

## Hounded out of time: Black Shuck's Lesson in the Anthropocene

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**Abstract:** Drawing in nightmares, shadows and loneliness, this article follows a rarely-trodden and difficult path across the shifting geology of Norfolk; a track marked by fleeting glimpses and horrible signs of the deadly consequences of deep time and human choice.

The subject of fascination for folklorists, cryptozoologists and the general public alike; in East Anglia stories abound of a huge, devilish hound, with saucer-shaped eyes and followed by the demonic stench of sulphur; Black Shuck. Pursued by - rather than pursuing - footprints in the mud, whispered stories from isolated places, and the mysteriously mutilated corpses of deer, this ethnographic description considers the significance of encounters with this phantasm for recent debates surrounding the proper understanding of the beginning of the Anthropocene, and the implications of this for our sense time and responsibility. In this era of unprecedented human power over the natural world, the Shuck - the mere sight of whom brings death - still haunts us; his chthonic presence reminding us of the inexorable, yet unpredictable power of death. By attending the monstrous, spectral ambiguity of the Shuck, and his ability to reformulate the landscape of East Anglia as a social space, this article explores the how coeval quality of the *longue durée* of deep time, and the haunting rupture entailed by the prospect of our own mortality, can enchant, rather than blunt, our sense of human responsibility in the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** Chthulucene, Anthropocene, Death, Folklore, Norfolk, Climate Change, Haunting.

*And where they all lay sleeping*

*The Dog lies panting down*

*The fire of forests burning in his eyes*

*Whilst darkly in the churchyard*

*The silence sets around*

*And time itself dissolves within his guise.*

–Martin Newell, *Black Shuck*.

One of the fiercely contested aspects of the Anthropocene is its boundary with the preceding epoch – the Holocene. The Holocene – a relatively warm, stable, interglacial phase of the Earth system, that has sustained much of human history – contrasts sharply with the Anthropocene – a proposed, but as-yet unsettled, division of the geological record, wherein unprecedented human activity renders the Earth system unstable and unpredictable. Whether we should conceive of the boundary between the two as the product of a recent rupture caused by industrialisation, or a more gradual process, with its machinations unfolding over deeper timescales, is open to debate<sup>1</sup>.

It may be said that the movement from a state of well-acquainted certainty to chronic disturbance, raises the spectre, or spectres, of the uncanny – that which was once familiar, but is no longer<sup>2</sup>. Such uncanny apparitions reflect the powerful, haunting affects with which spaces of ruination and loss are charged<sup>3</sup>. I detected one such spectre during my research; the phantom dog known as Black Shuck – a terrifying, infernal black hound, who haunts the roads and wild places of East Anglia. Whenever he appears, the Shuck portends death and calamity; those who witness him will be bereaved, or die themselves, soon after. By following the traces left by this horrifying apparition, I suggest, perspective can be gained on what Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald refer to as the “deflationary move” towards the Anthropocene. Hamilton and Grinevald allege that by locating the Holocene-Anthropocene transition across longer timescales, the significance of that transition is blunted<sup>4</sup>. “In so doing”, they say, “[this] ‘gradualizes’ the new epoch so that it is no longer a rupture due principally to the burning of fossil fuels but a creeping phenomenon due to the incremental spread of human influence over the landscape. This misconstrues the suddenness, severity, duration and irreversibility of the Anthropocene leading to a serious underestimation and mischaracterization of the kind of human response necessary to slow its onset and ameliorate

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<sup>1</sup> see Ruddiman, “The Early Anthropogenic Hypothesis,” 7–10; Angus and Foster, *Facing the Anthropocene*; Colebrook, “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene.”; Schneiderman, “The Anthropocene Controversy.” The “machinations” here, refer to the efforts of early agricultural societies, who felled trees to prepare the land for agriculture, and altered various geological processes as a result.

<sup>2</sup> Long, “Haunting Malayness: The Multicultural Uncanny in a New Indonesian Province.”

<sup>3</sup> Navaro-Yashin, “Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge Malinowski Memorial Lecture.”

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton and Grinevald, “Was the Anthropocene Anticipated?”

its impacts”<sup>56</sup>. As such, their claim is that “[the nature of the Anthropocene as a] rupture means that the Holocene can be no guide to the Anthropocene geologically or intellectually”<sup>7</sup>.

Regardless of the validity of Hamilton and Grinevald’s broader argument about stratigraphic matters, the rhetorical tension they establish – between sudden rupture, and the *longue durée* of human activity – makes for a valuable point of departure. It raises important questions about how human beings categorise, and respond to, processes of change in their lives and surroundings. As one of the “chthonic ones” identified by Donna Haraway<sup>8</sup>, the Shuck’s intimate relationship with both death and the shifty soils of East Anglia, challenges any strict oppositions between moments of rupture, human memory, and the deep fastness of geological time. Consider Haraway’s description of these chthonic ones:

Chthonic ones are *beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute*. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, dig-its, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and *very unruly hair*. Chthonic ones romp in multi critter humus but have no truck with sky-gazing Homo. *Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters. They also demonstrate and perform consequences*. Chthonic ones are not safe; they have no truck with ideologues; they belong to no-one; they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth. They make and unmake; they are made and unmade. They are who are. *No wonder the world’s great monotheisms in both religious and secular guises have tried again and again to exterminate the chthonic ones*. The scandals of times called the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene are the latest and most dangerous of these exterminating forces<sup>9</sup>. (emphasis added)

One of the key attributes of the Shuck by all accounts is his coat; thick, heavy, and long. Indeed, one of the proposed etymologies for the name “Shuck” is the local dialect word *shucky* meaning “hairy” or “shaggy” – the alternative being the Old English *scucca*, meaning “demon”. Indeed, in some of the stories, he is referred to as “Shucky Dog”. Like other chthonic beings, the Shuck is an enemy of God and the Church. He is not just a deathly apparition, but a dirty one – a shaggy dog many shapes, and many places.

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<sup>5</sup> Hamilton and Grinevald, 66–67.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton, “The Anthropocene as Rupture.”

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton and Grinevald, “Was the Anthropocene Anticipated?,” 60.

<sup>8</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

<sup>9</sup> Haraway, 2, emphases mine.

Therefore, the Shuck is here a “demon familiar”, thoroughly rooted in marshy East Anglian places where I lived and worked, but with routes elsewhere<sup>10</sup>. Unlike *Pimoides cthulhu*<sup>11</sup> – whose many legs trace those routes in Haraway’s writing, it is the tentacular hairs of the Shucky Dog’s shaggy coat (and the shaggy dog tales<sup>12</sup> about him) that allow us to feel our way through discordant temporalities, and engage in tentacular thinking about the past, present, and future. As Kate Coddington points out, the analytic of haunting foregrounds connections between the past and present<sup>13</sup>. The lesson that the ghost Black Shuck teaches us, I suggest, is that it is *through* moments of sudden rupture – calamity and death – in the present, that we are confronted by the deep past at its most terrifying. Nor do these ruptures remain bounded within discrete events, but because of their unpredictability, they bleed through our experience of the Earth in place and time. Rather than lull us into a false sense of security, as feared by Hamilton and Grinevald, this type of anticipation of Anthropocene crises haunts us with the uncontrollable, unintended consequences of our actions. As David Matless points out in his detailed survey of cultural life in the Broads – the coastal, wetland region of Norfolk on the Eastern edge of England where the Shuck dwells – this area is frequently a site of heated discussion over authentic regional conduct and the physical consequences of human activity<sup>14</sup>, a theme also explored by other social scientists working in the region<sup>15</sup>. My discussion here continues in this vein, but dealing with the inhuman – rather than human – features of the Broads, attending to the “geographical particularity” of this apparition<sup>16</sup>. I see the Shuck as a tentacular critter that haunts marshy morasses at the edges of human understanding<sup>17</sup>, and in the heart of the East Anglian countryside, as a constant reminder of the uncontrollable dimensions to such places.

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<sup>10</sup> Haraway, 31.

<sup>11</sup> A spider found in the forests of Northern California, near to where Donna Haraway herself lives.

<sup>12</sup> “Shaggy dog tales” is a slang term for a long, often fanciful story, that doesn’t necessarily have a satisfying conclusion.

<sup>13</sup> Coddington, “Spectral Geographies”; see also Saltmarsh, “Haunting Concepts in Social Research.”

<sup>14</sup> Matless, *In the Nature of Landscape*, 64–65.

<sup>15</sup> Frake, “A Church Too Far Near a Bridge Oddly Placed: The Cultural Construction of the Norfolk Countryside”; Irvine and Gorji, “John Clare in the Anthropocene.”

<sup>16</sup> Holloway and Kneale, “Locating Haunting,” 308; Matless, “A Geography of Ghosts,” 338.

<sup>17</sup> McClean, “BLACK GOO: Forceful Encounters with Matter in Europe’s Muddy Margins.”

For my doctoral research project, I chose to study the land management practices and attitudes toward the environment in the Broads National Park; a large protected wetland area in East Norfolk. I spent 13 months conducting participant observation as a volunteer with a number of environmental NGOs, estates, and smallholdings, and interviewing local people. About four months before I embarked upon my fieldwork, I was on my way to a symposium in Wales with Professor Ronald Hutton of Bristol University, one of Britain's foremost experts on the history of magic and witchcraft. He warned me that East Anglia was not an altogether canny place; he had found it to be a brooding locale, haunted by mysterious and malevolent beings. Chief amongst these, Ronald explained as he drove, was Black Shuck – a terrifying black dog, with eyes like saucers and spittle like brimstone. All those unfortunates who met this demonic hound would die soon after.

Ronald's own brush with Black Shuck was second hand. He recounted how he'd been picked up while hitchhiking by an American serviceman from a nearby airbase. The American complained of the base as being decidedly "spooky"; highlighting one incident that had occurred a couple of weeks previously. The American had been alone on night duty, watching over the jets as the rest of the base slept. A motion alarm was triggered inside one of the locked hangers. Heading off to investigate, he opened the front doors, and saw within the dark shape of an enormous dog, with red eyes shining in the blackness. He trained his torch on the shape, and there was nothing there. He flicked the main lights on and inspected the hangar thoroughly – but there was no trace of what he'd seen. The American had presumed the sighting was of a stray dog, but was extremely puzzled by how such a large animal could have given him the slip, or got into the secure hangar in the first place. At the time, Ronald did not deem it politic to tell the American about the often-lethal consequences of seeing large black dogs in the Anglian wilds.

The Shuck first storms into East Anglian folklore – literally – at Holy Trinity Church in Blythburgh, on August 4, 1577. As an almighty clap of thunder ripped across the sky, the great doors to the church were burst asunder by an enormous black dog, who raced up the knave past the entire congregation, slaying two people where they stood and causing the steeple to collapse. On the same day, at St Mary's Church in Bungay, during a terrific lightning storm, the same black dog entered the building and killed another two people by wringing their necks as they prayed. Both at Blythburgh, and Bungay, it is said that the dog

left scorch marks on the doors as he departed – marks that can still be seen to this day. These terrifying events are remembered in the following verse, recorded by eminent folklorist Enid Porter:

*All down the church in midst of fire, the hellish monster flew, and passing onward to the quire, he many people slew.*<sup>18</sup>

At the time, the dog was equated locally with the Devil, but such experiences have a precedent within a far broader tradition. Britain has long been haunted by the Wild Hunt; a terrifying host of ethereal horsemen and hunting hounds that soars across the skies at night, and carries off mortal souls into the Otherworld - to witness it was to presage death and disaster<sup>19</sup>. According to Simon Sherwood, an account of the Wild Hunt passing through the woods and deer park of Peterborough from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 1127 is the first in English history to mention spectral hounds in their later form – as frightful black dogs, with huge glowing eyes<sup>20</sup>. Such accounts indicate that spectral hounds have appeared in East Anglia for almost a millennium.

But these black dogs are not confined to the East of England. They are common elsewhere too – with every single county in England reporting sightings of these apparitions; apart from Middlesex and Rutland<sup>21</sup>. Given the extent and frequency of these encounters, many scholars have attempted to provide some sort of explanation for them. Such analysis tends to unspool the stories in one of two ways. Cryptozoologists such as Di Francis<sup>22</sup> and enthusiastic members of the public treat the myths as folk-zoology; as genuine encounters with escaped panthers, or some unknown species, dressed in a raiment of fear and fairy tale. The alternative explanation – presented by social scientists, folklorists and sceptics – draws upon the psychology of belief to suggest that sightings of phantom big cats or black dogs have cognitive or phenomenal explanations<sup>23</sup>. This interpretation presupposes the existence of a fundamental tendency in humans to perceive agencies – especially hostile ones – in inanimate

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<sup>18</sup> Porter, *The Folklore of East Anglia*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Hutton, “The Wild Hunt and the Witches’ Sabbath.”

<sup>20</sup> “Apparitions of Black Dogs.”

<sup>21</sup> Brown, “The Black Dog,” 177; Trubshaw, “Black Dogs: Guardians of the Corpse Ways.”

<sup>22</sup> *Cat Country: The Quest for the British Big Cat*.

<sup>23</sup> Sherwood, “A Psychological Approach to Apparitions of Black Dogs.”

surroundings – a theory familiar from anthropology and developmental psychology<sup>24</sup>. John Lindow develops an example of this approach; recounting how a friend of his “experienced a troll while [she] was waiting for the train” at a station in Oslo<sup>25</sup>. Lindow suggests that when a person operates within a particular cultural context; is under stress, tired, or drunk, and is then presented with a “releasing stimulus, usually of only one sense” their mind fills in the blanks, and a vision results<sup>26</sup>. Lindow’s friend was indeed tired; the night was dark and the weather bad. The wind suddenly died down, and this, Lindow claims, acted as the releasing stimulus. Because this friend was in Norway, in the process of acquiring a Norwegian cultural identity, what she then experienced was a troll. Lindow concludes by pointing out that this model “Helps us understand that in many cultures supernatural beings can indeed be part of people’s empirical experience. Trolls were not just found in books: they were also in the landscape, to be glimpsed from time to time.”<sup>27</sup>. Lindow’s reading of trolls raises the possibility that, where Norwegians, Icelanders, Swedes and Finns experience trolls in moments of duress, Britons experience spectral hounds in our own landscape. If the Early Modern Christian congregations at Blythburgh and Bungay were exposed to a fierce thunderstorm while at prayer, it is not hard to believe that they might see a devilish hound – especially if that storm were physically destructive. Furthermore, the characterisation of depression as a “black dog” – most famously attributed to Winston Churchill, but with a far older provenance – is observed by Foley to be widespread across the British Isles, and is especially common in England. Foley concludes that, given the co-presence of the “black dog” metaphor for depression, and the spectral hounds that haunt the Hiberno-British countryside, a connection between the two is certainly possible<sup>28</sup>.

A shortcoming with these accounts however, is that they both start from one end of the phenomenon, and attempt to work their way out from there. Cryptozoologists start from known facts about the natural world – that big cats exist, and sometimes escape from zoos – while social scientists start from social theories of mind and subjective experience. As a result, neither approach does justice to the whole of the phenomenon it seeks to describe. The social scientists downplay the ecology in order to treat these creatures as imaginary first and

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<sup>24</sup> Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*; Jones, *An Instinct for Dragons*, 200; Piaget, “Children’s Philosophies.”

<sup>25</sup> Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> 8.

<sup>27</sup> 9.

<sup>28</sup> Foley, “*Black Dog*” as a Metaphor for Depression: A Brief History, 12.

foremost, while the cryptozoologists grind down the imaginary, sifting for grains of zoological truth – evidence for ordinary animals, that have either escaped from zoos or escaped scientific description altogether. Neither approach does much justice to these apparitions as they are – undefinable, elusive, and terrifying. As the character of Sherlock Holmes, re-imaged by Mark Gatiss in *The Hounds of Baskerville* explains “Fear, and stimulus... that’s how it works! But there never was any monster.” The very thing these accounts explain away – the reality of ghostliness – is, I suggest, the very essence of the phenomenon they attempt to describe. As Julian Holloway and James Kneale point out “in this kind of analysis, ghosts are mysteries that must be solved, although they are not significant in their own right.”<sup>29</sup>

In line with this critique, I follow the approach of folklorist Theo Brown<sup>30</sup>, who points out the intellectual morass represented by the subjective and objective dichotomy. But unlike Brown, who argues that it is impossible to understand these dogs on their own terms – that the very ghostly elusiveness of these phantom dogs fundamentally limits scholarly analysis of them – I suggest that this is precisely what we *must* do – treating them as simply a phenomenon that British folk encounter in isolated parts on dark and stormy nights, with neither mind nor matter taking precedence. Recent theoretical developments, such as the growing literature on spectrality and enchantment, is useful in achieving this aim. Rather than struggling to classify the black dogs either in material (zoological/cognitive) or immaterial (symbolic/cultural) terms, it is possible to reject that project entirely, and instead approach Britain’s black dogs in terms of their relational, processual, and affective qualities<sup>31</sup> – through the practice of embodied fieldwork<sup>32</sup>. By thinking of the Shuck as a tentacular, chthonic critter, who dwells in the tangled landscape of Broadland, surprising those who follow the rambling pathways through the marshes, we can attend to the mixed-up nature of this ghostly, shaggy dog. “Tentacularity is symchthonic,” Haraway reminds us, “wound with abyssal and dreadful graspings, frayings, and weavings... in the generative recursions that make up living and dying”<sup>33</sup>. The Shuck’s symchthonic recursions reverberate across the uncanny circumstances of personal deaths, into the deep timescales through which Broadland has coalesced. As we shall see below, my own experiences with the Shuck in the field match the methodological

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<sup>29</sup> Holloway and Kneale, “Locating Haunting,” 298.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, “The Black Dog,” 175–92.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.

<sup>32</sup> McCormack, “Remotely Sensing Affective Afterlives,” 642–43.

<sup>33</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 33.



approach described by McCormack, and the perspective voiced by Haraway, allowing me to in some way represent the unrepresentable spectrality of the Shuck<sup>34</sup>.

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One summer's day I was carrying out conservation work on Cantley Marsh, five miles from the little cottage where I was staying beside the river Yare, half way between the city of Norwich and the East Norfolk Coast. The weather was unseasonably cold, the sky a sheet of mottled grey, as a bitter wind blew down over the dreary marsh. At the end of the day, as I started on the long walk back home in a state of near exhaustion, my thoughts tarried – dwelling on the fields I'd left behind, isolated and now empty of people. Thinking on the lonely, flat country through which I was travelling, Ronald's story came to mind. The haunted airbase, the churches at Bungay and Blythburgh, weren't far away. Perhaps the country around me was stalked by the same infernal hound? I passed the ruins of an old wind-pump, black and grim against the ominous clouds – a derelict part of the infrastructure that once drained this boggy terrain, an effort that had now been abandoned. Suddenly, quite unbidden, under the cover of a threatening sky the Shuck made his presence felt. What started out as a stream of consciousness started to appear... possible. *He could be out there*. At that moment, as soft as a paw print in the mud, out of mind and out of sight, I sensed something dark padding across Cantley towards me. The hairs on the back of my neck went up. I felt my pace quicken. The wind didn't howl. I saw no dark shape. There were no glowing red eyes leering at me from the mirk. My reason told me that there wasn't anything out there, but that was cold comfort in the gathering dark. As it was, I got home without seeing or hearing anything – but at a run.

I wasn't the only one I met to sense the presence of *something* out in the Broads. One experienced naturalist confessed, he'd heard a strange roaring coming from deep within the isolated reed beds at Upton, that he couldn't explain. A seasoned birdwatcher told me that one of his friends had actually seen the Shuck – and died terrified a couple of weeks later.

Nor did the Shuck stop haunting me after I fled from Cantley. Later that month, one of the wardens and I came across the body of a Chinese Water Deer on one of the main paths running around the edge of Strumpshaw Fen Nature Reserve beside the river Yare, upriver

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<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*; Holloway and Kneale, "Locating Haunting."

from Cantley. A dead deer is nothing to be concerned about in and of itself; life and death are part of daily existence in the fens. What was odd was how the deer had died. It had been savaged - one of its forelegs had been torn clean off, and its guts had spilled out all over the grass. But the corpse was untouched; it must have been killed very recently, and then abandoned. This was curious – the wound was too severe to be inflicted by a fox or another scavenger, and a feral dog would have left tooth marks on the neck or hindquarters. But no marks of that kind were left on the body. Some of the wardens were excited by the mystery, others simply puzzled. But as jokes and shaggy dog tales about the Shuck were shared around, the Shuck became a “seething presence”, in Avery Gordon’s words, an uncertain absence made conspicuous through violent disturbances<sup>35</sup>. A couple of days later, a second dead deer was found – in the reed bed a couple of hundred metres from the first – with similar injuries. Was the Shuck to blame? I started to scrutinize every footprint I saw in the Yare Valley – was that an ordinary dog that left those marks, or something else?

It was only later that I discovered that the Yare Valley had always been one of the Shuck’s haunts. A combination of lakes; rivers; grazing marshes – soft underfoot, and difficult to cross; and impassable fen – full of sinkholes and hidden meres; the Yare Valley has been characterised before as an awkward, truculent place, rendered inaccessible because of its sodden soils<sup>36</sup> - the perfect lair for a spectral hound. Ted Ellis, a famous local naturalist, is alleged to have seen a dog the size of a horse emerging from the reed bed near Surlingham, while in 1894 two men came across a “huge uncanny dog” near the village of Rockland. The driver attempted to run it down with the cart he was driving, and then “the air [became] alive with wavering flame, and a hideous sulphurous stench loaded the atmosphere”<sup>37</sup>. The man driving the cart died soon afterwards. Both Surlingham and Rockland are just across the Yare from where I was living.

These reminiscences are still fresh – and, to use an adjective with suitably visceral connotations – raw. I can still remember the fear of racing home through the gloaming, unable to shake the sense that I was being pursued by something I couldn’t quite define. Although Black Shuck and his fellow spectral hounds might be explained (or explained away) as big cats, stray dogs, or as hallucinatory British “trolls”, these post-hoc speculations

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<sup>35</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 7–8.

<sup>36</sup> Cocker, *Crow Country*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Hooper, “Demon Dogs of Norfolk & Suffolk.”

all have their origin in uncanny, confusing “raw” experiences that occur unexpectedly in the path of our lives. Fortunately, I did not come face to face with the Shuck, but I nonetheless was confronted with the lingering sense that this dread apparition could be out there somewhere.

When attending to this ill-defined, mutable, monstrous quality to hauntings by this hound, what I suggest emerges is an intimate connection with a fundamental feature of human experience - death. The Shuck’s appearance is habitually deemed to portend imminent mortality<sup>38</sup> – often the mortality of the witness themselves. Like death, the Shuck’s liminal quality<sup>39</sup> incorporates both indeterminacy and certainty – we do not know what death is exactly, or where we shall meet it, but we know precisely what happens to us when we do. We do not know what the Shuck is, or if he is out there; but if you do meet him, you – or someone close to you - will die. It is precisely this ability to combine the known and unknown, I suggest, that makes the Shuck so frightening, makes him a monster. Try as we might to make our lives rationalised, secure, and predictable, death eludes our control and predictive capabilities<sup>40</sup>. No locked door can keep it at bay, nor can we know the time of its coming. And though death is often glossed as being wholly mysterious; this is not true either. Death incorporates facts that are all-too-clear, as well ones that are utterly beyond our comprehension. As such, death finds itself almost uniquely pregnant with meaning. The aim here isn’t to suggest that the Shuck merely *represents* fears about death, or the malevolent dead – as ghosts are sometimes deemed to do in the ethnographic literature<sup>41</sup>. Rather, the Shuck’s intimate connection with the ambiguous certainty of dying helps us to appreciate how, like the Shuck, death demands our attention and yields multiple interpretations, and so will always bear fruit when subjected to speculation. No investigation of it can ever truly be satisfactory. Death itself always has the last word.

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<sup>38</sup> e.g. Newell and James Dodds, *Black Shuck: The Ghost Dog of Eastern England*; Bunn, “Part V: Modus Operandi in Shuckland - Analysing the Hell Out of the Beast”; c.f. Westwood, “Friend or Foe? Norfolk Traditions of the Shuck in Explore Phantom Black Dogs. Eds”; Reeve, *A Strange & Terrible Wunder*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> Trubshaw, “Black Dogs: Guardians of the Corpse Ways.”

<sup>40</sup> Lorimer, “Rot,” 235.

<sup>41</sup> Endicott, *An Analysis of Malay Magic. Kuala Lumpur*, 75; Winstedt, *The Malay Magician: Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi*, 22; Long, “Haunting Malayness: The Multicultural Uncanny in a New Indonesian Province,” 881.

These deathly, spectral traits – uncertainty<sup>42</sup> and inevitability, engendering the relentless fascination of human beings – are the hallmarks of deep time, too. I argue that the Shuck embodies this conjunction, and we can see evidence of this in the shape that he takes. He is no ethereal spectre after all; he is not pearlescent mist, but pitch black. He stinks of sulphur – a mineral from deep within the Earth; emitted by rotting vegetation in the wetlands as hydrogen sulphide gas<sup>43</sup>. Although encounters with him are momentary, as a character of folklore he is truly ancient – a hellish, rather than heavenly beast, come up from below. He is not smooth, but textured with a thick coat of matted, shaggy hair, in which multiple, conflicting stories and tales get tangled up. In all these respects, the Shuck represents a peculiarly East Anglian, tentacular, chthonic critter, bringing forth the uncanny power of the composted peat that lies beneath the surface of East Norfolk<sup>44</sup>.

But for the Shuck to be a chthonic one in the full sense of the term implied by Haraway, he needs to “demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters” and, moreover, “consequences”. Haraway’s words here mirror the point made by Richard Irvine, who insists that deep time is a feature of phenomenal experience, rather than simply an abstract concern of the academic sciences<sup>45</sup>. Chthonic ones are the monstrous manifestations of deep, geological (or pedological) temporalities, that have clear and pressing effects upon human lives. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that the Shuck’s preferred haunts are in the wide, flat, marshy coastlines, wet woods, and river valleys of East Anglia. The geology here is chalk and clay; low-lying and easily eroded, but ancient – reaching back millions of years. The rate of erosion is exacerbated by the fact that the land is gradually sinking, as the crust rebounds from the melting of glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age<sup>46</sup>. As such, the coastline is littered with the memories of drowned villages and devastating floods, while inland trackless fens and alder swamp have swallowed up many lonely travellers<sup>47</sup>. The Broads – a network of shallow lakes, long thought to be carved out by rivers until the ground-breaking research of botanist Joyce Lambert in the 1950s – are actually the remains of

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<sup>42</sup> Holloway and Kneale, “Locating Haunting,” 300.

<sup>43</sup> Pockets of escaping marsh gas are known to spontaneously ignite, creating eerie lights over the reeds – associated with another kind of spirit, known as Will o’ the Wisps, or the Lantern Man, who would lure nighttime travelers off the path and drown them.

<sup>44</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 57.

<sup>45</sup> Irvine, “Deep Time,” 164.

<sup>46</sup> Moss, *The Broads*, 20–21.

<sup>47</sup> Williamson, *The Norfolk Broads*, 15.

medieval peat diggings that were inundated by the rising seas<sup>48</sup>. Much of the surface geology of East Anglia, therefore, has been laid down during the Holocene, although its chalky bedrock is far older, having precipitated out of a Cretaceous ocean. As we move through the Anthropocene, that sea's present-day successor may soon reclaim its old haunts.

Local history, and local futures in East Anglia – in a time of rising, stormier seas – are pock-marked with catastrophic loss, that cannot be separated from geological processes<sup>49</sup>.

Moments of human tragedy – such as the disastrous 1953 floods – are underlain by the material accretions of earthy substances, taking place over deep timescales. The Shuck haunts these precarious coastlines and marshes, this “unsettled and unsettling terrain”<sup>50</sup>, giving shape to the palpable sense of risk that resides in such places; a sense of risk that is directly consequent upon various tangled pasts – the geological, the pedological, and the mythological.

Julie Cruikshank explores how the oral history of the Tlingit peoples of Alaska treats glaciers as social spaces, narrating how landmarks, people, and clans came to be the way they are today<sup>51</sup>. As Cruikshank recounts “Raven, the trickster and world-maker, left evidence of his travels in geographical features he transformed. Raven once strategically disappeared down the blow-hole of a whale and spent the winter feasting comfortably on the finest blubber, eventually piloting his dying host ashore to the mouth of the Alsek River, where it remains an island that resembles a beached whale. At Mount Fairweather (Tsalx̄aan), Raven slashed one side of that mountain where Echo had offended him”<sup>52</sup>. Oral histories of this kind record the unfolding of past geological processes, containing information about the changes visited on the coastlands and mountains during the Little Ice Age<sup>53</sup>. As glaciers receded as the climate warmed, indigenous peoples travelled into the new lands that opened up, bringing their

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<sup>48</sup> Lambert and et. al, *Making of the Broadlands: A Reconsideration of Their Origin in the Light of New Evidence*.

<sup>49</sup> The Environment Agency, “Broadland Rivers Catchment Flood Management Plan.”

<sup>50</sup> Saltmarsh, “Haunting Concepts in Social Research,” 545.

<sup>51</sup> Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination*.

<sup>52</sup> Cruikshank, “Glaciers and Climate Change,” 380; de Laguna, *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit.*, 84,93.

<sup>53</sup> *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination*, 27–29.

stories with them<sup>54</sup>. Narrative, and the activity of mythic beings recorded in narrative, is inextricably linked to both the social world of relationships, and the unfolding physical realities of glaciers, mountains, and global oscillations in temperature over millennia.

While encounters with the Shuck do not represent a detailed oral history of the kind recorded by the Tlingit, I would nonetheless argue they represent a way in which the geological character of the East Anglian landscape is framed as social. As Cruikshank points out, treating the landscape as a social space is not alien to European history. She refers to the drawing of swords and the use of crucifixes in an attempt to arrest the expansion of glaciers in France during the Little Ice Age – once again, we see the opposition of the Church to the monstrous, chthonic power of earth systems<sup>55</sup>. Like the moraines of Chamonix, the flats of East Anglia can become treacherous when the conditions are right (or wrong); it is during fierce storms or at night, or under cover of mist, the Shuck walks abroad, and when the geology of East Anglia bears its teeth. While Lindow makes a link between encounters with trolls, environmental stimuli and personal duress, the Shuck indicates how encounters with preternatural beings can reflect a far deeper set of relations between humans and the landscape, where different pasts - root systems – weave together; foreshadowing the rupture of impending mortality.

In reframing the peats, soils, silts and bedrock of East Anglian landscape as social forces, the Shuck also embodies the consequences of our actions – whether those actions involve rashly driving your cart at a dog in the road, releasing vast amounts of carbon dioxide, building a house upon a flood plain, or foolishly heading out after dark across the mire. In the form of the Shuck, the terror of unexpected mortality, and the catastrophic eruption of deep time into human life histories, come together. It is worth noting that, despite the fact that the inevitability of death upon seeing the Shuck was insisted upon by the people in Norfolk I met while working the land, and wandering through the wet, there are occasions where an encounter with the hellhound does not portend imminent mortality. Indeed, according to some of the folk stories I was told, the Shuck can be a help – warning off travellers from dangerous roads or accompanying lone women until they are safely home. But even in these stories; the spectre of death and consequences is clear to see. The monster becomes a

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<sup>54</sup> Cruikshank, 32.

<sup>55</sup> Cruikshank, “Glaciers and Climate Change,” 390.

warning; frightening us into following the right routes through an unpredictable, shifty landscape.

Shuck embodies a further binary – the profoundly limited, morally-infused temporality of human lives and deaths on one hand, and the deep, pitiless, and inhuman expanse of deep time on the other. This coming together shouldn't surprise us – although it may terrify us. For death is the portal through which we all *pass into* deep time. As Jamie Lorimer vividly describes; it is through the process of rotting that human bodies become humus – integrating with geological processes in a way that is eerie; and as a result is normally confined to the “edgelands” of normative modernity<sup>56</sup>. Over deep timescales, soils become plants – food for others – or eventually sedimented and compressed into rock. I would suggest that deep time and long-term processes are therefore not always inimical to an appreciation of the radical state of “rupture” entailed by the Holocene-Anthropocene boundary. The creeping spectre of our own mortality is the very thing that allows for us to enter timescales beyond that of a single human lifespan, and appreciate a broader set of consequences to our own actions. We fear, we die, we rot, and eventually, we rock. Rupture and deep time are part and parcel of the same phenomenon – indeed, rupture is how deep time is injected into the more familiar stream of historical events. Being confronted with the prospect of the sudden death of ourselves or a loved one, or the body of a mysteriously mutilated deer, is a jarring reminder of the limits of human experience and the prospect of radical, surprising change - a sudden, unseasonable weather event, a flower blooming early, or the rising seas of the Norfolk coast all confront us with the same possibility. Death, after all, is the ultimate moment of rupture for each of us. After that, as our consciousness departs onto an uncertain road (into oblivion, eternity, or the afterlife – I don't know), our body runs down to soil, water and gas – the stuff of peat, silt, earth and atmosphere: and the media in which deep time is inscribed. Nor do our inevitable deaths remain at a remove from our awareness until they occur; the knowledge of our impending ends haunt each of us constantly, stalking our steps, and making themselves particularly visible in landscapes of a certain kind, reminding us of the profound consequences of our choices, and the responsibilities that come with them. Death is itself immortal; there is ultimately no escape from its unpredictable grasp.

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<sup>56</sup> Lorimer, “Rot”; Roberts and Farley, *Edgelands*.

Rather than blunting these sudden, lethal ruptures, pervasive anticipation of them can be a way in which people attempt to make sense of their scale and finality. Ghosts like the Shuck - who warn us of impending disaster, their uncertain presence pursuing us through wild places - anticipate disaster in a way that enchants the land; something that, as Jane Bennett points out, can motivate us to engage with the world<sup>57</sup>, and feel a renewed sense of responsibility. Ignoring such haunting apparitions when they demand our attention can have dire consequences<sup>58</sup>.

The Shuck, I suggest, is one such apparition. He represents an instance where precedent and rupture come together, with neither diminishing the other. Other spectral beasts – such as the Hound of the Baskervilles – do this too. They radiate the infernal heat of deep volcanic histories; haunting granite moorland swathed in shallow-rooted grass and lichens. But the Shuck is a dog whose fur is thick with the matted vegetation of the fen, and whose bared teeth are as white as chalk. In the claw marks of the Shuck, we find those indelible inscriptions of deep time ready-made. In his glowing eyes, we see the dawn of the sun rising without us. In his sulphurous breath, we scent the rot of the fen, *and* the volcanism that made the Earth, and will one-day mark its ending. In his shaggy fur, we feel, and fear, the licking flames of the funeral pyre.

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<sup>57</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 12; also Holloway and Kneale, "Locating Haunting," 298.

<sup>58</sup> Coddington, "Spectral Geographies," 753.



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