The old man mobilizes both primary and secondary types of hauntings. While he does resolutely believe in the supernatural orderings of the cosmos and the world, his narrative of the construction of buildings invokes a notion of disturbance, an intrusion that will result in earthquakes. There is an echo of a cosmological intervention which cannot sustain the man-made intrusion of urban development. One could read in his response a cosmological and ghostly play of in/justice akin to a secondary haunting. The scale of the haunting itself defies common-sensical scalar classifications. It is necessary to flag that the location of this field site was urban fringes in West Bengal which is largely a polytheistic milieu. While monotheistic religions do exist, such a framing of gods and nature very clearly invokes a folk discourse of creation by god while also conflating it with a larger pantheistic

notion of nature as an extension of god. Such non-dualistic thinking is a hallmark of a range of folk and high philosophies in wide parts of India.

Existing work on New Town has noted explicitly the violence of land acquisition that transpired in New Town as the initiatory process of urban planning. Rajesh Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sanyal (2011) argued in the case of New Town that violence during processes of primitive accumulation must be conceptualized away from a narrow notion of violence from the barrel of the gun (Sanyal and Bhattacharya 2011). Instead, they argued that the transition of land away from a subsistence economy to a market-based economy through land acquisition constituted an act of violence as the value was generated and extracted by the state through this process of transition. It is amidst this background that the above scene was unfolding. To get a sense of the old man's perspective on the nature of urban planning and development, I interjected a little later in the conversation about the impending transition from the panchayat system to a municipality in the region. The conversation takes an explicit turn therein which invokes the inegalitarian approach of the state.

To go back to the buildings, the old man invoked a sense of weirdness in the construction of the buildings. After having travelled much of the country and having worked as a migrant worker in distant lands, he returned to the village and found it radically altered. There is a sense in his speech that something did not quite belong in the vicinity. Coupled with this were a sense of disarray, a sense of wrong, and a perception of injustice. Fisher points towards this double quality associated with the weird, of wrong and a sense of not belonging when he notes that 'the sense of wrongness associated with the weird — the conviction that this does not belong— is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new' (Fisher 2017: 13). What could be newer than the planning of a new town?



Image 1: The buildings referred to in both vignettes. Debarun Sarkar. 9th July 2019.

The trope of metaphorical haunting that Lincoln and Lincoln relegate to one particular world for anthropologists is not that metaphorical once one starts locating them in the quotidian. Much like the imaginations of ghosts and gods matter, metaphorical hauntings of hauntology problematize the boundaries of matter and spectrality. What do we even mean by ‘real ghosts’ when cosmologies populated with diverse entities remain forces to reckon with in the everyday? As the above vignette demonstrated a diverse cosmological world exists alongside histories of violence and inequality. By collapsing the primary and secondary hauntings we come face to face with an im/material world, of a supernatural city. In doing so I wish to highlight ‘materialism’s status as a theory not so much of being as becoming’ wherein ‘the ghost ceases to be a figure only of unreality or illusion’ (Peeren and Blanco 2013: 97). To add

to this recentring of materiality I also wish to draw attention to how material processes as such set the ground for the possibility of new affective hauntings.

To that end, the next scene is about the same site, the same set of buildings that the previous scene dealt with. But in it, we will encounter a different formulation, a different configuration that echoes Fisher's (2017) conceptualization of the eerie.

Spectres of Treasures

Scene II: Legends of a Treasure

A friend who lived in the southern part of Kolkata had noted countless times his desire to visit the house that I had rented during my fieldwork. I had rented a small apartment in a spawning gated community, still under construction, which claimed to house over a hundred thousand people, with varied housing units for different classes. It was precisely this set of buildings that the old man had pointed to when talking about the impending earthquakes in the previous scene.

My friend, a filmmaker, had traversed the landscape of New Town with his team to shoot a landscape film in the previous months. Something about the landscape, the rising buildings amidst the desolate lands had stayed with him. I visited him occasionally, travelling to the southern extent of the city on a bus to grab a drink with him. On a winter day, when the weather was bearable and the sultry weather was behind us, he arrived in New Town on a bus. After picking up some alcohol on our way home we discoursed what kinds of stories can be told in a film set in New Town.

As the evening approached and we eventually got bored, we decided to take a bus to Kolkata to drink with other friends. On the crowded bus, I stood towards the front of the bus

while my friend found a place to sit at the back. Nearing our destination, the seats started emptying and I sat next to my friend. My friend started narrating to me his encounter with the man sitting next to him before me.

I had noticed the man at the back of my eye but did not register his physical features. He looked like a working-class man travelling from New Town to the southern suburbs of Kolkata. My friend explained to me that he was a construction worker who worked contractually in New Town. He was engaged in construction activity in the same building compound that I lived in. The worker had shown my friend certain coins which looked worn out and belonged to another era. He had found the coins in the construction site of the set of buildings that the old man had pointed towards when dwelling on earthquakes and mountains. He was curious to know whether the coins he had found had any significant value and if my friend was interested in buying them as he was not sure what to do with them.

Situating Treasure in Bengal

Stories of secret treasures, *guptodhan* (secret treasure), are a recurring motif in Bengali folk tales. In such folk tales, pots of gold are usually hidden underground to prevent dacoits and thieves from stealing them. Often, *guptodhan* is buried within the property of the person hiding away the wealth, sometimes digging up the ground inside their own house. Diverging away from such folk imaginations, the imagination of treasure is also found rearticulated in colonial-era children's literature which builds on the imagination of treasures in British literature. A canonical example remains that of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's novel *Chander Pahar* (The Mountain of the Moon) which could well be a companion piece to H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. In the last decade, these articulations have also found their full-blown account in popular Bengali cinema with a proliferation of the genre of treasure films.

Despite these existing imaginaries, there remains something that distinguishes the above ethnographic vignette. Though the very notion of buried treasure recurs as a motif in the above scene, it is not a dacoit or an adventurer who unravels the treasure or the hope of a treasure. In the above instance, it is a construction worker, working towards the development of high-rise buildings that unravels the hope of treasures. And this hope or a fantasy of a treasure is shared anonymously with a passenger, a traveller on a bus.

The hope is passed on as murmurs, as whispers and as rumours. As an ethnographic artefact, the interaction arrived to me in a second-hand manner. The story of a treasure remained an apparition throughout my fieldwork. I never heard of it again. The whisper of a treasure has within it the propensity to form an urban legend. But it isn't the possibility of it becoming or being an urban legend that I wish to dwell upon. I am interested in how it is precisely the site of construction that emerges as a site of buried treasure. And it is a construction worker who carries forward this hope, rumour, and dream and circulates it. The site of construction then becomes a site which suddenly construes a peculiar temporality wherein an anonymous treasure from the past is present. The future in such formation is framed with a sense of hope with a possibility of a treasure from the past being uncovered. The material site of construction and the material object of coins—in the case, the treasures—emerge in the above vignette as a site of temporal knot where past, present and future akin to a supernatural event become a site of temporal knots and ruptures.

To come back to the modern imaginations in and of Bengal, the most enduring and foundational modern myth of Bengal is the myth of Bengal as *sonar bangla* (golden Bengal) (Guhathakurta 1997; Banerjee 2006). This notion of Bengal imagines an agrarian past which was rich and plentiful before the advent of colonial modernity and capitalism. This dream has deeply shaped history, as Meghna Guhathakurta notes it 'fuelled the imagination of those who struggled for a free and independent Bangladesh'(Guhathakurta 1997: 197). Projecting a

treasure in the past then has the propensity to conjure a futurity where that treasure can someday be found. In invoking the hope of recovery of a treasure, the construction worker is then a conduit of desire, a site of a temporal knot, wherein a lost time manifests as coins with uncertain provenance and uncertain value. Whose coins might these have been? Are they valuable? Are they worth anything? Why are they here? Questions such as these might very well have crossed the mind of the worker on the bus.

Mark Fisher's notion of the eerie invokes similar concerns. Dwelling on the eerie, he notes that 'we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human. What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved? . . . What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all?' (Fisher 2017: 11). The construction site is certainly not an empty space, yet it remains relatively unpopulated when compared to constructed buildings housing people. In a way, there are no visible ruins that the construction worker would have encountered, yet there is clearly a ruin of another way of life, another temporality as the city expands. The construction worker's dream of a treasure may well have been answered. Maybe it was worth nothing, or it was worth something. But why indeed was there something there 'when there should be nothing?' (Fisher 2017: 12). The expanding New Town stands in and around marshy hinterlands, and from these lands, some objects manifested whose provenance remains uncertain. This temporal rupture of another time in the construction site points towards the knotting of temporalities.

When Ishita Dey, Ranabir Samaddar and Suhit K. Sen (2016) and Ananya Roy (2011) invoke the registers of 'dystopic' and 'ghastly' to frame New Town, they do so to invoke the violence of capitalism. In Dey, Samaddar and Sen's case, the framing of dystopia remains unable to account for the utopic gestures and imaginaries that are so often invoked by the state and various other citizens in New Town (Sarkar 2022). A dystopic framing also risks framing the past as utopic, as necessarily better. On the other hand, Roy frames New Town through the

register of the ghastly to highlight the vagaries of speculative capital that have produced a city largely uninhabited during her field visits. This eerie sense haunted me as well during my time of fieldwork in New Town. There was a sense of emptiness on the roads with a dearth of pedestrian life with wide roads and tall buildings under construction. This eerie sense of “why is there nothing here when there should be something?” (Fisher 2017: 12) is explained and made sense of by Roy through the vagaries of capital.



Image 2: The desolate urban landscapes of New Town, West Bengal. Debarun Sarkar. 1st November 2018.

Yet, the other side of the eerie that we encountered in the second ethnographic vignette and the case of the weird that we encountered in the first vignette pointed towards new hauntings induced by the vagaries of capital. The eerie affect that Roy apprehended was quickly

cordoned off to move towards an analysis of speculative capital, yet what would New Town look like if we do not foreclose these affects? The New Town in that case would appear to be a landscape rife with new hauntings, where dreams and hopes of treasures, fears and prophecies of earthquakes co-exist along with the slow but steady expanding reach of the city while capital also flows.

Conclusion: Materiality of Ghosts and the Ghostliness of Matter

To approach a supernatural city, one needs to remain open to affectivities which remain difficult to pin down. However, by approaching the supernatural city as an im/material configuration, it becomes possible to think of various affects as spectres that haunt the urban and are resolutely enmeshed materially. Both the vignettes presented point towards the city as a site of desires, dreams, hopes disappointments and violence. The city emerges as a Janus-faced site, where pasts and futures erupt and are pre-empted in the quotidian. In not reducing such affects, encounters and narratives ‘prematurely to an object of knowledge’ (Davis 2013: 58), we might start thinking of New Town as an object that defies scalar classifications, spatially and temporally.

To argue against Lincoln and Lincoln’s distinction between primary and secondary hauntings is precisely to argue for an openness to encounters and affects. Such neat classificatory concepts foreclose the possibility of encountering ghosts which might not resemble traditional ghosts from folklore and such. In putting forth an argument for considering earthquakes and treasures as spectres I have hoped to foreground the spatial, temporal and scalar stretch of certain hauntings which invoke a larger cosmology.

EndNotes

ⁱ Fieldnotes, 7th November 2018. The ethnographic data presented here were collected during a year-and-a-half-long intensive fieldwork in New Town from February 2018 to August 2019. No conversations were recorded, instead fieldnotes were made later in the day. No private information was collected at any point and anonymity of all individuals was maintained while making the fieldnotes.

ⁱⁱ Road intersection in Bengali.

ⁱⁱⁱ Panchayats are the local governing bodies of villages, being the basic unit of governance in rural India.

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