
Editorial

Hermeneutic Theses Can Live in Haunted Houses: Calling Out the Ghosts

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Nancy J Moules

This year, we feature the PhD work of Dr. Katherine Stelfox's hermeneutic study, *The Haunting of Long-Term Care: Understanding Healthcare Aides' Experiences with Death and Dying During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. This is the third time the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* has published entire thesis work from PhD studies, including the work of Dr. John Williamson (2016) and Dr. Michael Lang (2022). Of course, many theses are worthy of publication, and most are published in various forms, primarily separate papers published across journals of varying disciplines to widely disseminate the work. In the cases of Williamson and Lang, we felt their theses were best disseminated as a continuous and connected serialization that held together the structure and spine of the work. This is also the case for Dr. Stelfox's work.

As her thesis title suggests, she took up the topic of long-term care healthcare aides' experiences with death and dying during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Stelfox made the decision to situate her interpretive findings under an overarching metaphor of a haunted house. In her accompanying editorial, she describes her intention behind this decision and why the metaphor felt integral to understanding this topic as one way to hold the findings and the ghosts behind the findings. Her thesis aptly embraces an attention to the guests in the house – the residents and the long-term healthcare aides, while keeping a vigilant and discerning eye on the ghosts that hid behind the words and stories related by the aides in her interviews with them. These ghosts represent the haunting of the edifice where the stories were housed: in the systemic issues at play in the context, structure, and administration of long-term care facilities.

Corresponding Author:
Nancy J Moules, PhD, Professor
Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary
Email: njmoules@ucalgary.ca

Metaphors are tricky things. They can be useful when a situation needs to be carried and when experiences or feelings are wordless. Etymologically, the word “metaphor” means “to carry or bear” (Etymonline, n.d.) and is often seen in hermeneutic work that needs help in carrying an interpretation into visibility.

Two senses of metaphor are at work in hermeneutics: one that signals our fundamental relationship with the world, and the other is that which is at work in language to make it possible to give expression to the nuanced character of experience...metaphor is used as a linguistic device that can express the interplay of familiar and other. (Moules et al., 2026, p. 133)

Metaphors are tools at our hands and when they work, they can help bring the exotic into a recognizable and relatable form. “Metaphors provide a view of something from a viewpoint of another thing” (Moules et al. 2004, p. 105). In making things recognizable, they also bring a sense of home or familiar.

Paradoxically, a metaphor simultaneously serves to remove us, while at the same time offering us a home in language and understanding...Metaphors perhaps offer something to grasp, something that can be pictured and understood as a place to rest the mystery of the profound, wordless, faceless experience of suffering. (Moules et al., 2004, p. 105)

Moules et al. (2026) cautioned against the overuse of metaphors, mixed metaphors, or contradicting metaphors that confuse the interpretations rather than carry them. Overused, they suggested, metaphors become “signifiers of implied shared values and points of view – fostering complacency rather than questioning” (p. 134).

“The art of using metaphors relies on creativity, fit, and discernment about when and why to use them” (Moules et al., 2026, p. 134). Stelfox’s thesis is an example where the metaphor of a haunted house holds her interpretations and enriches them. It demonstrates the fit, creativity, and discernment that is needed and it helps us call out the ghosts in her data: the people and structures that did not show up in full form, the amorphous shapes and systemic voices that held weight and power and affected the experiences described and discussed. The metaphor is big enough to truly “house” this delicate topic and all the seen and unseen, said and unsaid forces at play in the topic.

Stelfox felt compelled to approach her data with suspicion, as in the kind of hermeneutic suspicion that Ricoeur (1970) and Gadamer (1984) described, and one cannot reside in a haunted house without suspicion. Every sound, echo, movement, shadow, and texture can appear to be one thing and turn out to be something else. Suspicion is the handmaiden of taking up residence in such a house. In Stelfox’s work, she relies on gothic literature, a genre of which she is well informed and talented. Like the case with Williamson thesis, where he used the genre of hard-boiled detective novels, Stelfox pulls on her refined sensibilities about gothic literature and tradition. This is necessary for the work to “work.” A guiding (or this case, housing) metaphor cannot be randomly chosen; it must have some meaning and wisdom. It does, however, need to house its own caution or have a caution employed by the author. It would be easy to slip into allowing the metaphor to guide the interpretations and have them serve it, rather than developing the metaphor to fit and serve the

interpretations. This becomes an act of dexterity. In addition, I do not think the guiding metaphor can be decided in advance. Having been an avid fan of the novels of John Irving over the years, I recently read his latest novel and then revisited some interviews with him. In these, he stated he always knew his last sentence or how the novel ended before he started to write it. It works for him; his books are outrageously outstanding. I do not, however, think it works for research. If we start off knowing what we want to find, we cannot hear the newness in the data or that which is meant to inform us. We cannot see the monsters.

James Hillman (1979) wrote that monsters (like ghosts) are here, not just to scare us, but to warn us, disrupt us, to ask us to keep open. Richard Kearney argued for a similar point in his message in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003):

...monsters terrify and intrigue for another reason too: they defy borders. Monsters are liminal creatures who can go where we can't go. They can travel with undiplomatic immunity to those undiscovered countries from whose bourne no human travellers – only monsters – return...monsters scare the hell out of us and remind us that we don't know who we are...Without them we know not what we are. With them we are not what we know. (Kearney, 2003, p. 117)

In the case of Dr. Stelfox work, she explains that it was the interpretations that led her to the metaphor when she realized that all her data lived somewhere and had a home that increasingly appeared to be haunted by other things. The data led her to the ghosts.

For all these reasons, I invited her to keep her interpretations in this tricky and frightening home and not ask them to vacate and rent another locale. By keeping her thesis as a whole in the serialization of it, we can enter the house, watch out for the shadows, and call out some ghosts and maybe even some monsters.

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