

# **GOTHIC NATURE**

## **NEW DIRECTIONS IN ECOHORROR AND THE ECOGOTHIC**



**ISSUE TWO**

**FOUNDED BY ELIZABETH PARKER  
EDITED BY ELIZABETH PARKER AND MICHELLE POLAND**

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# GOTHIC NATURE

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## **ABOUT THIS JOURNAL**

*Gothic Nature* is a new peer-reviewed and open-access academic journal seeking to explore the latest evolutions of thought in the areas of ecohorror and the ecoGothic. It welcomes articles, reviews, interviews, and original creative pieces interrogating the darker sides of our relationship with the nonhuman world. The journal includes research from new and more revered scholars alike, working at the intersections of ecocriticism, Gothic and horror studies, and the wider environmental humanities and sciences.

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**We Live in EcoGothic Times:  
*Gothic Nature* in the Current Climate**

*Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland*

*'The story of COVID-19 is a peculiarly ecoGothic one'.*

In the year or so that has passed since the inaugural issue of *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic* a lot has changed. In what seems the blink of an eye, we now find ourselves in increasingly surreal—and Gothic—times in the midst of messily intermeshed social, political, economic, racial, and environmental turbulence. Many of the portents and warnings that have been entrenched from the outset in conversations around ‘ecohorror’ and ‘ecoGothic’ have rapidly taken frightening material form—evoking both disturbance and denial in seemingly equal measure. Consequently, the subject of interrogating and understanding the inextricable relationship between the human and the more-than-human—as well as the ‘Gothicness’ of this relationship—is becoming less niche by the day. The themes, and potentially the tools, of the ecoGothic are pushed ever more centre stage.

In Charlie Brooker’s recent Netflix mockumentary *Death to 2020*, one character muses on the past year: ‘I’d say it was a train wreck and a shitshow, but that would be unfair to trains and shit’. More, certainly, has occurred in terms of ecosocial catastrophe than we can begin to catalogue here, but the global highlight of the year, of course, is COVID-19: a phenomenon that fits all too well within the themes of this journal. The pandemic, as William Hughes persuasively argued at the swiftly organised *CoronaGothic* conference (hosted by the University of Macau in June 2020) and in a subsequent special issue of *Critical Quartley* (2020) titled ‘CoronaGothic: Cultures of the Pandemic’, is a matter of dark and global ecology—and one which fits squarely within the remit of the ecoGothic. And indeed, the story of COVID-19 is a peculiarly ecoGothic one. We wish to dwell, therefore, for a moment, on the extraordinary context in which we are publishing issue two of *Gothic Nature*.

Much has been written on the links between humankind's treatment of the environment and disease. In the past few decades, there has been a notable increase in the number of disease outbreaks that cross over from nonhuman animals to humans, such as SARS and bird influenza (Kate E. Jones et al, 2008; Katherine F. Smith et al, 2014). A key subject for ecologists in the last decade has been to question *why* this increase has occurred. Rory Gibb et al (2020) found that deforestation, agricultural expansion, and land conversion—and, importantly, attendant biodiversity loss—increases the pool of pathogens that can make the jump from nonhuman animals to humans. They found that while the increasing lack of biodiversity leads to some species going extinct, it means that others thrive—and these creatures (rats and bats, for instance) are often more likely to host potentially dangerous pathogens that can spread to humans. Their results suggest that global changes in the mode and intensity of anthropogenic land use are 'creating expanding hazardous interfaces between people, livestock, and wildlife reservoirs of zoonotic disease' (p. 398). As we now know all too well, zoonoses (diseases transmissible from vertebrate animals to humans), such as the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19, carry the risk and potential to cause global pandemics. In short, the virus was born out of an environment in which the line between human and nonhuman is *blurred*. Created in—and uncontrollably emerging out of—the shadowy borders of civilisation, the pandemic has subsequently brought to light uncomfortable truths about our relationship with Nature that have been, so far, much easier to ignore. COVID-19, we can conclude, is a direct product of a Gothic environment of our own making.

From the outset, COVID-19 has been communicated and narrativised—and can thus be interpreted—in decidedly Gothic terms. For starters, it conforms with ease to Dale Townsend's (2013) assertion that the Gothic is characterised by metaphors of *swarming*. He highlights that Gothic figures such as zombies, vampires, and viruses are consistently 'deterritorialized, mobile and ever-more ferocious' in contemporary Gothic narratives, and 'insistently swarm' (p. xlv). The virus is indeed much like a swarm: relentless, all-encompassing, ever-spreading, and pervasive. Moving indiscriminately throughout humanity across the globe, the swarm of invisible pathogens is for many terrifying, suffocating, and claustrophobic—with the newly evolved strains of the disease inviting fearful conjectures of an intelligent, invisible enemy. COVID-19 has brought, too, paranoia, which is another enduring Gothic trope. A swathe of bogus rumours and conspiracy

theories have spread, virus-like, across the world via social media. The indiscriminate spread of the disease, moreover, as it moves freely across species, as well as social and geographical borders, chimes resoundingly with the Gothic's central obsession with the traversal of boundaries. It exposes the *porosity* and trans-corporeality (Alaimo, 2010: p. 2) of our own bodies. As Darryl Jones (2020) reminds us, our very cells have walls and defences—and the success of a contagion, by definition, demands their violation. The very language used to describe the effects of COVID-19 further underlines the disintegration of boundaries. Daily death tolls and continual allusions to spectral, unseen threats thin out the line between the living and the dead.

Perhaps the most 'in-your-face-Gothic' element of all in this is the fact that COVID-19 is popularly believed to have begun with a *bat*. As with many popular tales, there is perhaps only a grain of truth in COVID-19's origin story; nonetheless, the bat has been an enduring symbol of the pandemic and it is, of course, an icon of the Gothic mode. Commonly considered dirty, fetid, monstrous, and unclean, it falls into what Lorrain McKee (2020) terms the category of our creatures we resign to the 'unloved'. Bats have long been associated in the popular imagination with infectious disease and the undead. Nick Groom (2020) contends that pandemics, pestilence, and plagues have always been a 'lightning rods for folklore and urban myths' (p. 9). He argues that the folk, and folklore, quickly found explanations for the virulence of infection through the preternatural and supernatural, most notably the vampire—a Gothic monster renowned for shapeshifting into various animal forms, markedly the bat. It is all too fitting then that our own real-life corona-vampiric mythos begins with the purported consumption of 'bat soup'. We have the uneasy sense that we have somehow *ingested* the Gothic: opening up further associations with what Jimmy Packham (2019) dubs 'vegetarian horror' (p. 78), a mode that explicitly foregrounds food politics and reveals the horror implicated in meat-eating. The pandemic has not only been a wakeup call to crack down on illicit wildlife trades and markets; it has raised uncomfortable questions that destabilise our acceptance of excessive carnivorous consumption and, to echo Packham, places the 'everyday eating practices of large swathes of humanity as a site of gory Gothic horror' (p. 81). Indeed, the pandemic increasingly serves as an uninvited catalyst which summons us to question our own Gothic natures.

In the first issue of *Gothic Nature*, Tom J. Hillard's essay 'Gothic Nature Revisited: Reflections on the Gothic of Ecocriticism' (2019) posited that the development of ecocriticism itself can be reimagined figuratively 'as if it were a horror film' (p. 21). He argues that as we interrogate the human/nonhuman relationship, we are collectively at the point in the movie where we have discovered 'the body in the basement' (p. 29)—and we are staring at it, wide-eyed and dumbstruck. One year on, if we are to continue the analogy, it is hard not to see our current lived experience specifically as an *ecohorror story*. In this vein, the pandemic—caused, in essence, by destructive anthropogenic phenomena—becomes Nature's wrath materialised, exacting a Gaia-like vengeance on the (now ironically) infecting presence of the human race. This context adds weight to the 'types' of texts and tales examined in this journal: it suggests that our array of ecohorror fictions and concurrent ecoGothic tools employed will not only grow—both in number and importance—but will increasingly resonate in the cultural moment we find ourselves within.

Overall, 2020 has served as a stark reminder of the ease with which Gothic fiction bleeds into reality. If COVID-19 is a lived story of terror, wonder, and horror—one rooted in our dysfunctional relationship with the more-than-human world—then the interrogation of 'Gothic Nature' has never been more vital. It is imperative that we seek to question, probe, and better understand the otherwise overwhelming ecosocial phenomena around us, and organise the chaos. Whether we are reading the Nature *in* Gothic, or Nature *as* Gothic, the varied literary, philosophical, ecological, geological, historical, political, and cultural discussions that sit under the umbrella 'Gothic Nature' are united in their ability to productively engage with the anxieties arising from our co-existence with the more-than-human world.

The last twelve months or so have continued to expose the fragility of academia, with the pandemic alarmingly accelerating the systematic disinvestment in the arts and humanities across the Higher Education sector. Despite the year it has been, scholars from around the globe, each affected by the crisis—some home-schooling, some un/underemployed, some adapting with lightning speed to online teaching, and some navigating the enormity of illness and loss—have come together both at the *Gothic Nature* conference in the autumn, and within this publication, to critically reflect on the ecoGothic times we are living in. We are keen to promote the tangible benefits that our small but rapidly growing community can and *do* provide through increased

interdisciplinarity and inclusivity; that is, by moving into new and fruitful areas of inquiry relating to our fears of the more-than-human world in collaboration with scholars across the environmental humanities and sciences, while ensuring that we increasingly and proactively diversify the voices included in the publications, projects, and events associated with the journal. The *Gothic Nature III* conference, held in October 2020, showed genuine interdisciplinarity and attracted public interest and engagement—leaving many of its participants with the uncomfortable takeaway that ‘ecohorror’ and ‘ecoGothic’ are increasingly lived realities, and that the monstrous topics and creatures of our many stories of the Gothic nature of Nature are gravely relevant. And so it is with the essays, reviews, and interviews collected here in the second issue of *Gothic Nature*—each reflecting, either explicitly or implicitly, the tempestuous times in which they were written. Through this journal, we continue to be passionate about our commitment to Open Access publishing and to showcasing and celebrating the scholarship of both leading names in ecohorror and ecoGothic and newer researchers alike. We have kept the scope of issue two deliberately broad in order to foreground the emerging, engaging, and sometimes surprising evolutions of scholarly inquiry into *Gothic Nature*—but all, in one way or another, have much to say about how we read the world in ecosocial crisis.

This issue is fittingly opened by Dawn Keetley, who provided the excellent keynote at the *Gothic Nature* conference in the autumn. In ‘Dislodged Anthropocentrism and Ecological Critique in Folk Horror: From “Children of the Corn” and *The Wicker Man* to “In the Tall Grass” and *Children of the Stones*’, she perceptively identifies and interrogates two forms of folk horror plots and, in doing so, significantly develops this exciting and relatively uncharted field. The first, which she dubs ‘anthropocentric folk horror’, is notable for its centring of human actors. Using Stephen King’s short story ‘Children of the Corn’ (1977) and its subsequent film adaptations (1984 and 2009), as well as by Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man* (1973), she illustrates how the plots of this dominant form of folk horror pivot on ‘the clash between rural/local/primitive and urban/global/modern human communities’. In the second, ‘stone-centric folk horror’, humans are displaced. Keetley explores this ‘folk horror without people’ in another of King’s stories ‘In the Tall Grass’ (2012) and the TV series *Children of the Stones* (1977). In these tales, agency is given to the ‘quasi-objects’ that constitute Nature—grass and rock—and narratives expand from a human scale of time to the geological. Keetley importantly draws our attention to the significance of the

folk horror genre, whether anthropocentric or stone-centric, in its unsettling ability to tell stories about the devastating human impact on the environment.

Alexandra Hauke further builds on the definition and contours of folk horror by examining the American folk horror genre in ‘The Wicked Witch in the Woods: Puritan Maternalism, Ecofeminism, and Folk Horror in Robert Eggers’ *The Witches: A New-England Folktale*’. Hauke argues that a key theme of American folk horror is its revelation of the mutual oppression of women and Nature—one that is rooted in the United States’ dark colonial history, but persists to this day. Through a perceptive analysis of *The Witches* (2015), she explores the limited possibilities of woman-, mother-, and witchhood in colonial New England. Hauke offers ‘postmaternal ecofeminism’ as a way of challenging violent and oppressive patriarchal and anthropocentric systems—providing a way to break free from the ‘horrors of past and present folk’ and inviting further critical discussions of the intersections between Gothic, folk horror, gender, and ecology.

Continuing the theme of intersectionality, Kateryna Barnes’ essay ‘Soundtrack to Settler-Colonialism: Tanya Tagaq’s Music as Creative Nonfiction Horror’ is an important and much-needed contribution to conversations around the decolonisation of ecohorror and the ecoGothic. Focusing on the work of Inuit artist and throat-singer Tanya Tagaq, Barnes deconstructs the darkness of Tagaq’s music, which includes a mixture of original work and covers of, for example, Iron Maiden’s ‘Run to the Hills’ and Nirvana’s ‘Rape Me’. She argues that Tagaq is able, through her art, to give voice to an enraged Mother Nature, who herself embodies the pain and retribution of the extractive violence of settler-colonialism. Tagaq’s music is shown to express the real-life trauma of indigenous peoples and their lands—deliberately complicating, opening up new dialogues around, and identifying overlooked voices in Margaret Atwood’s established work on our understandings of the Canadian wilderness. Drawing on critical race theory and Ernest Becker’s work on death avoidance and terror, Barnes resituates Tagaq’s music and lyrics as works of creative non-fiction. In doing so, she challenges established ideas around settler-made Canadian ‘ecohorror’—particularly the enduring theme of survival *against* the perceived hostilities of Nature—and demonstrates that the origin of horror in Inuit culture is not in Nature itself, but in the monstrous treatment of indigenous peoples and the natural world by settler-colonialism.

Christy Tidwell also invites further discussion around the remnants of ecohorror in her essay ‘The Ecohorror of Omission: Haunted Suburbs and the Forgotten Trees of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*’. Her work demonstrates the value in re-examining older texts, including some titles which may not be such ‘obvious’ choices, within the contexts of ecohorror. Here, she draws out the *elms* in ‘Elm Street’, highlighting two environmental issues which subtly inform the film: Dutch Elm disease, which destroyed millions of America’s elm trees, and mass deforestation, which paved the way for the increasing expansion of suburban life. Drawing on Bernice M. Murphy’s seminal work *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009), Tidwell explores how suburban horror can reveal human desires to control the ‘natural’ world and its forces. Focusing on the *absence* of the titular elms, while drawing out their spectral resonances in the film, Tidwell argues that it is not just Freddy Krueger that haunts this text, but the trees themselves—introducing the provocative and exciting term ‘the ecohorror of omission’.

In ‘All You Need Is Love?: Making the Selfish Choice in *The Cabin at the End of the World* (2018) and *The Migration* (2019)’, Rebecca Gibson goes on to explore our problematic—and distinctly Gothic—response to climate crisis in two apocalyptic texts. These texts are quite different in their visions of environmental disaster: Paul Tremblay’s *Cabin* depicts a family who must sacrifice one of their own in order to prevent a series of environmental disasters that will lead to the end of the world. The family in Helen Marshall’s *The Migration*, meanwhile, is threatened by a horrifying epidemic targeting teenagers, which is revealed to be a new stage of evolution engendered by a warming climate. Gibson explores in insightful detail the full range of shared and divergent reactions and emotions the families go through, from creeping climate dread to the lure of inaction to anxieties about future loss to selfishness, apathy, and denialism. While she argues that neither Tremblay nor Marshall offer any practical solutions, Gibson’s analysis of the two texts is highly relevant to our own troubling responses to real-life climate horror, and leaves its readers with much to think about.

The final three articles of issue two invite you to dive into the deep dark blue. We received a wealth of submissions around ocean Gothic to both the conference and the journal; it seems that as awareness grows of our ever more polluted and cluttered seas, there is thriving interest and interrogation into the dark fictions around our watery worlds. In the first of these essays, ‘The

Haunted Seas of British Television: Nation, Environment and Horror’, Mark Fryers examines the prolific appearance of the Gothic sea in British culture and television. He demonstrates how the symbolic power of the sea in the British consciousness as a space of imperial triumph and mastery over Nature has eroded, along with the physical coastline itself. Subsequently, these maritime environments—haunted, decaying, repressed—have become a key site of choice for British television, which itself has a long association with the supernatural, Gothic, and horror. Drawing on a number of examples, from Jonathan Miller’s *Whistle and I’ll Come to You* (1968) to Ashley Pearce’s *Remember Me* (2014), Fryers argues that these Gothic seas provide an opportunity to interrogate British myths, virtues, and values. The sea in British television, he argues, is a space of ‘both littoral and liminal terror’ and often ‘represents the binary opposite of the Imperial oceans: terror instead of triumph, confinement instead of freedom, fragility instead of strength, death instead of life and in all instances, a secure identity is displaced’. Here, Fryers provides both sharp textual analysis of British televisual nautical terror and a historiographical overview of sea horror within British culture.

In ‘Tentacles from the Depths: The Nautical Horror of D. T. Neal’s *Relict* (2013)’, Antonio Alcalá González makes the case for a new recognised subset of ecohorror that he terms ‘Nautical Horror’. Nautical horror, he argues, takes place in a watery wilderness, combining a sublime Gothic maritime background with a horrifying monstrous encounter with the nonhuman. By conducting a close reading of D. T. Neal’s novella *Relict* (2013)—in which the protagonist is trapped on an atoll of the Pacific Ocean and stalked by a giant octopus that has already devoured her three crew mates—González introduces some of the key themes of Nautical Horror, including its function to shatter our illusions of human control over the environment and undermining the perceived supremacy of human technology. The article provides a springboard for the development and theorisation of Nautical Horror and opens the door to new and exciting conversations about what has been, so far, an understudied Gothic monster: cephalopods.

Echoing some of the themes around ecofeminism in Hauke’s essay, while further demonstrating the value expressed by Tidwell in reconsidering older texts in the context of current environmental conversations, our final essay on the dark blue Gothic is Timo Thelen’s ‘Real Mermaid vs. Nuclear Power Plant: Ecofeminist Vengeance and *Ama Divers* in Japanese Horror’.



There has been a growing interest in recent years around water-dwelling eco-monsters, with notable focus on the *darker* manifestations of the often-sanitised (not to mention sexualised) figure of the mermaid.<sup>1</sup> Thelen takes as his starting point the fact that common conceptions of the mermaid are often extremely *Western* and seeks to productively broaden this conversation. Focusing in his essay specifically on Japanese folklore, Thelen argues that while there are certainly hybridised figures of watery monstrosity to be found in Japanese stories and legends, there is no obvious—or obviously celebrated—clear counterpart here to the ‘common mermaid’. Thelen posits that in fact the mermaid’s closest equivalent can be found in the real-life *ama* divers (professional free-diving women in Japan) and contends that there is much to explore in the extensive mystery and mythologies that these figures evoke. Thelen looks specifically to *ama* divers’ place in Japanese horror films, examining the common themes and tropes firmly established in the twentieth century. He uses this context to set the scene for a close analysis of the film *Mermaid Legend* (1984)—a text which diverts from the expected stereotypes in its strong environmental and feminist message, as an important, if lone siren voice of its time.

Following the articles, we are thrilled to have an extensive selection of reviews, interviews, and creative submissions (which are likely to leave readers with a substantive reading/viewing list for surviving lockdown/s!). The range of film and TV reviews include a multi-authored discussion of the eco-themes within Bong Joon-ho’s Oscar-winning film *Parasite* (2019), as well as well as a standout reading of Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019) within the context of our current times. The selection of book reviews covers both recent critical and fictional texts which relate to ecohorror and the ecoGothic, including reviews of titles such as *Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture* (2018), *Gothic Animals* (2019), and *Speculative Taxidermy* (2018), as well as reviews of story collections such as *Evil Roots* (2020) and *Taaqtumi: An Anthology of Arctic Horror Stories* (2019). We are honoured to publish two original interviews in this issue. The first is with Mi’kmaq writer and director Jeff Barnaby, who talks to Tiffany Hearsey about his latest film *Blood Quantum* (2019), which is a zombie apocalypse narrative with a progressive environmental twist. The second is with the director of *Vivarium* (2019)—possibly the eeriest watch during lockdown—Lorcan Finnegan, who answers a series of questions contributed by various members of the *Gothic Nature* community. Finally, we are delighted to close this issue with an entirely new section, which is

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<sup>1</sup> For a quick overview, see Kristen Angierski’s piece on ‘Siren Sisters’ in issue one.

devoted solely to creative submissions. Opening with an adapted version of our creative keynote from the 2019 conference from Kevan Manwaring, on interrelations between the Gothic canon and lived experiences of Nature, here readers can find an array of explorations into Gothic Nature through poetry, short stories, and creative nonfiction.

Finally, and most importantly, we wish to explicitly acknowledge our sincere gratitude to everyone who has contributed to this issue. Life in lockdown has been and continues to be troubling, disruptive, and fraught with challenges to our individual and collective mental health and wellbeing; we are humbled by the number of people who have volunteered to support the development of issue two, despite being in the midst of a global pandemic. Our thanks go to our Review Editors, Jennifer Schell and Sara Crosby, and to our Editorial Board, as well as to Michael Belcher, our Web Designer, and our newly-appointed Blog Editor, Harriet Stilley. Especial thanks, of course, go to each of the writers in this issue, who have accepted the necessity of shifting deadlines this past year with patience, understanding, and good humour, all while undoubtedly navigating their own circumstances. We are delighted to bring together different voices and divergent ideas, united in their interest in interrogating the darker side of our relationship with the more-than-human world—and hope, at least in some small way, that this issue contributes to the understanding of the ecoGothic times in which we find ourselves.

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## Dislodged Anthropocentrism and Ecological Critique in Folk Horror: From ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* to ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones*

Dawn Keetley

### ABSTRACT

The dominant form of folk horror is distinctly anthropocentric, focused on unwitting outsiders who are brutally sacrificed after they stumble into a rural, pagan community. This plot is epitomised by Stephen King’s short story ‘Children of the Corn’ (1977) and its film adaptations (1984 and 2009), as well as by Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man* (1973). There is another, less anthropocentric variant of folk horror, however. ‘Folk horror without people’ is exemplified by another of King’s stories, ‘In the Tall Grass’ (2012), written with his son Joe Hill, as well as by one of its antecedents, the TV series *Children of the Stones* (1977). The critical element of sacrifice is still present in these ‘stone-centric’ folk horror texts, but humans are thoroughly displaced from their central role. Agency and sacrifice belong instead to stone. Both of these folk horror plots, the anthropocentric and the stone-centric, serve to critique—albeit in different ways—the devastating effects humans have had on the environment.

Folk horror is notable for its centring of human actors. In his 2017 study, Adam Scovell defines folk horror through the four narrative elements of the ‘folk horror chain’: landscape, isolation, a ‘skewed’ belief system, and an often violent and sometimes supernatural culminating event that he terms the ‘happening/summoning’ (pp. 17-18). Three of these links presume a human community that has become virtually synonymous with the subgenre. Indeed, criticism on folk horror to date has located the violent conflict between ‘modern’ urban outsider and rural ‘pagan’ tribe as perhaps its most definitive characteristic. This paradigmatic plot traces its roots back to Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man* (1973), one of Scovell’s founding ‘unholy trinity’ (p. 8), and its influence is evident in Stephen King’s ‘Children of the Corn’ (1977), along with its two film

adaptations (in 1984 and 2009). Both *The Wicker Man* and ‘Children of the Corn’ illustrate the dominant, anthropocentric folk horror plot—the clash between rural/local/primitive and urban/global/modern human communities.

This essay excavates an alternative folk horror narrative that is exemplified by another of King’s stories, ‘In the Tall Grass’ (2012), written with his son Joe Hill. This story discloses what I somewhat provocatively call ‘folk horror without people’. The critical element of sacrifice is still present, but humans are displaced. If agency in the dominant anthropocentric folk horror plot is human, in ‘folk horror without people’, agency tilts drastically toward the non-human. Once the characters step into the eponymous grass in ‘In the Tall Grass’, for instance, they lose the power to control almost everything. What exerts control instead are the ‘things’, the ‘quasi-objects’, that constitute ‘nature’—the endless swaying grass and a very old rock.<sup>1</sup> Like ‘Children of the Corn’, ‘In the Tall Grass’ has its anti-anthropocentric antecedents in the canonical British folk horror tradition—in this case, the TV series *Children of the Stones* (1977). Whereas ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* tell stories about hostile *human* communities, ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* emphasise *non-human* antagonists, and their narratives expand to geological rather than human scale. They both stand as what can be called ‘stone-centric’ rather than anthropocentric stories.

All of these folk horror texts, whether anthropocentric or stone-centric, tell stories about the environment, and this essay makes the case for folk horror as an important source of ecological crisis fiction. At first glance, *The Wicker Man*, ‘Children of the Corn’, *Children of the Stones*, and ‘In the Tall Grass’ appear to show humans living ‘in nature’. Indeed, a longstanding part of the popular appeal of folk horror has been its depiction of what F. R. Leavis (1933) called the ‘organic community’. Leavis defines the organic community through an ‘animal naturalness’ that is nonetheless ‘distinctly human’, and he emphasises that its way of life reflects the ‘rhythm of the seasons’ and that its members are ‘in close touch with the sources of their sustenance in the

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<sup>1</sup> I am drawing on Jane Bennett’s (2010) description of ‘things’ as possessing what she calls ‘vitality’—the capacity ‘not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’ (p. viii). ‘Quasi-objects’ is Bruno Latour’s (1993) phrase and represents his effort to disrupt the absolute subject-object binary. For Latour, ‘quasi-objects’ are ‘social’, ‘real’, and refuse to serve merely as screens for strictly human projections (p. 55).

neighbouring soil' (pp. 87, 91). Leavis' book was very popular, reprinted in both 1950 and 1964, and it serves as part of an unrecognised genealogy of British folk horror in the late 1960s. All four of the folk horror texts I take up here, though, disclose the illusoriness of the organic community and the harmonious co-existence of human and nature. Instead, this apparently utopian co-habitation turns out to be what Eileen Crist (2016) calls a 'takeover' (p. 28). Either humans 'take over' nature, or nature takes over humans. There is only the struggle to colonise. Both anthropocentric and 'stone-centric' folk horror offer quite different versions of what this 'takeover' looks like.

### **'Children of the Corn' and anthropocentric folk horror**

In King's 'Children of the Corn', married couple Burt and Vicky are driving across Nebraska when they hit a boy who stumbles out of a corn field. Heading to the nearby town of Gatlin to get help, they discover a cult of children who worship 'He Who Walks Behind the Rows' and who ritualistically sacrifice themselves when they reach the age of nineteen. They also sacrifice those 'strangers' who are unfortunate enough to end up in Gatlin. Structured as anthropocentric folk horror, almost everything that happens in 'Children of the Corn' is determined by the 'primitive' human cult members in service of their deity. Their movement began during a drought, when the children were called to slaughter every adult in Gatlin: the children dominate the story, and the mandate of sacrifice is theirs, specifically that of their 'Seer', Isaac (p. 277). Even the children's deity may be illusory. Only Burt sees it, toward the end of the story as he is running through the corn to escape from the children. He realises that he is being guided toward the clearing that serves as the town's sacrificial site: 'hadn't that been the plan all along?' Burt thinks. 'All the time he had thought he was cutting back to the highway, hadn't he been being led to this place?' (p. 275). And then Burt sees 'something huge, bulking up to the sky . . . something green with terrible red eyes' (p. 276). The deity may be real, or Burt may simply be making his fate explicable by imagining a malign god when he is confronted with certain death. Either way, those who sacrifice and are sacrificed are unambiguously human.

Burt's ability to infer what has happened in Gatlin, as he explores the deserted town church after he and Vicky first arrive, emphasises how the 'new' religion in 'Children of the Corn' is

actually layered on top of a familiar Christian tradition. When Burt enters what used to be Grace Baptist Church, he finds not a place wiped of its Christian appurtenances but one where they have been interwoven with corn. The large portrait of Christ behind the pulpit has green hair—a ‘twining mass of early-summer corn’—forming a ‘pagan Christ’ (p. 266). The pipes in the organ are filled with dry cornhusks. And when Burt approaches the pulpit to find a Bible on the lectern, it is an unnervingly updated Old Testament, one that shifts without remark from Job 38 to corn worship—‘The Lord. He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Declare if though hast understanding’ (pp. 266-67). Burt is thus able to speculate credibly that the children killed off their parents because the corn was dying, and ‘they got the idea somehow’ that it was because ‘there was too much sinning. Not enough sacrifice’ (p. 268). Reading the signs that he finds in the church, Burt explains what birthed Gatlin’s corn cult by means of a Christian paradigm: Job’s story of disaster as a god’s punishment for sin.

The film that originated the dominant anthropocentric folk horror narrative, *The Wicker Man*, also manifests the human propensity to invoke the divine in order to manage disaster. Just as the children of Gatlin sacrifice both Vicky and Burt to propitiate He Who Walks Behind the Rows, Hardy’s film culminates with the ritual burning of Sergeant Neil Howie by islanders desperate to appease their ancient gods and renew their crops. There is still less evidence of an actual deity in *The Wicker Man* than in ‘Children of the Corn’, moreover. Indeed, Lord Summerisle reveals to Howie that his grandfather brought religion to the islanders in order to turn them into diligent labourers. The ‘best way to rouse the people from their apathy’, he had determined, ‘was to give them back their joyous old gods. And that as a result of this worship, the barren island would burgeon and bring forth fruit in great abundance’. While the islanders were revelling in their fabricated pagan rituals, Summerisle’s grandfather developed ‘new cultivars of hardy fruit’ in his laboratory, inventing nature as well as culture. Lord Summerisle insists to the sceptical Howie that the ‘pagan’ religion of Summerisle is actually very close to Christianity: both include the notion of a ‘virgin birth’, for instance. The proximity of the island’s pagan practices to Christianity is not at all surprising, since Summerisle’s grandfather no doubt crafted the ‘joyous old gods’ in ways that were familiar to him. The ‘pagan’ religions of both ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* slide into resemblance with Christianity, then, as both are revealed as systems that *humans* devise to explicate and control ‘natural’ disasters.



The dominance of humans and their gods in ‘Children of the Corn’ renders the land—the corn—as backdrop.<sup>2</sup> More than once, what at first appears to be agential action by the land is revealed to be that of the cult. After Burt and Vicky initially hit the boy with their car, for instance, King hints at the ominousness of the corn as it makes ‘a weird sound like respiration’ and ‘rustled’ (p. 252).<sup>3</sup> Once Burt investigates, however, he finds blood in the corn where the boy emerged, and he tells Vicky, ‘*Someone* cut his throat. Maybe *whoever* is watching us’ (p. 253; emphasis mine). The vague unease created by the corn thus dissolves into a clearly human ‘someone’. This idea is represented visually in Donald P. Borchers’ 2009 adaptation, in which an aerial shot late in the film shows Burt running through the corn and the corn swaying behind him as if it is animate. Within a minute, however, the camera reveals that the corn is moving because the children are chasing Burt. The corn acts in response to humans.

Indeed, in both ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*, nature matters only as it signifies within anthropocentric rituals. While corn is bountiful in ‘Children of the Corn’ and crops (notably the famous Summerisle apples) are scarce in *The Wicker Man*, the community in each narrative believes that the abundance or dearth of crops is contingent on their relationship to their gods and is open to manipulation. Ironically, despite being adored by ‘pagan’ viewers, *The Wicker Man* depicts a ‘nature’ that is artificial, almost wholly determined within human relations.<sup>4</sup> We see fruit ritually arrayed in baskets in the photographs of the May Day celebration that Howie scrutinises on the wall of The Green Man pub, for instance; the orchard Howie drives through on the way to visit Lord Summerisle is carefully laid out in rows; hedges are artfully sculpted (one of them as a phallus); and women do a fertility dance in a circle of manufactured stones—representing one of many ways in which the artificiality of the production seeps into the diegesis.<sup>5</sup> We never see nature as ‘wilderness’ in *The Wicker Man*, only as landscapes that are engineered both by science and by an invented religion—by intentional and human practices.

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<sup>2</sup> See Tenga (2016) on how the corn in Borchers’ adaptation evades human control (pp. 68-69).

<sup>3</sup> The word ‘rustle’ is important here, as Emmanuel Levinas has argued for ‘rustling’ as central to the ‘impersonal life’ that resists subjectivity, a life not confined to the human, as I discuss in ‘Tentacular Horror and the Agency of Trees’.

<sup>4</sup> See Higginbotham (2006).

<sup>5</sup> The fake stone circle erected in the Castle Kennedy Gardens is described here: <https://www.findingthewickerman.co.uk/castle-kennedy>.

The anthropocentrism of ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* is also evident in the human-centred history that underlies their rituals. Anthony Magistrale draws on references to Vietnam in King’s story—Burt was a medic in the war, for instance—to argue that the text manifests the ‘more symbolic cultural “illness” of moral guilt and spiritual taint that accompanied American war involvement’, including US ‘defoliation of the Vietnamese landscape’ (p. 64).<sup>6</sup> Both Kathleen Hunt (2020) and Patricia Oman (2012) read Fritz Kiersch’s 1984 film adaptation of *Children of the Corn* as an allegory of the US farm crisis of the early to mid-1980s. They claim that the film critiques the policies that led to this crisis—reduced government involvement in (and subsidies for) agriculture and a consequent increase in farmers’ debt, a ramping up of free market exchange, increased US exports, the 1980 grain embargo against the Soviet Union, and the massive grain surpluses after Ronald Reagan rescinded the embargo in 1982 (Hunt: pp. 174-75; Oman, p. 84). Hunt astutely argues that the ‘uniquely menacing’ and ‘endless monocropped fields’ of corn in Kiersch’s adaptation register ‘the consequences of capital-driven surplus production through the corn’s ominous excess’ (p. 180). The ‘haunting omnipotence’ of He Who Walks Behind the Rows, Hunt asserts, ‘articulates the corn’s surplus’ (p. 179). So, while Magistrale argues that the original drought and the ruined crops represent the ecological damage the US wrought in Vietnam, Hunt claims that the subsequent excess of corn figures ‘an industrialized food system centered around corn’, with its ‘hegemony of surplus cultivation’ (p. 183). In both readings, human actors are the drivers of ecological catastrophe.

*The Wicker Man* is more explicit about the human invention behind Summerisle’s religion, not least, of course, because the current Lord Summerisle’s entrepreneurial grandfather created the island’s rituals expressly to channel the potentially wayward energies of his work force. There is, however, a historical cause for the island’s barrenness that is strikingly absent from the film, just as the war in Vietnam and the intentional overproduction of monocropped corn are largely absent from the overt plot of ‘Children of the Corn’. Robin Hardy makes this cause explicit in his 1978 novelisation of his film. He establishes the narrative’s location as the West Highlands and

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Borchers amplified the connection of what happens in Gatlin to Vietnam in his 2009 adaptation: in the film’s conclusion, as Burt is fleeing through the corn, hunted by the children, he has several flashbacks to the war, misperceiving the children as enemy Vietnamese.

Hebrides, which were ravaged by the Clearances of the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries when the residents were moved off the islands and sheep were imported by ‘the Scottish lairds and the London bankers who backed them’ (p. 31). The novel takes Howie on a plane ride over the ‘barren scenic isle of Saint Ninian’s’ to the mainland of west Scotland and on to the Outer Hebrides and ‘beyond them’ to the fictional island of Summerisle (pp. 7, 32). As he flies over the Hebridean Islands, Howie sees ‘the ruined churches, the abandoned monasteries, and other evidence of the great migrations that had long since taken most of the original population to far-off Nova Scotia in Canada’ (p. 30). Howie then remembers reading an article by Karl Marx in the *New York Herald* that attributed the islands’ barrenness (which was the cause of the migrations) to the Clearances: ‘Not only the clansmen but the once plentiful trees too had fallen victim to the depredations of the sheep. The islands now were bald and barren’, the novel continues, save for the sheep and those ‘who had stayed to tend them’ (p. 31). The novel makes it clear that the Clearances, effected by those ‘Scottish lairds’ and ‘London bankers’, are the underlying cause of the ecology of the island that the original Lord Summerisle purchased. He bought a land engineered into barrenness and then, in both the novel and the film, he set about engineering it back to fertility. Two generations later, however, the current Lord Summerisle has engineered the island back to barrenness, a second ecological disaster that, like the first, is a human creation.

A portrait of his grandfather in Lord Summerisle’s manor illuminates the anthropocentrism of *The Wicker Man*’s story and its consequences for the island:



Figure 1: The portrait of the current Lord Summerisle’s grandfather in *The Wicker Man*

The first Lord Sumerisle stands in the foreground, holding a book that could be either an agronomical or a religious tome. Behind him the land looks grey and dead—a bare and withered tree and a stone that resembles a skull. Human impositions on the land, figured literally in Lord Summerisle’s dominance of the landscape, has laid waste to the island. Summerisle’s portrait depicts a human ‘takeover’ of nature (Crist, 2016: p. 28) that is of deadly proportions—whether it is the systemic nature of the Clearances or the individual entrepreneurship of one man.

The anthropocentric folk horror narratives of ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*, with their depictions of a community’s sacrificial rites and their ‘pagan’ religions, tell stories about the Anthropocene, the current geological era named for humans’ impact on the planet. Both narratives depict humans as what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) calls ‘geological agents’, as they change ‘the most basic physical processes of the earth’ (p. 206). Both narratives specifically implicate intentional human actions (both individual and collective) in ecological destruction. In *The Wicker Man*, land is rendered barren by the Clearances and by ongoing human manipulation of unnatural crops. In ‘Children of the Corn’, farming practices lead to drought, and then a new community ensures an excess of a monocropped corn. Human sacrifice in both narratives serves to sustain a worldview in which humans strive to control nature, either directly or by petitioning imaginary gods who serve their wishes. Both of these folk horror tales, in short, justify the ‘*anthropos*’ of Anthropocene and, in Matthew Adams’ (2020) words, ‘consolidate the notion of human influence on ecological systems’ (p. 2).

Both of these stories, though, are also about an *attenuated* human intention and influence. Both open themselves to what Timothy Clark (2015) calls the long ‘Earth’ scale of reading a text, an interpretive strategy that looks beyond the personal and the national to where ‘a certain impersonal ecological dynamic start[s] to become visible’ (p. 100). Both *The Wicker Man* and ‘Children of the Corn’ elucidate what is, according to Clark, one of the most important global events of the last three centuries, ‘a worldwide supplanting of local biota in favour of an imported portmanteau of profitable species: cattle, wheat, sheep, maize, sugar, coffee, eucalyptus, palm oil etc.’ (p. 101). One might add Summerisle apples. As intentional as was the introduction of, for instance, sheep during the Clearances or a monoculture of corn in the US Midwest, such actions

also brought, as Clark points out, unintended consequences, as the ‘list of genuinely significant historical agents thus soon extends itself beyond the human in a rather bewildering way’. Environmental history, Clark concludes, ‘underlines how deeply the agency of the human is far more circumscribed and saturated with illusion than one might suppose’ (p. 101). Hence the centrality of ritual sacrifice to folk horror: ritual aims to redress the vanishing human agency that pervades folk horror, even in its anthropocentric versions.

### **‘In the Tall Grass’ and the eerie rites of a rock**

Written almost four decades after ‘Children of the Corn’, Joe Hill and Stephen King’s ‘In the Tall Grass’ disrupts the anthropocentrism of King’s earlier story and its particular variant of folk horror. ‘In the Tall Grass’ culminates in sacrifice, but it is not exacted by anything human. Instead, the story represents ‘folk horror without people’—specifically, folk horror in which humans are thoroughly dislodged from the centre of both plot and ecology by the disconcerting power of the non-human. Despite the absence of the hostile community, ‘In the Tall Grass’ nonetheless inserts itself into the folk horror tradition by echoing the earlier more familiar plot of ‘Children of the Corn’. In both stories, out-of-towners driving through a midwestern state are stopped by someone who emerges from dense fields demanding their help. In ‘Children of the Corn’, a boy staggers out of the corn, but in ‘In the Tall Grass’ a seemingly boundless field of swaying, unnaturally tall grass beckons its characters, as siblings Becky and Cal, on their way to California, hear a boy calling for help. In both stories, the main characters try to help the children they encounter and are thus persuaded to stop in eerily empty locations, each of which features a deserted church. Unlike Burt in ‘Children of the Corn’, however, Becky and Cal do not enter the boarded-up church, the Black Rock of the Redeemer, which stands across from the field of grass. They plunge straight into the field and so, again unlike Burt, they never get the chance to ‘interpret’ what befalls them through a known religious parable. Indeed, the field repels all familiar, humanist stories.

Like both ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*, ‘In the Tall Grass’ drives toward a culminating sacrifice that positions the story as folk horror even as its sacrifice is not enacted by

any ‘folk’.<sup>7</sup> What demands the sacrifice of ‘In the Tall Grass’ is grass and a rock that sits alone in a clearing. Lost in the grass with his wife (Natalie) and son (Tobin) for much longer than Becky and Cal, Ross Humbolt tells Becky that ‘the stone in the center of this field’ has been here ‘since before red men hunted on the Osage Cuestas’, adding that ‘a glacier brought it here during the last Ice Age’ (p. 411).<sup>8</sup> Expressly ‘before’ men, the rock emerges out of a pre-history in which not humans but non-humans acted, including rocks and glaciers. This centring of a rock generates a plot outside of what Eileen Joy (2013) has dubbed the typical ‘human-centered, historicist frames of reference’ (p. 29)—a plot fully open to Clark’s (2015) ‘Earth’ scale of reading (p. 100). King and Hill’s story is, indeed, explicitly ‘stone-centric’. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2015) claims that stone ‘offers a stumbling block to anthropocentrism’ (p. 6). The rock of ‘In the Tall Grass’ does more, however, compelling its own form of non-anthropocentric sacrifice and thus dislodging human time, space, agency, identity, and story.

The ‘huge black rock’ at the heart of ‘In the Tall Grass’ is inscrutable. It represents one of the ‘unfamiliar shapes’ Clark (2015) claims human history and culture take on when viewed ‘on very long time scales’ (p. 101). It is ‘the size of a pickup truck’ (p. 420), and the solitary rock is clearly ‘not from Kansas’, having ‘the black, glassy quality of volcanic stone’ while lying far from any volcano (p. 421). The rock is also ‘inscribed all over with tiny dancing stick-men’ (p. 420), suggesting that some kind of community—perhaps human but perhaps not, but certainly now vanished—might have made the inscriptions. The rock is a geological formation that logically should not be where it is, and it thus raises the enigma of presence (why is it here?) as well as the enigma of absence (who or what might have put it there and etched symbols upon it?).<sup>9</sup> The rock is ‘eerie’, as Mark Fisher (2016) has defined a term often associated with folk horror. The eerie embodies what Fisher describes as ‘a *failure of absence*’ and ‘a *failure of presence*’. As he elaborates, ‘there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present

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<sup>7</sup> As Simon Bacon (2020) points out in his discussion of Vincenzo Natali’s film adaptation, *In the Tall Grass* (2019), the film changes the typical folk horror plot in that ‘it is the weirdness or occult nature of the land, and specifically objects and/or sites within it, that are the focus of malevolence’ (p. 19).

<sup>8</sup> The racist term ‘red men’, like the invocation of the Vietnam War in King’s ‘Children of the Corn’, offers a glimmer of how systemically violent human history has been.

<sup>9</sup> The difficulty of discerning whether a particular stone is inhuman or human ‘art’ (or whether it is art at all) is compounded by the fact that, as Cohen (2015) adds, ‘it does not matter if masons or geology fabricated the structure since humans and rocks have a habit of imitating each other’s work, of creating homologous spaces’ (p. 84).

where there should be something' (p. 61). The rock of 'In the Tall Grass' actually embodies both forms of eerie, each of which disturbs familiar anthropocentric stories.

In Fisher's formulation, eeriness is inextricable from the question of agency, specifically 'the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate: the agency of minerals and landscapes' (p. 11). With the enormous power it exerts over the characters, the rock of 'In the Tall Grass' certainly demands a materialist reading in which matter is not subordinate, not colonised, as in *The Wicker Man* and 'Children of the Corn'. Theories of new materialism, according to Maurizia Boscagli (2014), all present 'versions of the material as unruly: they refuse to play by the rules that define materiality as passive matter' (p. 3)—the passive matter, for example, that pervades the mise-en-scène of *The Wicker Man*. Jane Bennett's (2010) theory of the vitality of 'things' is especially useful, as it describes that 'uncanny' moment when the object refuses to stay in its place and instead becomes a 'thing' (p. 3), accruing a '*Thing-Power*' that names 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act' (p. 6). 'In the Tall Grass' reconfigures the world by depicting 'nature' not as an array of inert objects but as a world of powerful animate 'things'. The reconfigured world of this particular folk horror story, moreover, inverts the 'takeover' portrayed in *The Wicker Man* and 'Children of the Corn', enacting instead the takeover of the human by the agentic 'things' of 'nature'.

A world in which nature refuses to remain the 'object' of the exclusively human 'subject' is inherently bewildering, and so, not surprisingly, 'In the Tall Grass' plunges its characters into 'disorienting' terrain in which space and time do not hold (p. 401). Even before Cal and Becky enter the field of grass, they note how it stretches to a horizon that is 'illimitable' and that the height of the grass, 'more than six feet high this early in the season', was 'an anomaly' (p. 392). Once they are mired in the grass itself, though, Becky and Cal experience the complete disruption of known physical laws. The grass does not flatten when someone passes through it (pp. 397, 398), auguring an unsettling intransigence of the natural world—one could say, a lack of appropriate subordination—in its relation to humans. Space also refuses to conform: characters are not where their voices seem to place them, for instance. When Cal calls out to Becky, she thinks, 'he could say he wasn't moving but he was, he was getting further away all the time', and yet, when she jumps up to get her bearings, he appears close to her (p. 401). Cal has the same experience, seeing

the church and thinking that ‘in any normal world he should’ve been able to reach it by walking through the grass in a straight line’ (p. 402), but this is not a ‘normal world’ and he cannot walk in a straight line to the church: ‘reality was starting to feel much like the ground underfoot: liquid and treacherous’ (p. 402).

The world that Cal and Becky now occupy is controlled by the grass, which not only organises space and movement but also seeks to incorporate the human characters. When Ross assaults Becky, she notices how his ‘green breath’ smells ‘like a fresh-clipped lawn’ (p. 410). As she struggles with him, she thinks that she ‘didn’t want to smell the green stink of him anymore’ (p. 411). The story suggests that Ross is merging with the grass. Indeed, Cal recognises this fact earlier: ‘*The grass flows, and you flow, too. Think of it as becoming one with nature, bro*’ (p. 404). If the ‘flow’ of the grass begins the dissolution of the human and its separateness from the non-human, the rock lying in its midst completes that process. Ross’ son, Tobin, who appears to Cal after having touched the rock, tells him that it makes you ‘see’ and ‘know a lot more’, including teaching you ‘to hear the grass’. It also makes you hungry and thirsty (p. 419). The rock draws the human characters toward it; it has its own powerful propulsions, quite literally embodying Bennett’s (2010) capacity of all things to exhibit ‘trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’ (p. viii). Once Cal approaches the rock, ‘he slid forward because the stone had him, it had its own gravity, and it drew him as a magnet draws iron scrap’. The rock’s buzzing echoes in his head, as the force of the rock extinguishes his separate personhood in its version of ritual sacrifice (p. 423). As the characters merge with grass and rock, ‘In the Tall Grass’ dramatises an aspect of Bennett’s ‘thing-power’ beyond the mere animateness of things: humans are not exceptional but themselves ‘vital materiality. In other words’, Bennett continues, ‘human power is itself a kind of thing-power’ (p. 10).

As the characters in the story lose what are considered to be the properties of the human, including singular selfhood and affective bonds, and as they take on some of the properties of both rock and grass, the nature of sacrifice changes. It becomes more ‘elemental’, free of the trappings of scripture, law, prophets, and ritual—unloosed from the persistence of the human that we see in ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*. ‘*All flesh is grass*’, Becky thinks before she touches the rock. Like Ross before them, Becky and Cal become one with the grass, their flesh assimilated



with it. Like Ross and Tobin, they are driven only by hunger and thirst, and the bodies of those they once loved and held sacred—wives and babies—become fodder. As Cal says of Becky's just-born daughter, whom they have eaten, 'She's *elemental*. Becky—she *flows*' (p. 431). The 'weary pilgrim' (p. 423) comes to the rock and thereafter accepts only those sacrifices, like Becky's just-born baby, that feed and sustain.

### ***Children of the Stones* and stone-centric folk horror**

If 'Children of the Corn' advances *The Wicker Man*'s particular anthropocentric folk horror paradigm, the TV series *Children of the Stones* stands as a 'stone-centric' progenitor to 'In the Tall Grass'. Like 'In the Tall Grass', *Children of the Stones* shifts agency from people to stones. Filmed on location in Avebury, Wiltshire, in the summer of 1976, *Children of the Stones* is inseparable from the prehistoric stones that shape Avebury's landscape. The stone circle, Kennet Avenue, the Sanctuary, and West Kennet Long Barrow all feature in the drama. It is the stones in particular that impel the story once astrophysicist Adam Brake and his son Matthew arrive in 'Milbury' so that Adam can study their magnetic power. As Adam and Matt adjust to life in the village, 'within the circle' of the stones, they discover that with the exception of the most recent arrivals, almost all of the villagers are strangely 'happy'; they exhibit a mindless cheerfulness that renders them almost inhumanly identical to one another. Seeking the solution to the mystery of the unnerving 'happy people', Adam and Matt unearth a combination of geological and astronomical forces that transform the villagers first into an indistinguishable mass free of 'evil' and 'sin', and finally, when the circle is broken, into stones.

The non-human force that moulds the villagers in *Children* creates an iterative rather than a linear plot; this force is a complex interaction between the ley lines that all lead to Milbury, the stone circle, a stone dish that lies under the circle, and a collapsed supernova above the village. Together they form a 'pagan storehouse of energy' (ep. 7), which could also be understood as what Bennett (2010) calls an 'assemblage', marking how materiality is 'as much force as entity' (p. 20). Agency, she writes, is 'congregational' rather than 'atomistic' (p. 20). Actors do not act alone; rather, agency 'always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces', thus unsettling the anthropocentric notion of 'human will or

intentionality’ (p. 21). The narrative driven by the pagan assemblage of *Children of the Stones* is indeed bereft of singular and intentional actors; it is instead a story that has been repeated throughout human history and that involves an iterative cast of characters: the villagers, a priest, a man who warns of what is happening, and a man and boy who escape the circle. As in ‘In the Tall Grass’, the characters are fungible parts of a story driven explicitly by geological forces. The characters might sense this, but they cannot change it.

Time is a circle in both narratives, repeating not progressing. The poacher, Dai, who lives just outside the circle in *Children of the Stones*, is the ‘seer’, and he tells Matt that ‘something happened here in the past and it’s happening here again’ (ep. 3). Matt repeats this to his father, later in the series: ‘I’m talking about something that happened thousands of years ago. Something that keeps repeating itself’ (ep. 7). Indeed, the series ends with Matt telling his father, after they both escape the village, ‘Maybe there’s another circle besides the stone. Time. Perhaps that’s a circle too’. When Adam asks, ‘Do you mean it might all happen again one day?’, Matt replies, ‘It may already be happening—to the people inside the time trap’ (ep. 7). Just as ‘In the Tall Grass’ ends with a new group of passers-by being lured into the field, so does *Children* end with a new incarnation of the ‘priest’ driving into Milbury. In *Children of the Stones* and ‘In the Tall Grass’, time is not linear; it is, like rock itself, *stratigraphic*—one stratum, one epoch in time, layered on top of another.

The way in which events are inexorably repeated in *Children* serves, as in ‘In the Tall Grass’, to undercut human agency. On the surface, *Children of the Stones* appears to enact the typical anthropocentric folk horror plot with its powerful village ‘lord’ and ‘priest’, Hendrick (played masterfully by Iain Cuthbertson). Hendrick seems to manipulate events in the village, just as Lord Summerisle did in *The Wicker Man*. In his brief discussion of the series, Scovell (2017) claims that ‘*Hendrick is using the power of the stones, derived from its connection to a black hole, to empty the minds of his villagers*’ (p. 69; emphasis mine). Hendrick’s agency is an illusion, however. By the end of the series, it is revealed that, like every other character, Hendrick is just a replaceable element in a drama driven by the energy of the stones and the black hole. Similarly, Adam and Matt’s escape from the village at the end, apparently an act of human ingenuity, is not only part of a plot over which they have no control but was actually predicted in a painting Matt

discovered before they even arrived at Milbury. As Adam diagnoses it, the stones have removed that most essential human quality, the thing that confers agency, ‘man’s ability to think for himself’ (ep. 7). Matt and Adam are instead part of a pagan assemblage of ‘things’ that have a life beyond any individual life—indeed, beyond any human life at all.

The stones drive an impersonal plot, then: their story refuses human individuation and agency, reiteratively folding back upon itself and forging a different kind of human fused with larger non-human forces. The ritual of sacrifice in Milbury will continue—one that, as Hendrick intones, will ‘Make us at one with nature and the elements’ (ep. 5), finally turning them all to stone (ep. 7). This form of sacrifice is echoed in ‘In the Tall Grass’, in which characters dissolve and become ‘elemental’, and in which the buzzing of the rock, ‘like the electrified filament in a tungsten lamp’, becomes the buzzing in Cal’s head (p. 422). Both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* materialise what Cohen (2015) named a ‘human-lithic-world participation’ (p. 78), and in this world, sacrifice involves humans being incorporated into ‘nature’ not making offerings to it.

The determining presence of stone also changes the temporality of the narrative. Stone challenges ‘small, linear divisions of human history through its aeonic insistence’, as Cohen (2015) puts it (p. 78). Time becomes bigger. And humans become not only smaller but *different* within stone-centred geologic time. Both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children* imagine how ‘enmeshment’ with stone-being and existence in stone-time alters human interiority, including agency and affect.<sup>10</sup> There is, in short, a quite different kind of ‘takeover’ occurring in ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* than in ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man*. As in the latter, this ‘takeover’ is represented in *Children* by a painting. But unlike the portrait featured in *The Wicker Man*, with Lord Summerisle in the foreground, the painting in *Children of the Stones* is dominated by the non-human, by rocks and the beam of light. The humans in the painting are dwarfed by the landscape, and, in the camera shot itself, Adam and Matt appear only on the very edge of the frame as, respectively, a hand and part of a face.

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<sup>10</sup> With the term ‘enmeshment’, I am referring to Timothy Morton’s (2010) concept of the ‘mesh’ as a way to talk about ecology; he defines ‘mesh’ from the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting circumstances’ (p. 199).



Figure 2: The painting Matt finds in a store that predicts the plot of *Children of the Stones*

The camera repeatedly reinforces the insignificance of the human characters in *Children of the Stones*: the first shot of the first episode, for instance, is a low-angle shot of a stone. Illustrating the story itself, the figures in the painting Matt finds are indistinguishable, and the painting renders visually how their lives are organised around the geologic, non-human elements that surround them. This is a painting of a horizontally-arranged assemblage, not a vertically-structured portrait (as in *The Wicker Man*) in which a man dominates a natural background.

### **Stone-centric folk horror's alternate ecologies**

In the environmental stories told by the 'stone-centric' folk horror narratives of 'In the Tall Grass' and *Children of the Stones*, nature is not engineered in the lab or subject to the rituals of humans supplicating illusory deities. Humans do not even appear to be in control. In *Children of the Stones* and 'In the Tall Grass', things themselves demand the rituals and enforce the sacrifice. Humans are far less distinct from non-human forces than in anthropocentric folk horror. As Clark (2015) writes, the 'larger the scale the more thing-like becomes the significance of the person registered on it'. Reading the human, he continues, 'on the same level as nonhuman agency' means 'reading

people as things’ (p. 103). In these narratives, humans are not only interwoven with an agentic non-human world, they also live in a deep, geologic time that vastly overshadows human chronology. As a result, both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children* are better able to offer representations of the enormity of a changing climate than anthropocentric folk horror stories. As Cohen (2015) writes: ‘Thinking the earth in billion-year spans is utterly disorienting—and the difficulty of comprehending ecological activity over such immense durations likely underlays our inability to address climate change, to formulate the ethics of scale and Long Ecology necessary to achieve something more than the witnessing of catastrophe’ (p. 79). Our temporal frameworks need to change, in other words, so that we can grasp climate change. Both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones*, with their strong intimations of geologic time, do indeed offer stories of long-term ecological damage, stories of disorienting heat and damp and of blinding, transforming light emanating from the skies. These are stories of damage without direct, intentional human action. Humans do not do things that bring about specific and immediate effects; instead, they act in stories of much more remote and uncertain causality.

‘In the Tall Grass’ weaves its powerful grass and rock into a story of sweltering wetness and thirst that inevitably, in the twenty-first century, evokes global warming and encroaching sea levels. As characters wander into the grass and get lost, they are unsettled not only spatially but temporally, displaced into the ‘immense durations’ that Cohen (2015, p. 79) claims are necessary to make climate change thinkable. Cal notes that, in the grass, the sun seems to ‘hover almost directly overhead’ for an unnaturally long time: ‘He could feel it on his scalp and the tops of his ears, which were tender, beginning to burn’ (p. 403). The field of grass is filled with ‘swampy water’, moreover, and it is ‘hot water—not lukewarm, *hot*, as hot as bathwater’ (pp. 404-5). If the field is oppressive, encounters with the rock are burning. As Cal is drawn toward it, ‘he became aware that his flesh was burning, that his skin was boiling in the unnatural climate that existed in the immediate space right around the rock’ (p. 423). The burning climate of the field—evocative of global warming—coincides with a sacrificial logic centred on the young.

Both ‘Children of the Corn’ and *The Wicker Man* depict the sacrifice of a sinful older generation: in the former, children slaughter their parents, architects of the drought; in the latter, Howie tells the island patriarch at the end that the people will sacrifice *him* next, the designer of

the over-engineered and failed crops. ‘In the Tall Grass’, on the other hand, depicts the sacrifice not of guilty fathers but of the young and innocent; its sacrificial logic culminates in Ross’ attack on the pregnant Becky and the consumption of her dead baby. The story thus allegorises the ways in which generations of thoughtless ecological damage have bequeathed a fatally warming planet to the young. The story ends with a new group of people ready to plunge into the field—and one of them looks across it and thinks, ‘*I bet all of Kansas looked that way before the people came and spoiled it all*’ (p. 433). The land was spoiled—and now it demands a terrible sacrifice—the death, the literal consumption, of future generations.

Global warming was not as apparent when *Children of the Stones* was broadcast in 1977, but the series nonetheless reflects research that was emerging in the mid-1970s about the ‘greenhouse effect’—specifically a warming of the Earth’s atmosphere produced by chlorofluoromethanes as they disturbed both atmospheric and low-level ozone levels. These chemicals were at once depleting the high-level ozone level that protects the earth from ultra-violet rays and also elevating concentrations of low-level ozone and driving rising temperatures. Two years before *Children* was filmed, Mario Molina and F. S. Rowland (1974) published their Nobel-prize-winning research in the journal *Nature* showing that rates of fluorocarbon production were increasing and that they were definitively leading ‘to the destruction of atmospheric ozone’ (p. 810).<sup>11</sup> Amplifying the implicit connection between *Children* and the dangerous effects of ozone depletion, the series was filmed during the summer of 1976, which remains to this day a record-setting summer. As Sean Coughlan wrote for *BBC News* in 2004, ‘No one had heard of global warming then, but the records set that summer have still to be broken. In Dorset, there were 45 days without any rain and for an unbroken stretch of 14 days, southern England clocked up temperatures in excess of 32c’. According to the Central England Temperature Record, as of 2012, the maximum temperature ever recorded (since 1659) in the months of both June and July occurred in 1976, although those records routinely started getting broken in the 2010s (Walker 2019). Even with climbing temperatures in the twenty-first century, however, 1976 holds its own: the average temperature of the record-breaking summer of 2018 was only marginally hotter (15.80C) than the

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<sup>11</sup> It’s unclear whether writers Jeremy Burnham and Trevor Ray or director Peter Graham Scott knew of this research, but it is indicative of its spread that in May 1977, less than a year after *Children* was filmed, a mainstream Hollywood film, *Day of the Animals* (1977) was explicitly centred around the damaging effects of ozone-layer depletion. The film even begins by mentioning Molina and Rowland’s research.

summer of 1976 (15.77C) (Weaver, 2018). In the wake of a growing understanding of the deleterious effects of fluorocarbons and the consequent ‘greenhouse effect’, an article in the *New Scientist* in 1987 noted the extraordinarily high ozone concentrations (about four times the acceptable limit—the highest ever recorded) in the UK in the summer of 1976 (Glenny, p. 17). The summer that *Children of the Stones* was filmed, then, saw not only the production of the first ‘stone-centric’ folk horror—humans entangled with powerfully agentic natural ‘things’—but also dawning awareness of a dangerously warming Earth.

*Children* does not refer, in the narrative itself, to the dryness and heat that was no doubt a significant factor during its production, although multiple shots of the landscape around ‘Milbury’ disclose dry, yellow fields. A critical part of the narrative, though, tellingly involves an intense beam of light that links the stone dish under the circle to the black hole; the beam blinds the villagers and ultimately transforms them, first, into mindless ‘happy people’ and, second, when Matt and Adam break the circle, into stone. A beam of intense heat and light, in other words, is profoundly damaging to the people of Milbury. *Children* also raises the question of causality: where does the light come from? What causes it? The narrative foregrounds debate about the directionality of the beam; Matt and Adam at first think it comes from the black hole toward the stone circle, but Matt later claims they had it ‘backwards’ and that the energy ‘comes from here’, with the ancient stone dish as a transmitter (ep. 7). That the beam of light might come ‘from here’ suggestively implicates humans in the plot that repeatedly turns humans to stone.

With their more inchoate causality, both ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* represent a different kind of anthropogenic logic than the direct and immediately harmful human interventions represented in *The Wicker Man* and ‘Children of the Corn’. ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children* show larger geologic and planetary forces as drivers of sacrifice—folk horror ‘without people’. It is not that humans do not figure at all in these narratives, but they have a vastly attenuated and more entangled agency. When they are potentially implicated in unleashing destructive forces, the causality is not immediately apparent, the consequences are unintended. As Cohen (2015) writes, ‘Geologic scale diminishes the human’ (p. 79). As geologic scale and the attenuated and transformed ‘human’ is represented in *Children* and ‘In the Tall Grass’, it should

make us re-think the hubris that is implied in the term ‘Anthropocene’.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, I would argue that ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* conform more nearly with Adams’ (2020) suggestion that humans may not actually warrant our own geological era. Instead, we may more accurately be deemed a ‘parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity’ (pp. 1, 6), a ‘blip in the context of deep time’ (p. 6), a transition between the Holocene and whatever comes next.

There is a way to read ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* that recentres humans—by claiming that the power exerted by non-human things, by grass and stones, is actually some form of ‘revenge’ for human depredations. But this is to wrench these stories from their strangeness, their unfamiliarity, and to make them recognisably human stories: after all, to believe that nature’s efforts are directed at punishing us is to reinstate ourselves at the centre. A different way to read these narratives is precisely as diminishment of the human, a human that is sacrificed to the motiveless and illimitable power of grass and stone. We matter nothing in the face of such forces, which is why both texts present human characters as fungible. In this way, ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* answer Amitav Ghosh’s (2016) call for stories that bring ‘nonhuman forces’ back into human lives (p. 31), for stories that return the vast agentic landscape that was ‘pushed further and further into the background’ by literary realism, itself a profoundly anthropocentric literary form (p. 60). ‘In the Tall Grass’ and *Children of the Stones* are non-realistic folk horror narratives that do indeed privilege vast agentic landscapes while dislodging human characters. They are driven, as Matt from *Children* puts it, by ‘forces so powerful, they’re beyond our comprehension’ (ep. 3). Perhaps even the very idea of ‘sacrifice’ is too anthropocentric to accurately describe what these narratives do. Do the grass and the stones really care about humans enough to be said to ‘sacrifice’ them? With their depictions of the enigmatic causality and obscure motivation of non-human actors, these stone-centric folk horror plots depict worlds changing beyond human control, changing in ways that really do reveal us to be a ‘blip’, a mere parenthetical.

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<sup>12</sup> As Adams (2020) writes, the notion of humanity as a parenthesis or transition unsettles ‘the emerging Anthropocene story, a challenge to both the hubris and the hand-wringing that might lean toward anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism’ (p. 7).



## BIOGRAPHY

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**The Wicked Witch in the Woods: Puritan Maternalism, Ecofeminism, and Folk Horror in  
Robert Eggers' *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale***

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**ABSTRACT**

In this essay, I read Robert Eggers' 2015 film *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale* across ideas of maternalism, ecofeminism, and folk horror to show that the interconnected disenfranchisement of women and nature in the United States is rooted in a colonial past—one that continues to underlie contemporary socio-political structures. I argue that the American folk horror genre, in particular, calls for critical discussions of the intersections between gender and ecology. One of the genre's principal markers is the significance of landscape as a keeper of the histories of Puritan sins, wherein the damnation of witches in the seventeenth century becomes a violent symbol of the overall subordinate status of women in the patriarchal order. *The VVitch* makes clear the limited opportunities of woman-, mother-, and witchhood in colonial New England, demonstrating that a potential move from the maternal to the postmaternal, and from environmental feminisation to ecofeminism, can only be accomplished if the folk recognise their responsibilities to the world and all its inhabitants.

Like many horror films in recent years, Robert Eggers' directorial debut *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale* (2015) has left viewers and critics divided, regarding both its quality and its generic classification. In this essay, I propose a reading of the film through the lens of American notions of 'folk horror' and the ways this more recent subgenre intersects with significant tenets of ecofeminism. I set out to uncover the ways in which the historical-colonial domination of both women and nature underpins contemporary patriarchal supremacy in the United States, continuously rendering human and non-human 'Others' as inferior. I suggest that *The VVitch* offers postmaternalism and ecofeminism as potential measures to free its protagonist, Thomasin (Any

Taylor-Joy), from various cultural-political and familial expectations: as a young woman, daughter, sister, and—eventually—as a satanic witch with allegedly destructive and evil powers. Ultimately, it will become clear that the ‘folk’ in folk horror encapsulates both the struggles at the core of American folklore and, as I have argued elsewhere, ‘the fundamental fear of being folk, of being human’ (Hauke, 2020: p. 172). In this context, I will show that Thomasin’s mother Katherine (Kate Dickie)—a product of the patriarchal system of seventeenth-century New England and a marker of maternalism as the allegedly singular natural calling of any colonial woman—is in fact the central horrifying agent of the film, echoing Matilda Groves’ (2017) notion that folk horror ‘is horror of the people, stemming from folklore’ (n.p.). Thomasin’s only way out therefore is by rejecting the Puritan ideals passed on through generations and entering an alternative ‘safe space’ that is physically, psychologically, and emotionally detached from her family’s Old-World belief system. Witchhood as an extension of the natural propensities of the earth and woods, as well as a linkage to the powers of Satan, serves as a liberating measure for Thomasin. Thus, postmaternal ecofeminism is here suggested as a viable option for women to break free from the horrors of past and present folk.

### **Women, Nature, and American Folk Horror**

Folk horror, as a literary and cultural form, offers new insights into the connections between past events, structures, or practices and contemporary epistemologies. In American folk horror, the myths of discovery and the realities of colonisation—as well as the present-day repercussions of these horrors, especially for marginalised groups—constitute a recurring backdrop. These tales often hark back to actions carried out and ideologies put in place during the establishment of Puritan settlements. Many scholars have noted the substantial impact of the Puritans, Pilgrims, and the Promised Land on American national narratives. In *By Land and By Sea* (1953), for example, historian Samuel Eliot Morison observes that the ‘place of the pilgrim fathers in American history can best be stated by a paradox. Of slight importance in their own time, they are of great and increasing significance in our time, through the influence of their story on American folklore and tradition’ (p. 234). A similar paradox can be observed in the reception of these stories: while American national narratives are riddled with violent land seizures, genocides, and brutal dehumanisation systems such as slavery, much of their legacy has become inscribed in American

cultural memory as a glorious past defined by victory, justice, and perseverance. Anthropologist Margaret Mead (2000) remarks in this context that, in the U.S., the ‘assumption that men were created equal, with an equal ability to make an effort and win an earthly reward, although denied every day by experience is maintained every day by our folklore and our daydreams’ (p. 125). As such, the horrors of these colonial times were established and carried forward by the dominant folk: groups of white, male oppressors responsible for the suffering of allegedly inferior communities (such as Native Americans) and the large-scale erasure of accounts by less privileged peoples. For this reason, I consider folk horror to be a timely and valuable addition to horror literature and scholarship. The backbone of American horror has always been the forceful emergence, history, and development of the United States and its exceptional collection of founding myths. Folk horror is distinct because it foregrounds why and how practices by certain folk have translated into folklore and, therefore, an American cultural consciousness. In doing so, it reveals the horrifying influence folklore continues to have on present and future folk.

I consider folk horror to be not only a complex textual category that builds on the legacies of American horror overall, but also a cultural-political phenomenon that uncovers—largely without the need for jump-scapes or serial killers—the violence at the core of processes of American identity- and meaning-making. In this sense, folk horror also serves as a reminder of the roots of the current culture of fear in the United States (cf. Bader et al., Skoll, McCollum), making visible the ghosts of the past and the ways they cast their shadows over contemporary events. In *The Birth of the American Horror Film* (2018), Gary D. Rhodes calls this process of passing down unresolved traumata ‘spectral evidence’ and offers the most pertinent example: ‘horror as an emotion has gripped American life for centuries [...]. But no horrifying event from the colonial era looms larger than the Salem Witch Trials of 1692’ (p. 3). Rhodes’ thesis serves as fertile starting ground for my arguments about American folk horror in the context of ecofeminism and Eggers’ *The Witch*. My reading suggests that the link between colonial notions of womanhood and the natural environment is at the core of a current American condition, one still predicated on the reductive image of women as natural birthgivers, of nature as Mother Earth, and thus as categories falling victim to patriarchal discrimination and dominance. What will become clear, therefore, is how and why the settlers’ original idea about the wilderness in the New World as an evil breeding ground was carried forward and returns in folk horror narratives of the twenty-first

century, an era largely defined by practices of degradation at the core of anthropocentric and homogenocentric ecosystems.

In his seminal study *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017), Adam Scovell outlines a four-part narrative framework he calls the ‘folk horror chain’, which consists of landscape, isolation, skewed belief systems and morality, and a summoning/happening (p. 17-18). As outlined above, landscape, especially through the connection to nature’s ecologies in past and present American territories, also becomes one of the fundamental elements in American folk horror. Tom Hillard (2013) argues that the settlers’ mission to conquer the newly encountered wilderness is grounded in ‘an important imaginative symbolic structure that allowed them to “read the world” to interpret signs from God’. This idea ‘not only coloured Puritan textual representations of nature, but also prefigures key characteristics of the literary Gothic mode as it is later developed’ (p. 106). Hillard’s analysis is framed by theoretical underpinnings of the ecoGothic, which focuses on discussions of nature as ‘a more contested term [that] appears to participate in a language of estrangement rather than belonging’ (Smith and Hughes, 2013: p. 2). I argue that the process of division stemming from the colonial separation of culture from nature, and civilisation from wilderness, can be similarly found in American folk horror with regard to the divine subsumption of the environment and women. Hillard’s reading of the 1999 box office hit *The Blair Witch Project* as ‘a modern manifestation of older, widespread cultural anxieties about the natural world’ (p. 106) speaks not only to this connection between American ecology and gender questions but also to the ways in which the film can be read as a precursor to *The VVitch*. In this found footage horror movie, protagonist Heather Donahue (whose character is named after the actress) resembles the biblical Eve when she convinces her fellow male travellers to move deeper and deeper into forbidden territories only to be punished by an unseen entity. The eponymous Blair Witch, or whatever iteration of nature striking back against unwelcome intrusions is at work, is never revealed. What is clear, however, is that the film provides and plays with a view of the association of the sinister forest with the evil witch coming to haunt the explorers, carrying forward the Puritan damnation of agents of the Devil, who were thought to be almost exclusively female. This association between women and satanic powers goes back to what Elizabeth Reis (1997) calls ‘the allegedly unappeasable nature of women’ (p. 93), whereby Puritanism declared women as highly susceptible to satanic attacks of the body and soul. They



‘were in a double bind during the witchcraft episodes’ of seventeenth-century New England because ‘the representation of the vulnerable, perpetually unsatisfied, and yearning female soul, passively waiting for Christ but always open to the Devil as well, implicated corporeal women themselves’ (Reis, 1997: p. 94). There is no doubt, therefore, that if the Blair Witch exists, she must be female, and her possible snatching of Heather’s friend Josh (Joshua Leonard) one night can thus be read as both a revenge-feminist act against patriarchy and a service to the Devil’s plan to eliminate other men in order to be able to reign supreme.

Reis’ idea that, because of their biology and anatomy, female-identified humans are as much read as the principal evildoers in colonial ideologies as supernatural women also explains Heather’s downfall in the film. Her suffering can be read as punishment by the Blair Witch for bringing representatives of the patriarchy, namely Mike and Josh, to her woods to conquer them. The group’s crime of trespassing into lands they do not own for the benefit of their film project, thereby paralleling the settler imperative of discovery, is further exacerbated by the fact that Heather—a woman—serves as the leader. Her fate, very much like Thomasin’s in *The VVitch* before she becomes the eponymous protagonist, thus seems to be sealed: as long as she chooses to align herself with the patriarchal order, she does not seem to stand a chance to leave the forest alive. Had she entered into conversation with the Blair Witch and thus opened herself up to supernatural possibilities or existences, like Thomasin, Heather may have been spared further misery. What this shows is that there seems to be only one way out for these women, if not death: namely, an alignment with the Devil as a nature-bound witch, which does not constitute an opportunity for full agency but rather conditional freedom under the wings of another master. These complex connections between the nature of the land and the nature of women as victims to the rulers of heaven or hell testify to the ways in which the American landscape was, and still is, inscribed with the histories of gender injustice and environmental degradation that demand further attempts at their mutual liberation. *The Blair Witch Project* serves as a precedent of these ideas in the context of folk horror. Groves (2017) argues that ‘[a] film about witch hunts, regardless of plot and setting, does not need witchcraft to tell a story. The most important element is that the story concerns a society that believes in witchcraft’ (n.p.). Arguably, therefore, the physical presence of the Blair Witch is irrelevant; what counts is the film’s success in establishing a diegesis whose

logic and suspense depend on the characters' and viewers' engagement with the idea of the witch's existence.

It is at this point that *The Blair Witch Project* testifies to the double signification of folk horror. First, the Blair Witch is treated at once like a figment of legendary fables and a real entity haunting and chasing Heather, Mike, and Josh through the woods. Second, while the Blair Witch is also described as the central evildoer of the film by all characters, the three film students—the folk—become the uninvited intruders with a self-righteous entitlement to conquer the woods and the witch. As such, much like we will see in *The VVitch*, the film's true horror is human, alluding to the fact that, in folk horror, no supernatural presence is necessary for violent tendencies to occur. In this way, *The Blair Witch Project* as forerunner of *The VVitch* prepares the themes of Puritanism, woman- and witchhood as well as environmental exploitation in the context of American folk horror. While Eggers' film shows viewers the eponymous witch and thus seems to defy the idea of the inconsequence of her existence, this explicit portrayal can also be read as a mere manifestation of the Puritan imagination of witches, who, in 1630s New England, were very much believed to be a lived reality. This points towards the meaning of the film's title, whereby Eggers alerts viewers to the fact that, especially in colonial times, '[w]itches were integral to the cultural fabric of America' (Davies, 2013: p. 21) because of the ways they served as testaments of the very real presence of demonic horrors. It could also explain the rather stereotypical and dichotomous interpretations of this figure in *The VVitch* as haggard crone or sensual young temptress. In the former guise, she is replete with crooked nose, hairy mole, and broomstick; in the latter, she is sexualised, beautiful, and starkly reminiscent of Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood—heroines from stories known all-to-well for their 'splitting' of 'good' and 'bad' femininity. Witchhood is thus coded in these binary structures in the film, very much like Puritan womanhood overall, in which case the 'good' wife, mother, and family caretaker emerges in contrast to the 'bad' woman who rebels against these roles—who then, naturally, must be a disobedient witch. This dualistic distinction speaks to Chloé Germaine Buckley's (2019) observation that the female witch is 'a deeply ambiguous figure that proves problematic for feminism and its project to subvert or otherwise destabilise misogynist symbols' (p. 22). It also brings with it an inherent contradiction: on the one hand, motherhood is seen as natural for all women because of their so-called prescribed biological predispositions, while witchhood is unnatural in that it stands in

opposition to the Puritan mission to fulfil this role. On the other hand, female closeness to nature is what is responsible for women falling victim to the Devil and becoming witches in the first place. The idea, then, of what comes ‘naturally’ to women is subjected in either case to regulations of a patriarchal logic, whereby the woman does or does not conform and is then judged accordingly. What will become clear from my reading of *The VVitch* is that, even if the Puritan woman does everything to live up to her role, she is still subjected to judgmental gender discourses applied by the male-dominated society around her, limiting not only her opportunities for agency but also her chance at peaceful survival.

Women/witches and nature/land can be simultaneously read and interpreted at will by ‘higher’ powers—be they God, the Devil, or male Puritans. The allegedly inextricable link between these categories sets women and land off from male masters through what Mary Phillips (2016) calls ‘sets of interrelated and hierarchical dualisms, such as mind/body, reason/nature, reason/emotion, masculine/feminine or human/nature’ (p. 472). Thereby:

‘the privileging of the first terms in these dualisms expresses what can be regarded as authentically human/masculine and this is defined as superior and in opposition to the natural, physical or biological realm. Idealised masculinity qua humanity transcends this realm, while women, nature and all else that do not conform are “othered” to confirm and justify their subordination’ (2016: p. 472).

Phillips’ idea echoes the central concerns of ecofeminism, emphasising the mutual oppression of women and nature while aiming for their liberation from their essentialist alignment. Emily Carr and Christine Flanagan are among the few scholars who have examined the significance of ecofeminism in horror and the Gothic, following feminist initiatives outlining the roles of mothers, wives, and daughters, as well as the problems around gender inequality in the genre. Folk horror, however, has not yet seen comprehensive theorisations about (eco)feminism despite the genre’s clear connections to these movements. Recent American folk horror texts, such as Ryan Murphy’s and Brad Falchuk’s *American Horror Story: Cult* (2017), Jeremy Saulnier’s *Hold the Dark* (2018), or Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018), are especially invested in the theme of motherhood as it intersects, to varying degrees, with categories of gender, sexuality, and

naturalisation, calling into question the ways women are expected to conform to prescribed roles only to be demonised when their agency as mothers is undercut by the horrors of patriarchal orders. Sarah Arnold (2013) advocates ‘maternal horror cinema’ as a standout category that often ‘perpetuates an ideology of idealised motherhood’; nevertheless, she continues, ‘certain contradictions and ruptures emerge from the texts, indicating that the maternal ideal is not a stable construct’ (p. 4). Maternalism, a complex set of beliefs and discourses foregrounding—sometimes even glorifying—this ideal of women’s natural propensities for motherhood through childbearing, caring, and nurturing, is also continuously thematised and challenged in the folk horror genre, pointing towards larger questions and problematics surrounding normative, one-dimensional, and possibly outdated ideas of womanhood in and outside of horror fiction.

In this essay, I want to make the connection between ecofeminism and Puritan maternalism in *The VVitch* to uncover the ways in which the film’s protagonist, 16-year-old Thomasin, will be unable to emerge as a heroine because she is doomed from the start as both a woman and a witch. I will situate this argument within the frames of American folk horror, a subgenre grounded in landscape and clashing belief systems but wherein horror principally derives from damaging political ideologies perpetuated by human agents. Thereby, I want to show that Thomasin’s survival and liberation from the constraints of her family, if not her full freedom from patriarchy, can only be guaranteed through matricide and thus through ridding herself of her maternalist role model. While this may indicate that the mother is surprisingly depicted as Thomasin’s main adversary, the film clearly illustrates that this is only true because Katherine is herself a product of the patriarchal order of Puritanism, following learned rules, conforming to societal standards, and condemning any deviations from the sacred norm. Through the clash between Katherine’s outdated worldview and Thomasin’s understanding of the ill-fitting one-dimensionality of this system, *The VVitch* approximates not only central concerns of folk horror but also notions of postmaternalism. Alison Bartlett (2016) describes this idea through the example of a situation when the ‘daughter no longer finds “what has always been” acceptable, while the mother seems to have performed those expectations without questioning them’ (p. 487). Postmaternalism, Bartlett continues, sees ‘the need for a shift in the patriarchal legacies of a mother–daughter continuum whereby mothers model for daughters the experience of marriage and the management of men in a compulsorily heterosexual environment of unequal opportunity and male privilege’ (pp. 487-88).

It is for this reason that *The VVitch* participates in the practices of folk horror: its horrors may be depicted through the eyes of the past, introducing a society that speaks to techniques of New World oppression as well as Puritan models of femininity, masculinity, and power; however, the film's message resonates with twenty-first-century realities, wherein the horrors of androcentric and anthropocentric practices constitute mere repetitions of the past that continue to undermine both women and nature and that ecofeminism can only partially dismantle. As such, while *The VVitch* might offer only a few jump-scares and portrayals of bloody gore, I argue that its alignment with folk horror and Puritanism shows its potential as a most frightening horror film because it dips into the social, cultural, and political nightmares of the United States—both past and present.

### **Towards an Ecofeminist Reading of *The VVitch* as American Folk Horror**

*The VVitch* provides ample fertile ground for the three-part theorisation (Puritan maternalism, ecofeminism, and folk horror) I suggest in this paper. A self-proclaimed folktale set in 1630s New England, the film revolves around a family relocating to the wilderness: father William (Ralph Ineson), mother Katherine, and their five children, Thomasin, Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw), twins Mercy (Ellie Grainger) and Jonas (Lucas Dawson), and baby Samuel (Axtun Henry/Athun Conrad Dube). Cast out from their Puritan settlement, they make their new home at the edges of an uncanny forest, where their crops do not grow, their animals do not lay eggs or give milk, and their hunting traps do not catch game. Scovell (2017) observes that in the folk horror genre the landscape can function as 'a character itself' while also 'being a punishment' (p. 17). Certainly, the soil beneath the family's new farm in *The VVitch* shows implications of both, seemingly exacting active vengeance on their sinful behaviours as exploiters of lands that do not belong to them. William and Katherine, while beginning to question whether God has deserted them and is exacting punishment, remain utterly devout, expecting their offspring to take on their religious society's prescribed roles and to follow in their footsteps as good servants to the Lord above and their peers on Earth.

As the film zooms in on William's and Katherine's oldest daughter, Thomasin, it becomes clear that her attempts to live up to these expectations set in place for Puritan women are in vain regardless of her actions. A failure as a caretaker, sister, and daughter in the eyes of her mother, Thomasin becomes virtually banished from the family when they suspect that her non-conformity is rooted in her conspiracy with the Lord of Hell. This establishes a dead-end for the protagonist that speaks to Reis' (1997) idea that:

'Puritans effectively demonized the notion of active female choice. A woman was damned if she did and damned if she didn't. If her soul waited longingly for salvation in Christ, such female yearning could evoke the image of an unsatisfied woman vulnerable to Satan; if, on the contrary, a woman's soul acted assertively rather than in passive obedience, by definition it chose the Devil' (p. 94).

In this respect, it is uncertain who the movie's title refers to and whether it can or should act as an explicit signifier to any one witch the viewer encounters. Elizabeth Parker (2020) remarks in this respect that the 'title notably contains no modifiers', for viewers are confronted 'with the archetype itself, *the witch*' (pp. 179-180). It is of great importance, however, that, for her parents, Thomasin serves as that witch with the powers to enchant nature and cause the earth's infertility, for abandonment of their beliefs in God, despite their initial doubts about His protection, is unimaginable and abominable in the end. Therefore, the family's accusation of the daughter's alleged choice of an alliance with the Devil over Puritan faith serves as multifaceted commentary on the power dynamics at play during this time, carving out a hierarchy wherein Thomasin loses significance in comparison to God, despite her status as daughter and especially if she is suspected of being a traitor. As such, Thomasin falls victim to the gender ideal prescribed by Puritan social structures, whereby all individuals are ranked in a top-down manner according to their gender's worth. 'While Puritan teaching relegated women to the domestic sphere, it also valued their work as Christian labor and an important contribution to Puritan society. Usefulness was a central Puritan virtue, and mothers made themselves useful as they oversaw the increasingly isolated world of the home' (Murphy-Geiss, 2010: p. 218). This conceptualisation is starkly defined by principles now known as maternalism, a multifaceted collection of ideas that 'is premised on an assertion of the public, social importance of motherhood and the nurture and care of children'

(Stephens, 2011: p. 4). Widely discussed in the disciplines of gender studies, feminism, and ecofeminism, among others, maternalism brings with it its own controversies about the reinforcement or subversion of traditional gender roles and family models as well as the expectations of women to conform to specifically female and feminine aesthetics and characteristics. The maternal is thus often described as a natural female attribute and, consequently, a naturalised feminine trait that comes about through the alignment of women's biological predispositions and their social callings. When, in *The VVitch*, Thomasin's baby brother Samuel is mysteriously abducted from her sight one day, Katherine sees this as evidence of her daughter's worthlessness as a caretaker, surrogate mother to her siblings, and thus as a woman. Her obligations to her supposedly natural motherly and womanly propensities violated, Thomasin slips further and further away from her mother's grace and is continuously chastised for her actions. It is at this point that the film suggests that Puritan maternalism relies on a femininely-coded model of motherhood and care, an idea Janet Borgerson (2007) calls 'feminine ethics', whereby she means the 'conventional visions of a natural or an essential female-gender-based way of being in the world' (p. 481). She goes on to differentiate feminine ethics from feminist ethics, whereby the latter aims to (re)centre the problems and meanings of sexual politics as well as the subordination of marginalised groups in social and business environments through ethical awareness.

Mary Phillips (2016) adopts and adapts these ideas in her theorisation of the postmaternal 'as a way of reconceptualising relationships that does not rely on "feminine" maternal models but which stresses a "feminist" approach to connection, embodiment and emotion that is equally valued in both personal and political spheres' (p. 470). This move from the supposedly feminine maternal to the potentially feminist postmaternal constitutes the core of Thomasin's relationship with and development away from her mother, summarised by Katherine's utterance 'What is amiss on this farm? It is not natural'. Directed at both the barren landscape and her insubordinate daughter, the mother unwittingly addresses the interconnected essentialism of woman and nature as deficient entities because of their deviance from the expected norm that defines feminine ethics. Phillips identifies this idea as the central concern of ecofeminism, which 'has been developing in response to the ways in which "woman", other subordinated groups (e.g. the aged, differently abled, ethnic minorities) and "nature" are conceptually linked in Western thought, such that

processes of inferiorization have been mutually reinforcing' (p. 469). Feminist ways of reading women, their bodies, and desires as elements *in* the environment instead of attributes *of* the environment expose the Puritan project in *The VVitch* as a legitimisation of the subjugation of figures and spaces inferior to the male-controlled order of New World patriachs. Surprisingly at first, this suppression happens at the hands of Katherine, who not only resents Thomasin for her inability to perfectly copy her behaviour but also displays fits of envy that are directed at her daughter's beauty, youth, and desire to emancipate herself, which Katherine cannot or can no longer attain. The sexualisation of Thomasin's physique is otherwise reserved for her brother Caleb's longing looks at her cleavage, for even her nakedness later on in the film displays an innocence that is entirely at odds with her defamation through Katherine. When the parents consider sending the young girl away to serve another family, it is supposedly out of their interest in financial and material profit to secure the survival of their farm. While William's intentions in this respect seem more believable, Katherine's underlying wish to live a simpler life without the potential for trouble inflicted by Thomasin suggests the lengths she is willing to go to in order not to compromise her role as a 'good' Puritan woman.

At this point, accusing Thomasin of witchhood becomes not only a convenient excuse but also the only feasible explanation for her unruliness according to Puritan beliefs. As such, woman- and witchhood become reciprocal signifiers of Thomasin's lack of opportunity to live according to her desires. Jane Kamensky (1998) identifies a number of studies that have shown, on the one hand, that 'the witch was essential to the Puritan construction of womanhood, part of a dual-edged ideology that increasingly venerated female piety while clinging to elements of an older, misogynist tradition'. On the other hand, she continues, scholars 'have focused on the role of witchcraft accusations in defining and maintaining social boundaries—between village and town, rich and poor, "deviant" and "normal", men and women' (p. 28). Thomasin treads along these and other frontiers, marked interchangeably by her double identification as woman and witch while showing attributes as either that are unacceptable to her family, especially mother Katherine, who must subsequently find a (preferably supernatural) culprit for the family's misery. Buckley (2019) argues that 'the female witch continues to function as [such] a scapegoat despite the interventions of revisionist storytelling' in horror cinema (p. 28), thus feeding into processes of othering that lie at the base of folk horror as a genre that negotiates humans who mask their everyday monstrosity



through their larger-than-life commitment to the transcendental powers of God. The hypocrisy of this project, whereby allegedly evil supernatural creatures are condemned while the equally unproven metaphysicality of God is celebrated, testifies, once again, to the obsessive Puritan need for reassurance in their lifestyles, regardless of the consequences they may inflict on ‘others’.

The particular horror in *The VVitch* speaks to the fact that ‘in folk horror the word “folk” is key’ (Groves, 2017: n.p.) and points towards the need for scrutinising further the dedicated roles of gendered and, especially, feminised individuals and environments in the genre. Ruth Bienstock Anolik (2003) argues that, ‘[i]n the Gothic world, wives are frequently imprisoned by their husbands’ (p. 25), an impulse adopted by horror texts, ‘wherein the woman is [often] ignored, taken for granted or maltreated, her role as wife and mother being assumed to be all she needs’ (Wood, 1986: p. 137). Katherine appears unusually unaffected in this respect during scenes when her domineering behaviour seems to usurp or at least parallel her husband’s status as the commander of the family. Of course, while she is not physically confined to a cell, her prison is more metaphorical and consists of her lack of options, independence, and freedom to act from autonomous will. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (1980) argues that a Puritan ‘woman became a wife by virtue of her dependence, her solemnly vowed commitment to her husband. [...] One can be dependent, however, without being either servile or helpless. The skilled service of a wife included [...] the responsibilities of a deputy husband’ (p. 37). While there are ‘factors which enhanced the role of deputy husband’, she continues, there are also ‘conditions which muted its significance for colonial women’ (p. 38). Katherine strikes William across the face when she finds out he sold her silver cup, the only material remnant of the Old World she so desperately wishes to return to, after initially letting her believe Thomasin lost the beloved heirloom. She calls him a liar, screams at him because of his inability to save the family from starvation, and blames him for Caleb’s disappearance into the woods—all instances that do not leave the viewer guessing the extent of her assertiveness. ‘You cannot escape the woods’, she exclaims, alluding to the fact that the family is at the mercy of the land as a punishing agent that continuously brings about evils the family can no longer deny.

Following Katherine’s exposure of William’s failure as a father and husband, and thus of his inability to live up to Puritan manhood and masculinity, Thomasin’s continuous feelings of

exclusion and unfair treatment by the family reach a climax. In a moment of recognition of the degree of subordination she has witnessed and suffered, she identifies the culprit for her misery: the patriarch.

‘I am no witch, Father. [...] Why have you turned against me? [...] You and Mother are planned to rid the farm of me. Aye. I heard you speak of it. Is that truth? You took of Mother’s cup and let her rail at me. You confessed not till it was too late. Is that truth? [...] You are a hypocrite. [...] You took Caleb to the wood and let me take the blame of that, too. Is that truth? You let Mother be as thy master. You cannot bring the crops to yield! You cannot hunt! Is that truth? Thou canst do nothing save cut wood! And you will not hear me!’

Thomasin’s courage to speak out against her father is not a direct response to her mother’s similar breakdown in terms of the film’s chronology; however, it could be argued that the daughter’s already growing suspicions about the unjust and hypocritical dynamics underlying her status in the family see confirmation in Katherine’s exposure of William’s sins. While the mother cannot (or refuses to) save herself from her subservient position despite her momentary dissatisfaction, Thomasin realises in her rage the necessity for tearing down the ropes that bind her. What follows is a crucial conflict in the protagonist between the maternal, embodied by Katherine, and the postmaternal, an impulse surfacing in Thomasin. She understands that her imprisonment has not only been as a daughter to her father but also as a woman to another woman and, thereby, to a man who has made himself a private slave to his wife all the while speaking and acting out the word of Christ to the public world. William is henceforth painted as the Edenic Adam, who, while made by God as a commandeering leader, is ultimately seduced by the powers of his Eve, mirrored by Katherine, the cunning actuator of Original Sin. In this sense, *The VVitch* alludes to and makes use of a past as described in Genesis that is perpetuated in the film’s present by the loyal followers of these Christian beliefs. A true iteration of American folk horror at this point, which ‘develops from the contours of the central gothic idea of repetition, realized [...] through the transgenerational hauntings of the folk’s past wrongdoings’ (Hauke, 2020: p. 172), Eggers’ folktale allows for an explicit reading of the American landscape as the keeper of the histories and sins of both the United States and the world, exemplified through the Puritan’s enactment of God’s plans.

Frank McConnell (2009) has observed that '[e]ach era chooses the monster it deserves and projects: and all of them are, in their terribleness, blood brothers' (p. 20). In folk horror, monstrosity is often reserved for humanity; and in the case of *The VVitch*, while the most corrupt horrors are executed by William and Katherine in this sense, it is Thomasin who is codified as what Barbara Creed (1993) has famously called 'the monstrous-feminine', a grotesqueness that 'is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions' (p. 7) or lack thereof. When Thomasin unleashes her desperate anger to put her father in his place, William seems to identify this horrifying quality in his daughter and sees no other way but to lock her in the farm's barn, along with the family's goats and her twin siblings Mercy and Jonas, who Thomasin accuses of communicating with the goat Black Phillip, a manifestation of the Devil. While Caleb was previously kidnapped and enchanted by a beautiful witch who lured him to her cabin in the woods prior to his untimely death from a poisoned red apple—an allusion to the forbidden fruit in 'Snow White', which famously mirrors the fall of Adam and Eve in Paradise—it is the witch as a naked old hag who enters the barn that night to drink from a white goat's teat and scare the children. When the animal turns up dead and the twins have disappeared the next morning while Thomasin and Black Phillip remain alive, the viewer is left to speculate about the old witch and the Devil as murderers. William, horrified at the bloody scene before his eyes, plans to avenge his children by killing the black goat; he has to surrender to his fate, however, when he is impaled by Black Phillip's horns. Brendan C. Walsh (2020) argues that, to Puritans, 'demonic activity was [...] something to be closely inspected for divine meaning' (p. 148); hence, the father's 'execution (and the Devil's role in it) could even be read as a form of divine justice, with God punishing William through the machinations of Satan' (p. 156).

This analysis emphasises the various hierarchies of patriarchal power at play in the film as well as their interconnectedness across physical and metaphysical planes, whereby William's identity as a devoted Christian is ultimately overhauled by his sins. His initial pride no longer serves him when he exclaims his final words—'Corruption, thou art my father!'—giving himself over to the master he will meet in death, be it God or Satan. Overcome by grief and anger, Katherine is unable to recognise her husband's role in the family's downfall and hysterically clings to her understanding of Thomasin as the perpetrator. Rhodes (2018) reads such a 'willingness to

believe unbelievable evidence' in the context of seventeenth-century witchcraft as '[o]ne of colonial America's greatest traumas', as 'a vexing conundrum' (p. 3) that brings with it a long list of accusations and physical as well as psychological violence against alleged practitioners of magic. Katherine thus rails at Thomasin, actively blaming her for the horrors she has seen before exclaiming 'The Devil is in thee! [...] You reek of evil!' and physically attacking her on the ground in an attempt at strangulation. This scene constitutes Thomasin's final desperate attempt to receive her mother's mercy: she cries 'I love you!' numerous times, which first serves as testament to her tireless efforts to prove her worth as a daughter and to communicate her desire to conform but ends up as a final goodbye. Arguably an act of self-defence, Thomasin stabs Katherine uncontrollably until she falls motionless atop of her.

Anolik (2003) argues that 'the absent mother promotes the Gothic narrative' (p. 27). Similarly, in *The VVitch*, the erasure of the mother figure is a necessity for the text to unfold its full potential as folk horror with ecofeminist and postmaternalist themes. Anolik's idea bears two meanings in the film: first, a more literal reading of her thesis concerns Thomasin's inability to act as caretaker of her siblings, whereby she becomes herself a signifier of the absent mother and of maternalist failure. Second, Thomasin's arguably unplanned yet ultimately necessary slaughter of her mother pushes Anolik's proposition to the extreme, because, as I want to argue, the daughter's active removal of Katherine from the scene emerges as the central act of defiance and thus the main event in the film. Only when Thomasin rids herself through matricide of her ascribed role model and thus of the maternalist fantasy of Puritan womanhood embodied in Katherine can she see clearly what is at stake for the rest of her life. With the colonialist mindset and patriarchal structures that dominated her family now gone, Thomasin asks Black Phillip to speak to her and agrees to sign herself over to him in exchange for a delicious life full of butter and pretty dresses. When the goat commands her to remove her clothes, the girl obeys and presents her naked body as a kind of *tabula rasa* signalling the beginning of her new life. Partially covered in Katherine's blood, Thomasin is marked by the corporeal traces of the mother as a spawn of patriarchy and carries with her not only the essence of the woman who created her but also a visible reminder of her wish to separate from the mother. While Thomasin moves on with this symbol on her chest to meet the Devil in his chambers, Katherine's dead body remains on plantation ground, the rest of her blood seeping into the soil, nourishing the earth: a seemingly ritualistic sacrifice of the

matriarch demanded by the witches—arguably as agents of the land as punisher—to restore natural balance and equality. The final horror of her life eliminated, Thomasin can now witness Black Phillip’s transformation from goat to human, from a brutal animalistic entity to a figure ‘garbed in the attire of an early modern English gentleman’ (Walsh, 2020: p. 156). Circling the naked girl like a lustful predator, the Devil guides Thomasin’s hand to sign her name beneath their pact. As they venture into the woods together after Black Phillip’s goat form has resurfaced, the protagonist is allowed to join a coven of witches dancing around a fire while chanting in wild ecstasy. Thomasin laughs wickedly as she is lifted into the sky among her sisters in the film’s last scene, concluding not only an ambivalent final act, but also an altogether ambiguous narrative.

While scholars such as Buckley and Walsh have offered readings of *The VVitch* as a folk horror film, even more studies have commented on the film’s various engagements of feminist themes—or lack thereof. A superficial glance at Thomasin’s alleged liberation post her family’s collective death might lead to an assumption of feminist agency on behalf of the protagonist; similarly, her ultimate transformation into a witch can be read according to ideas of witches as alleged feminist agents or activists. However, as Thomasin’s decision to follow Black Philip makes clear, her fate is determined by the exchange of one patriarchal system for another, a plot point alluding to ‘the classic Gothic novel’, which, according to Donna Heiland (2004), tells the ‘melodramatic story of an innocent young woman trapped by one man and rescued by another’ (p. 1). While the death of the family patriarch marks the beginning of the film’s violent end, the fact that Thomasin’s new master murders her previous guardian speaks to the Devil’s desire for supremacy: William’s elimination must thus take place through Black Phillip, whether a heaven-sent executioner of God or not, establishing his agency as legitimisation of his powers before Thomasin and the other witches. As such, the protagonist is, once more, subjected to an ideology rooted in the binary opposition of male domination and female compliance. However, I want to argue that the fundamental difference between her father’s rule and the Devil’s ways lies not only in the like-minded sisterhood of witches that awaits her this time but also, and particularly, in Thomasin’s first and only opportunity to autonomously choose the latter as her future—even if a lack of other options guides this resolution. Her agency, and with it the film’s feminist leeway, must remain limited, because in seventeenth-century New England, no woman could fully escape Puritan entrapment. As Matilda Joslyn Gage (1893) argues, ‘[w]hen for “witches” we read

“women”, we gain fuller comprehension of the cruelties inflicted by the church upon this portion of humanity’ (p. 291). Similarly, reading ‘women’ for ‘witches’ reveals a reciprocity of societal oppression that can only partially be overcome in *The Witch* through the strategic essentialisms of ecofeminism.

By leaving behind the rotting ecologies of her family’s farm and therewith the maternalist assumption of her natural duties, Thomasin defies the essentialist alignment of woman and nature rooted in Puritan mother- and womanhood. At the same time, however, she confirms the Puritan belief that, by rebelling against these propensities, she must be inherently evil, and thus aligned with the Devil and inscribed in nature as the wicked witch of the woods, an ‘*antichristian space*’ (Parker, 2020: p. 182). However, Thomasin’s metamorphosis into a witch rather makes possible the desires she already nurtured as a human girl—to be heard, to be seen, to act in ways that remain uncontrolled by society, and to make up her mind about the world and the ideologies it offers. The film can thus be said to call for a figuration of the postmaternal according to Bartlett (2016): ‘It articulates the daughter’s insistence that something is wrong and it cannot continue. It insists that the daughter does not want the same as the mother, and yet she still wants the same mother. She may even want maternity, but the maternal can never be the same’ (p. 488). Thomasin’s desperate cry for Katherine’s love prior to the mother’s death testifies to this idea and allows the film to play on conflicting affects of grief and liberation on the daughter’s part that remain open for redemption after the film’s close. These emotional responses are rooted in Thomasin’s postmaternal impulse, one Julie Stephens (2011) calls ‘a fantasy of self-sufficiency’ that ‘can be seen as a kind of unmothering of society as a whole’ (p. 7). This is confirmed by the community of seemingly childless witches at the end of the film, who can, perhaps, act as each other’s caretakers in the new order. Of course, this is only possible if the events of the film’s last scenes are real in the sense that they are part of the action and not figments of Thomasin’s intradiegetic dream world: the protagonist taunts her younger sister Mercy<sup>1</sup> earlier in the film with the idea that, ‘[w]hen I sleep,

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<sup>1</sup> There is much debate among scholars and movie critics as to the destinies of Mercy and Jonas post their disappearances. The most straightforward explanation is that the witch snatched them in a manner similar to baby Samuel in order for the coven to be able to practice their ultimate ritual: covered in blood as they dance and chant around the fire before rising into the air in the final scene, this indeed suggests that the children’s bodies were used to prepare flying ointment very much like earlier in the film. Due to the fact that the twins serve as the final reminder of the protagonist’s failure in the eyes of her family in terms of feminine and maternal expectations, they have to die in order for Thomasin to break free from her constraints and find new kinship in the coven. This supports the idea that all proponents of the maternalist system must be eliminated before a new order can emerge. As such, besides mother

my spirit slips away from me body and dances naked with the Devil. That's how I signed his book'. An arguable act of foreshadowing, the viewer later sees Thomasin asleep from grief and exhaustion after the death of Katherine and before she meets her fate with Black Phillip, teasing out the possibility of the end as mere wishful thinking on part of the protagonist.

In any case, this is one of the main reasons *The VVitch* cannot emerge as a wholly feminist tale but is instead a narrative whose spectral presence of the colonial past of Puritan womanhood imbued in the American landscape calls for the critical efforts ecofeminism can provide. Thomasin does not explicitly devalue Katherine's ideals, but neither can she copy them as they are; she is caught in a disruptive space where domestic reality and grotesque fantasy cannot coexist without a dismantling of the dualistic imagination of woman/emotion/nature and man/reason/culture. While Thomasin's family clearly ascribes to her the problematics of the former, Katherine's efforts to act as William's deputy husband seem to move her towards the latter on occasion, despite the fact that her place must, unsurprisingly, remain in the private sphere. As such, domesticity is celebrated as the only successful reality of Puritan womanhood, because it must come naturally to all daughters and wives, which contradicts the fact that Thomasin's exiling by her family is equally justified by reasons of the nature of women, only this time as evil witches. From this follows a kind of hypocrisy that not only differentiates between 'good' and 'bad' women but also between 'right' and 'wrong' kinds of nature. The Puritan anxieties of God's abandonment and the Devil's seduction collide in this respect as *The VVitch* refracts the fear of divine judgment following Eve's damnation for her devilish appetites onto the film's seventeenth-century present, where Thomasin and her family supposedly await the same threats. Gretchen A. Adams (2008) sees the contexts of the histories of witchhood and the ensuing Salem Witch Trials in the 1690s as a clear 'dividing

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Katherine's tragic yet utilitarian death, it is imperative that Jonas and Mercy—respective successors of the family's patriarch and maternalist role model—must be sacrificed because they threaten the possibility for ecofeminist and postmaternalist change. In a convincing blog post on the meanings of the seven deadly sins in *The VVitch*, it has been suggested that Mercy serves as a representative of envy because she 'badmouths Thomasin at any given moment and acts incredibly hostile towards her. She sews the thoughts of witches and devils and is the first one to blame the eldest' (Maingal). This echoes not only my earlier argument about Katherine, who recognises Thomasin's desire for rebellion and begrudges the fact that she never seized her own moment for escape from her Puritan prison, but also underlines the irony of Mercy's own association with Black Phillip. If the Devil serves as the witches' master in the film, then his enchanted whispers to the younger sister, especially, serve as yet another clever ploy to drive a wedge between Thomasin and her family, pushing her to emancipate herself by cutting ties in violent ways. In line with my theorisation of folk horror, Mercy's blatant animosity towards Thomasin speaks to the fact that the human agents function as the real antagonists in the film, their psychological cruelties relativising Satan's and the witches' otherwise abhorrent deeds.

line between the colonized past and national present [that] emerged from deliberate efforts to create a national mythology', whereby 'the Puritan past eventually came to underpin a broader national identity' (p. 39). This idea is echoed by Rhodes (2018) in that, '[o]ver three hundred years later, the events [of the Trials] still captivate us' (p. 3) and with them the concurrent oppression of women and the fear of their powers.

As such, if the story of Thomasin and her family can serve as both a seventeenth-century imprint of a biblical past and as an iteration of the American colonial past itself, then it comes as no surprise that its projected fears around national unity, its rules about public and domestic terrains, and, especially, its understandings of male/masculine and female/feminine obligations still have a hold over quintessential debates in the contemporary United States. The seeming urgency of reading *The VVitch* as a folk horror film, whereby past-on-present spectrality is embedded in the genre's fabric, testifies to this idea and further speaks to its success as a period piece for which, according to Walsh (2020), 'Robert Eggers has used fantastical source material to achieve a certain historical authenticity' (p. 144). If *The VVitch* is a *New-England Folktale* and American folk horror, in particular, negotiates the controversies of national American conditions, then the film succeeds in offering commentary on the violent histories of disenfranchisement of women and nature in the U.S., defined by the realities, fantasies, and repercussions of witch hysteria and ecophobia.

Lastly, because maternalism and the allegedly natural predispositions of womanhood continue to legitimise the subjugation of women's rights, resistance movements in the form of ecofeminism and postmaternalism must carry on disassembling paradigms of privilege that have been instrumental in the establishment of patriarchal orders in the United States and beyond. In this sense, if the witch cannot be created as a straightforward feminist figure in *The VVitch*, or ever, it is because the complex histories of witchcraft cast a dark shadow over the possibilities of female/feminine redemption, both in reality and fiction. Folk horror must thus allow for the diverse efforts of the many strands of feminism to serve as correctives to the gendered nature of the monstrous-feminine; until then, as Eggers' film demonstrates, any disruption of established social norms, such as prescribed binary and top-to-bottom structures of power dynamics and gender restrictions, will lead the folk into an abyss whence they must first examine themselves, their



humanity, and their obligations to the world. ‘What went we out into this wilderness to find?’ asks William at the beginning of *The VVitch*, and the film answers: the haunting, dark ecologies of women and the American land. ‘This wilderness will not consume us’, he continues. And yet, it already has.

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**Alexandra Hauke** is currently a lecturer in American Studies at the University of Passau, Germany, where her research and teaching focus on indigenous studies, folk horror, ecofeminism, digital cultures, and American popular culture. She has written on law and legal cultures in Native American detective fiction, American ecofeminist gothic fiction, blackness in horror film, utopian idealism in dystopian literature, and self-branding on YouTube, and has co-edited essay collections on Native American survivance, twenty-first-century Canadian literatures and politics as well as the post-truth era in the United States.

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## Soundtrack to Settler-Colonialism: Tanya Tagaq's Music as Creative Nonfiction Horror

*Kateryna Barnes*

### ABSTRACT

Throughout her discography, avant-garde musician Tanya Tagaq modifies traditional Inuit throat singing with graphic and haunting imagery familiar to horror culture. In Tagaq's music, the seemingly supernatural is natural (as in the natural world). Evoking the grotesque and uncanny of the genre through nonverbal vocalisations like growls, gasps and shrieks or the few lyrics she does use, she gives voice to the nonhuman natural world. Mother Earth is sentient and she has a voice through Tagaq, and she is exacting revenge for the violence on her body and her children by reacting to climate change violently or by raising the alarm of the harms done by 'speaking' out. Tagaq brings ecohorror to her music, articulating clearly that the monstrous is not Nature-in-itself, but settler-colonial humanity.

Tagaq's music conveys the real-life trauma of settler-colonialism on Indigenous peoples and the land: genocide, missing and murdered Indigenous women, residential schools,<sup>1</sup> and ecological destruction. Tagaq's performances echo Margaret Atwood's (2013) sentiment that, 'White man's ways [...] are at best useless and at worst deadly' (p. 115). The motifs used by Tagaq symbolise 'la survivance'<sup>2</sup> of Indigenous peoples, Inuit culture notably; however, unlike Atwood's explanation that the fight for survival is against Canadian Nature, Tagaq believes the fight to survive is against the industry and society created by settler-colonialism.

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<sup>1</sup> The residential school system was a genocidal Canadian government policy from the late 1800s to 1996, enacted by both the government and Christian church organizations. An estimated 150,000 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families. The purpose of the schools was to force assimilation into White Canadian culture and to eliminate Indigenous languages and cultures. More information on the abuses of this system can be found at The University of British Columbia's Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at [irshdc.ubc.ca](http://irshdc.ubc.ca).

<sup>2</sup> Defined by Gerald Vizenor (1999) as 'an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories' (vii).

In this paper I will analyse Tagaq's music through close reading informed by theory about death-avoidance and terror as detailed in Ernest Becker's landmark book, *The Denial of Death* (1973), as well as critical race theory paired with the politics of pain, horror, the uncanny, and disgust. This theoretical framework will establish Tagaq's musical work as creative nonfiction horror with special attention to the uncanny and grotesque affects of settler-colonialism. The analysis will situate her work into horror media by contrasting it with Margaret Atwood's established literary criticism, as well as accepted horror motifs and themes, specifically horror of the body, the North, and monsters. The value of situating Tagaq's music as creative nonfiction horror media is an act of decolonisation as the objects of terror and fear are not that of traditional, settler-made Canadian horror media. It is not the natural world that is horrific; it is the continued extractive violence of settler-colonialism on the natural world and Indigenous peoples. In particular, the analysis will focus on her songs 'Retribution' and 'Cold', as well as two covers that she performs: Iron Maiden's 'Run to the Hills' and Nirvana's 'Rape Me'.

When speaking about the cultural value of horror media, author Gabriela Damian Miravete (2018) aptly concluded that 'a good horror story reminds you that the sun may not rise', and that 'you can't run away from reality' (n.pg.). The reality that Damian Miravete speaks of is the ultimate fate: death. Eventually, mortality must be faced by each person, whether we choose it or not, and humans carry this existential knowledge. The acknowledgement of impending existential extinguishment conflicts with the animalistic self-preservation instinct, the biological imperative to keep living. Described as 'terror' in his Pulitzer-prize winning book *The Denial of Death* (1973), cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker describes Western society's fear of death this way 'in order to convey how all-consuming it is when we look it full in the face' (p. 15). This terror is a thematic mainstay of horror culture and media, playing on the settler-colonial fear that nothing is quite as terrifying as facing a gruesome and grotesque annihilation, even more so when the end of life is imminent. It is the highest point of tension in horror media—a change in music signals the oncoming fight-flight-freeze choice of the prey. Survival is not guaranteed. In the words of author and horror laureate Stephen King (1981), 'we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones'

(p. 13). The creation and consumption of horror media is an attempt to manage the fear that stems from the reality of death.

A residential school survivor, avant-garde musician Tanya Tagaq left home in Iqaluktuutiaq (Cambridge Bay, Nunavut) for art school in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Homesick, Tagaq started to teach herself katajjaq,<sup>3</sup> a traditional, a capella musical competition where two women facing each other attempt to outlast the other, making sounds like sharp inhales and exhales, guttural growls, and soft wordless whispers, reminiscent of the sounds of the natural world (Nattiez, 2016: n.pg). Throughout her discography, Tagaq modifies traditional katajjaq with graphic and haunting imagery familiar to horror culture. Her music is filled with changing rhythms, like an increasing heart-rate with ratcheting tension. There are growls, gasps, shrieks, screams that vocalise rage, pain, and fear without using words. In particular, Tagaq's version is a solo act, an absence of harmony and collaboration. Whether intentional or not, it symbolises a missing presence—another voice from another woman. To perform and create music without that other voice is a political statement. While it may have stemmed only incidentally from Tagaq's solitary experience in Halifax as a lone Inuk woman, it productively allows for a creative freedom for Tagaq to stimulate political discourse on humanity's relationship with the natural world, as well as that of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada by provoking the question: where is the other woman?

Further to the horror motifs, Tagaq gives voice to Sila,<sup>4</sup> the natural world as understood by the Inuit. As explained by Cherokee writer Thomas King (2012), the environment or Nature—more colloquially referred to as 'land' in English<sup>5</sup>—is a defining concept in Indigenous cultures:

'Land contains the languages, the stories, the stories and the histories of a people. It provides water, air, shelter and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and the

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<sup>3</sup> Inuit throat singing.

<sup>4</sup> Translates as 'climate or environment' in Inuktitut. Inuktitut Tusaalanga. *Inuktitut Tusaalanga glossary*. Inuit literature scholar Keavy Martin notes that a secondary translation exists: wisdom. Martin, Keavy. (2012) *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature* (p. 5). Generally, Sila is gendered as female.

<sup>5</sup> Many Indigenous cultures have words in their own languages for this concept. For example, Anishnaabemowin has 'Aki'; Nehiyaw has 'askîy'; Kanien'kehá:ka has Onkwèhonwè:ne (more directly translated as 'homeland').



songs. And land is home... For non-Natives, land is primarily a commodity, something that has value for what you can take from it' (p. 218).

In Tagaq's music, this understanding is reflected and furthered in her vocal performances in which she gives voice to Sila, the second woman 'missing' from Tagaq's katajjaq. Sila is sentient and she is exacting revenge for the violence inflicted on her body by reacting violently to climate change<sup>6</sup> and her children (plants, animals, the Inuit) who have suffered at the hands of settler-colonialism by calling out the harm. Industrialised human society driven by settler-colonialism is the target of Sila's vengeance. It is not the horror of the body itself so much as the horror *inflicted upon* the body—the real-life trauma of settler-colonialism on Sila and Indigenous peoples: natural world and Indigenous peoples through genocide, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop,<sup>7</sup> and the ongoing crises of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people, and the over-representation of Indigenous children in government care and ecological destruction. For Tagaq, death-anxiety is not repressed, but it is faced head-on without any avoidance. The horrors she conveys are not made-up; they are real.

In this paper I will analyse Tagaq's music through close reading informed by theory about death-avoidance and terror, as detailed in Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* in order to elucidate the monster of Tagaq's work—Western settler-colonialism, as well as by critical race theory paired with the politics of pain, horror, and disgust. This theoretical framework will establish Tagaq's musical work as creative nonfiction horror with special attention to the uncanny and grotesque affects<sup>8</sup> of settler-colonialism. The analysis will situate her work into horror media by contrasting it with Margaret Atwood's established literary criticism, as well as accepted horror motifs and themes, specifically horror of the body, the North, and monsters. Understanding Tagaq's music as creative nonfiction horror media acknowledges Indigenised objects of terror and fear. It is not the natural world that is horrific; it is the continued extractive violence of settler-colonialism. In

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<sup>6</sup> Since Tagaq uses the metaphor of the earth being 'our mother', it's not an unreasonable extrapolation to include environmental degradation as part of horror of the body and bodily trauma.

<sup>7</sup> Refers to the practices across Canada where provincial child welfare authorities where thousands of indigenous children were taken from their families and adopted out to White families in Canada and the USA.

<sup>8</sup> The experience of feeling and emotion.

particular, the analysis will focus on her songs ‘Retribution’ and ‘Cold’, as well as two covers she performs: Iron Maiden’s ‘Run to the Hills’ and Nirvana’s ‘Rape Me’.

The goal is to demonstrate that the monster in Tagaq’s work is not the sentient natural world or a fictional creature so much as it is settler-colonialism driven by death-avoidance, an ongoing process that fuels environmental degradation, rape, murder, and traumatising of the Inuit in particular. These acts of trauma, as well as their effects, are meant to show the audience that settler-colonialism is, as Atwood (2013) writes, ‘at best useless and at worst deadly’ (p. 115). Tagaq’s music gives the natural world a voice to the horrors of settler-colonial actions and the uncanny<sup>9</sup> terror the natural world will inflict on all of humanity in retribution.

### **Tusâtsialaugit<sup>10</sup>: Unipkaaqtuat<sup>11</sup> and life alongside the Qallunaat<sup>12</sup>**

The monster of Tagaq’s horror-themed music is settler-colonialism, a beast driven by gluttony, death-avoidance, and a superiority complex. In his book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), Cherokee literary theorist Daniel Heath Justice explains that while Indigenous traditional stories caution against human destructiveness and greed, reminding readers that humans are dependent on the natural world for survival, these themes are not present in the Western-colonial narrative (pp. 39-40). Instead, many Eurocentric practices reinforce hierarchies established in Abrahamic traditions. More simply, the roots of settler-colonialism’s origin story are European Christianity, a faith based upon being saved from eternal death and a human superiority over the natural world. Heath Justice critiques this worldview:

‘[...] when the creeds of this socio-religious tradition insist that “man was made in his own image”, it’s no great leap to see how an exclusionary god of the heavens is used as a divine model and mandate for narrower hierarchical definitions [...] Yet for all the bluster and self-justifying rhetoric of the social hierarchs, the insistence

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<sup>9</sup> In this paper, the strange and unsettling aspects of uncanny can be defined using Thacker’s (2010) ‘world-in-itself’ concept, where he argues that ‘the world often “bites back”, resists, or ignores our attempts to mold it into the world-for-us’ (p. 9), citing natural disasters or climate change or extinction as examples of the world’s autonomy and agency.

<sup>10</sup> Translates as ‘listen properly’. Surak, Silpa. *UKâlalautta Inuttitut/Let’s speak Inuktitut*.

<sup>11</sup> Translates as ‘traditional stories’. Martin. p. 42.

<sup>12</sup> Translates as ‘non-Inuit’, usually in reference to European-settlers and their descendants.

on these firm boundaries is far from a sign of confidence. If anything, it is clear evidence of a fundamental insecurity' (pp. 40-41).

In other words, death-anxiety is a deep-rooted complex of settler-colonialism, motivating a lot of settler-colonial practices and beliefs. This is the psychological profile of the monster in Tagaq's work.

To further understand the villainous force in Tagaq's work, a closer look at the nature of death-avoidance and anxiety in settler society is warranted, and how it is represented in horror media provides an extensive case study. Even though the audience of horror media knows that at some point all humans die, the will to outlast and outlive the immediate threats drives the plot and builds suspense. The survival instinct is a buffer against the death-related anxiety that people face in the real world, but it also exists as a reminder of unavoidable death. It suppresses the fear of impending death, all the while acknowledging that death comes for each person. Becker describes this as 'an impossible paradox: the ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation, as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life' (p. 15). It is this unconscious fear of permanent extinguishment that drives self-preservation, but it is the simultaneous repression of the anxiety of death that creates the tension central to horror media. In this way, horror media becomes a sacrificial offering to death anxiety-ridden brains.

To adapt and reconcile the psychological anguish stemming from this reality, the affect of this fear is repressed, creating a simmering pot of anxiety. Research based on the work of Ernest Becker, Terror Management Theory (as detailed by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1986), explains that humanity's self-preservation instinct is in conflict with the inevitability of death, with the details of the forthcoming death remaining somewhat uncertain. As such, the terror that Becker describes lingers below the affective surface, and is kept there by cultural beliefs or symbols imbuing a sense of value and meaning to life, the 'management' aspect of Terror Management Theory (TMT). The management of this terror allows humanity to wear a 'civilised' façade that is more culturally-acceptable in Western society; the affect of fear becomes a power source, akin to a battery, for the existential dread that motivates human action. Literary scholar Sianne Ngai (2005) explains that the aesthetics of these negative emotions, be it anxiety or disgust, are

‘dysphoric affects [that] often seem to be the psychic fuel on which capitalist society runs’ (p. 3). In other words, the repression of these feelings enable us to masquerade as productive, well-adjusted members of society. Tagaq, conversely, seeks to remove the mask by putting those ‘ugly feelings’ as described by Ngai at the forefront, using katajjaq with horror media as praxis.

In his book *Danse Macabre* (1981), Stephen King theorises that horror media plays a role in this terror management. He writes that the consumption of horror media helps alleviate the stress of existential terror. Using the example of American anxiety over the Sputnik I launch during the Cold War, he writes:

‘For a moment—just for a moment—the paradoxical trick has worked. We have taken horror in hand and used it to destroy itself, a trick akin to pulling one’s self up by one’s own bootstraps. For a little while the deeper fear—the reality of the Russian Sputnik and what it means—has been excised. It will grow back again, but that is for later. For now, the worst has been faced and it wasn’t so bad after all. There was that magic moment of reintegration and safety at the end, that same feeling that comes when the roller coaster stops at the end of its run and you get off with your best girl, both of you whole and unhurt.

I believe it’s this feeling of reintegration, arising from a field specializing in death, fear, and monstrosity, that make the danse macabre so rewarding and magical...’  
(p. 14).

In other words, horror media helps manage the feelings of terror, relegating them below the affective surface. The question becomes, what happens when you cannot get off the roller coaster, or ‘what becomes of the human animal when the management aspect of TMT is disrupted?’ How does the human animal react to the dissolution of the calm façade repressing the reality of everyone’s impending death? Becker would point out that repression ‘is not simply a negative force opposing life energies; it lives on life energies and uses them creatively’ (p. 17); more simply put, it takes creativity to block out one’s inevitable death.

The northern Canadian landscape plays a rather peculiar role in the intersection of horror media and nationalistic identity, particularly for settler-Canadians. Despite having a combined population smaller than the British Columbian city of Kelowna, the land covered by the Canadian Territories plays a leading role in portraying Canada as the ‘True North, strong and free’, as sung in the Canadian national anthem. Polar bears grace the two-dollar coins. Inuksuks, wayfaring landmarks created by the Inuit, are easily found all around Canada. Elementary school-aged children learn to recite Robert Service’s ‘The Cremation of Sam McGee’, the grisly and gothic tale of a prospector who seemingly survives his own post-mortem immolation in the Yukon wilderness.

The Canadian psyche’s attachment to this repetitive iconography is prolific enough for author Margaret Atwood to have enough content to write two books of literary criticism on this topic: *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (2013) and *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995). In *Survival*, Atwood postulates that Canadian media conceptualises the North as a cruel female deity (p. 60) and an unrelenting force that likes to kill off characters by freezing them (p. 66). She takes this characterisation further in *Strange Things*, writing:

‘[...] popular lore and popular literature established early that the North was uncanny, awe-inspiring in almost a religious way, hostile to White men, but alluring; that it would lead you on and do you in; that it would drive you crazy, and finally claim you for its own’ (1995: p. 19).

This portrait Atwood paints of the North is a distinctly settler-colonial understanding. Any appeal of the North is simply ‘Northern fetishism’ (p. 49), and Indigenous perspectives are not represented. In fact, Indigenous peoples are entirely absent from most of Atwood’s (2013) analysis, save for existing as ‘instruments of Nature the Monster, torturing and killing White victims’ (p. 123), or as victims themselves. Indigenous peoples have no agency. In contrast, Heath Justice (2018) explains that ‘The story of Indigenous deficiency seems to me an externalization of settler-colonial guilt and shame, and is all the more powerful because of the broader society’s refusal to take real responsibility for the story’s devastating effects’ (p. 4). Instead, Atwood (1995)

focuses on the concept of White Canadians ‘going native’ or what she calls ‘The Grey Owl Syndrome’ (p. 35). As such, the perspective and insight of Indigenous peoples is completely ignored by one of Canadian literature and literary criticism’s biggest names, in an act of erasure.

Absent from Atwood’s analysis of the Canadian North are the Inuit. Living on the northern edge of the continent, between the Arctic Ocean and the tundra, it is a culture adapted to an extreme, and sometimes unforgiving environment. Temperatures routinely remain below freezing most months of the year. Polar bears still frequent human settlements in search of food—be it in the form of garbage, animal, or human. The permafrost prevents most plant growth from taking root, save for some hardy shrubs. Sunlight is in short supply in the winter and on some days it may not rise at all.

The understanding of this extreme environment is key to Inuit culture, and is reflected in their traditional stories. In *Life Writings and Oral Traditions: Inuit Myths* (2001), author Dale Blake explains that many of the stories told to Inuit children do not have happy endings because ‘it was a fact that tragedies did occur in the harsh northern lands, and children might be better prepared for them through listening to myths’ (p. xii.) In these stories no gruesome, gothic, or uncanny details are spared, and death is not avoided: an elderly woman kills and skins her daughter to woo the young hero Kiviok; a young couple take refuge from a storm with, unbeknownst to them, a cannibal who sucks the brains out of their newborn child; fleeing her abusive husband, a woman transforms into a narwal; a parasite tricks a grief-stricken woman into nurturing it as if it were her own child, while it drains the life from her. Unlike the literature Atwood surveyed, the common theme with this collection in particular is the focus on the dark side of *humanity*, not of the natural world. In this way, the stories act upon the audience’s emotions of empathy for the horror, pain, suffering, and terror experienced by the characters. Scholar Sara Ahmed (2015) explains that these kind of narratives enable ‘the reader to enter into a relationship with the other, premised on generosity rather than indifference’ (p. 21). This generosity, however, depends on the audience seeing the being in pain as relatable, feeling, and animate. In the case of Tagaq’s work, she aims to disrupt a settler-colonial audience’s ambivalence towards the pain felt by the natural world, a pain that is caused by settler-colonialism itself.

Tagaq brings the aforementioned narratives and perspectives to her music. Sila is not a cruel force of villainy. In line with the tales from Blake's book, it is humanity—in particular settler-colonialism—that comes to kill.

### **'Cold' (2016)**

*'The loss of ice cover will catapult our climate  
Into an uncharted, apocalyptic era of rapid heating  
There will be no stopping it'* (Tagaq 2016, n.pg)

Tagaq's simply titled song opens with the eerily-highlighted sounds of footsteps crunching in the snow, cracking the ice, and then her voice matter-of-factly describing the application of thermodynamics to the ice, as understood and described by Western scientists. Energy is not created or destroyed. It is converted and it changes form—a metamorphosis. This is basic physics as taught in elementary school. As she says: 'there will be no stopping it'. Tagaq's katajjaq voice enters the track, symbolic of the traditional knowledge entering the scientific discussion, and the undulating voice grows stronger and more powerful. Paired with rising cello, drumming that speeds up the tempo, and increased volume of cracking ice, the ambience of the song has a chilling affect and creates a rising tension, building up to Tagaq's horrific reveal that 'human civilisation as we know it will no longer exist 'Cause Gaia likes it cold', a heavy prediction delivered with an uncanny softness in her voice (the relationship between 'Gaia' and 'Sila' is discussed momentarily). This declaration is simply-stated, a stark contrast to the dark, heavy music and atmospheric cacophony consisting of cracking and breaking ice, resonant bass-heavy cello with high notes sharply interspersed, deep, slow drumming, and low guttural growls from Tagaq. The result is unnerving and tension-inducing, not unlike a good horror film score. The final layer of complexity that Tagaq adds to the equation is the concept of a sentient Sila who is out for revenge for the abuse through climate change.

The traditional Inuit worldview conceptualises their environment as living, not unlike the song-referenced Gaia; in particular, Sila is the name given to the climate or environment, and it is

understood that Sila is sentient. Iñupiat<sup>13</sup> elders Fannie (Kuutuuq) Akpik and Jana (Pausauraq) Harcharek explain:

‘Sila is the weather. It is also the atmosphere. Here’s the nuna, or the land, and it’s anything from the land into the moon, the sun, the stars. That’s all Sila. Sila has a soul in the same way we do as people in the same way animals do’ (Never Alone 2014).

By understanding Sila to be as conscious and alive as humans and other animals, this perspective establishes that Sila can feel. In the case of Tagaq’s music, Sila feels pain from settler-colonialism against her own body and that of her human and animal children. Pain, Ahmed (2015) explains, ‘demands that I attend to my embodied experience’ and she further suggests that pain is the affect of a wound, which is ‘where the surface of another entity has impressed upon the body, an impression that is felt and seen as the violence of negation’ (p. 27). With this in mind, the Inuit traditional worldview demands respect for Sila, as she is key to their survival. This is antithetical to the settler-colonial praxis of extractive industry where the environment is harnessed for economic output. It is also contrary to Atwood’s perspective of the natural world as a murderous, seductive, female deity. Instead, traditional Inuit life lives in relation to Sila, recognising that her health and survival are imperative to their own.

In this song Tagaq transliterates Sila as Gaia, the Greek deity who personifies the Earth and the primal mother of all life on the planet. While the traditional Greek mythology of Gaia does not address climate change,<sup>14</sup> it does address her rebellious, vengeful nature (Powell, 2017: pp. 39-42). Abused by her male consort and father of the Titans, Uranus, Gaia and her son, Cronos, carry out a plan to castrate Uranus, deposing him of his power and exacting revenge for his harm. This mirrors Tagaq’s interpretation of Sila where she is not the instigator of violence, a stark contrast to the literature Atwood analyses. In common, however, is the realisation that humanity cannot

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<sup>13</sup> The Iñupiat people are Inuit peoples whose homeland is in modern Alaska.

<sup>14</sup> See: Lovelock, J. E. (1972) Gaia as Seen Through the Atmosphere. *Atmospheric Environment*. 6 (8), pp. 579–580. Available from: doi:10.1016/0004-6981(72)90076-5.



control a being more powerful than themselves. Becker explains this terror-inducing lack of control from a Western perspective:

‘[...] we don’t want to admit that we are fundamentally dishonest about reality, that we do not really control our own lives. We don’t want to admit that we do not stand alone, that we always rely on something that transcends us’ (p. 55).

More simply, we are not immune to the consequences of our actions against a power greater than ourselves.

The monsters in the horror story of ‘Cold’ are death-anxious humans driven by settler-colonialism who feed the violence of climate change, something Tagaq demonstrates by embodying Sila and giving her a voice which is both literal and ambient. She becomes an uncanny emissary, almost as if she is ‘possessed’, giving voice to the aforementioned missing woman in Tagaq’s katajjaq. The pain that Sila experiences, as conveyed by Tagaq, has the power to make one aware of bodily limits—be it human or planetary. Ahmed (2015) explains that ‘pain is hence bound up with how we inhabit the world, how we live in relationship to the surfaces, bodies and objects that make up our dwelling places. Our question becomes not so much what *is* pain, but what does pain *do*’ (p. 27). In this way, Tagaq uses the affective power of horror and pain to disrupt humanity’s terror management as a call-to-action against the harm of settler-colonialism. If humanity chooses to ignore the Tagaq’s rallying cry and instead continues on a path of ecological destruction, we cannot stop Sila’s revenge.

### **‘Run to the Hills’ (2018)**

Tagaq’s rendition of Iron Maiden’s song would be unrecognisable if not for the lyrics remaining the same in her version. There is no upbeat tempo or classic heavy metal guitar. Instead of an energetic rock song, Tagaq’s version is much slower, allowing the audience to feel the weight of the lyrics and music. A steady tempo of drumming with discordant strings emphasise the narration of the violence of colonisation from the perspectives of both the Indigenous peoples and the European settlers: neither side shy away from the terror of genocide. Teaming up with Fucked

Up's Damian Abraham (known for his vocal growl), Tagaq shares the vocals—one of the few occasions where Tagaq is not the solo vocalist. She starts the song by softly singing the first verse, with Abraham kicking off the harsher vocals that describe a cavalry running down innocent people. He growls like a hungry beast that revels in 'beating them at their own game' of survival on the land. Tagaq later joins in with vocals that emulate screaming in pain at the line 'Murder for freedom, the stab in the back' as if she were the murder victim herself. For the chorus she brings in her solo katajjaq, an act of Indigenous resilience despite the genocide, and those vocals return each time the chorus plays, through what would be a bridge, and finally closing out the song. The three sets of vocals emphasise rhythm over melody, a statement of contrast and conflict as opposed to complementary harmony. In spite of the violence, Indigenous people and their cultures still live and thrive. The voice, embodied by Tagaq, is not silenced, despite the violence of settler-colonialism.

Like many other Indigenous peoples within the state of Canada, the social impacts of colonisation on the Inuit are vast. Residential schools destroyed cultural and linguistic ties many children had to their families. Inuit naming conventions were not conducive to the colonial government's record keeping, so the Canadian government tagged Inuit with disc numbers, not unlike dog tags. The Inuit were subject to forced migration and settlement in the far north, to function as human flag poles during the Cold War. In a paper utilising the work of a cultural anthropologist, it would be remiss to not acknowledge the harm perpetuated by the discipline of anthropology and the anthropologists who treated the Inuit as strange curiosities as opposed to a vibrant and unique culture. One such story was shared by medical anthropologist Christopher Fletcher (2009) from his experience researching Inuit medical knowledge. He went to Nunavik (Northern Québec) to interview community elders in order to learn their wisdom and community-specific health practices. When meeting with an elder, before Fletcher was able to ask her about her knowledge of medicine, she started the conversation by asking him (much to his horror) if she needed to take her clothes off for him to get 'accurate measurements' of her features. Her childhood experience was with anthropologists who measured Inuit bodily features, an antiquated practice used by anthropologists to promote White supremacy by demonstrating that non-White features were inferior. This was the stark opposite of Fletcher's intended research, but the recent history affected his ability to build connections and do his research.

To this day, the effects of these acts of settler-colonialism reverberate through poverty, violence, and death. In 2005 it was estimated that 30% of Inuit children had experienced hunger because their families had run out of food, or money to purchase food (Prosser, 2011). Suicide rates among the Inuit are approximately 10 times higher than in the general population of Canada (Chachamovich, Eduardo, et al., 2015) and violence against Inuit women is 14 times the national average (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, n.d.). Data collected by anthropologists prior to the Canadian government's involvement in the lives of the Inuit, starting in 1939, suggest that these statistics are a relatively recent development (Kral, 2016) and have been attributed to the trauma of colonisation.

The song's message is clear—destructive settler-colonial violence will continue to kill and maim unless one flees. There needs to be distance for survival, and death-anxiety engages the flight instinct. While Ngai's analysis of Freud, Heidegger and other classic European philosophers suggests that anxiety exists to veer away from embodiments of negativity in the classic male mind (p. 247), Becker takes this point much further. On death-anxiety he writes:

'I don't believe that the complex symbol of death is ever absent, no matter how much vitality and inner sustainment a person has. Even more, if we say that these powers make repression easy and natural, we are only saying the half of it. Actually, they get their very power from repression' (p. 53).

More simply, the fear of death becomes stronger *because of* the repression. While her reimagination of this classic metal song directly engages with genocide of Indigenous peoples, Tagaq refuses to turn away from the horror. She forces the audience to listen to the terror exacted upon Indigenous peoples by settler-colonialism and engage with their subsequent anxiety. She refuses to give settler-colonialism any more power than it already tries to exert.

### **'Rape Me' (2016)**

Eerie and haunting, Tagaq's version of Nirvana's anti-rape missive stays true to the original intent of the song, wherein singer-songwriter and frontman Kurt Cobain focuses on the strength and resilience of the defiant victim (Steinke, 1993: n.pg). Traumatized and tortured, the feminine victim remains powerful. Tagaq starts with a sharp violin that borders on discordant. A slow, methodical bass drum beats and slowly gets louder. Tagaq's vocals are soft and gentle as she sings, with whispers of words like 'kill me' interspersed throughout the background. The juxtaposition of the two main features, Tagaq's vocals and Cobain's lyrics, is meant to disturb and be an affective experience. As Ngai explains, anxiety is an outward trajectory 'prior to its being projected or displaced onto others' (p. 211), meaning that it exists before it manifests outside the body. Rape is a violent and grotesque act. By slowing the tempo of the song to allow focus on the lyrics, Tagaq seeks to disrupt the repression of the anxiety from this horrible act. She explains, 'Why sugarcoat it? This album is about rape. Rape of women, rape of the land, rape of children, despoiling of traditional lands without consent, hence the cover version of Nirvana's song "Rape Me"' (Tanyatagaq.com, n.d.). While the fusing of industrial environmental degradation with sexual assault of women by ecofeminist theory and art (think the common term 'the rape of nature') is not new, Tagaq situates this comparison in a distinctly Inuit context.

For the Inuit in particular, the effects of climate change are terrifying. The Inuit have developed survival skills for living in this environment and its climate, and this knowledge is passed down by elders. This knowledge and way of life is at risk in a changing environment. Cloud and wind patterns inform weather prediction, which impacts hunting and travelling on the ice. When the weather patterns become unfamiliar, or the ice melts, it puts the lives of hunters and fishers at risk. The melting ice also encourages polar bears to hunt and scavenge for food in human settlements more frequently than ever before, as there the ground is more sturdy and food is more plentiful. As a result of anthropogenic climate change, the Inuit are subject to harm from a society and way of life outside of their own traditions.

The song can also be interpreted to be more specifically about violence against women. In the final report from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, abuse survivors detail horrific tales of sexual assault. In particular, they cite the Qikiqtani Truth Commission's previous investigation into Inuit-specific narratives of government colonial

harm, wherein the final report states that members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) used their positions of power to abuse Inuit women (Qikiqtani Inuit Association, 2014: p. 38). One story was shared by Arviat-area Elder and residential school survivor Rhoda Akpaliapik Karetak:

‘Some RCMP officers used to beat and rape us women. They took us into another room and locked the door. I was beaten and raped but had no one to turn to. We didn’t know they weren’t supposed to act like that. Even if we had been informed of our rights, as Inuit we couldn’t speak up’ (p. 43).

Karetak’s story directly connects colonisation with rape. RCMP officers are a symbol of colonisation, an enforcing limb of government policies such as residential schools and forced relocation, and a vestige of the North-West Mounted Police, which was founded in response to the Cypress Hills Massacre<sup>15</sup> and was a leading force against the Métis’ second rebellion.

Tagaq’s choice to cover Nirvana’s song allows a pointed critique of settler-colonialism’s White saviour complex. Referring to the abuser as ‘my friend’, Tagaq highlights the duplicity of supposed allies whose actions are violent. Becker explains that ‘the individual has to repress *globally*, from the entire spectrum of his experience, if he wants to feel a warm sense of inner value and basic security’ (p. 18) and it is clear that Tagaq insists on doing the opposite. She sees settler-colonialism as a monster from which there is no safety. Still, she chooses defiance as opposed to remaining a bystander or allowing herself to be victimised. By disrupting the affective surface holding back the anxiety, Tagaq invites her audience to self-reflect on their own complicity in the violence of colonialism: the genocide, the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and climate change.

### **‘Retribution’ (2016)**

*‘Our mother grows angry*

*Retribution will be swift’* (Tagaq, 2016: n.pg)

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<sup>15</sup> Approximately 20 Nakoda people were killed in this battle, according to Canadian Government sources.

On the title track of her 2016 album *Retribution* Tagaq merges her take on traditional Inuit throat singing with spoken-word poetry in English. The words she chooses are harsh, aggressive, and remarkably graphic. Tagaq herself describes this album and song as ‘not dinner party ambience music’ (tanyatagaq.com, n.d.). There is a sense of urgency with the uptick of the tempo and the increasing discordance layered with tension-inducing cello and ferocious and almost wolf-like growls. The music video reflects the tone set by the music, with shaking videography of a lone Inuk woman sitting among wolf pelts, setting a fire in the centre before her, painting her face and arms with a black, tar-like substance and red paint—providing intriguing parallels to European tales such as Little Red. The video jumps to the tundra landscape, moves south past the timberline and into an industrial setting with Tagaq in a black gown joining the aforementioned Inuk woman in a ritual and dance, in otherwise vacant warehouse space. The entire video is jarring and cacophonous, emphasising the affect of the uncanny and the strange in the music. In the lyrics, Tagaq accuses the oil industry in particular of horrific environmental devastation, analogising it to rape, murder, and desecration. She describes Sila, or Mother Earth’s rage for the violence inflicted upon her, whispering ‘*we squander her soil and suck out her sweet black blood to burn it*’. Extracting that blood is a form of mutilation, dismemberment, and then the evidence is burned beyond recognition. The motivations are simple—greed and a desire to assuage a deeply-rooted death anxiety.

In contrast to the death-anxiety, Tagaq’s katajjaq symbolises the survivance of Indigenous peoples, and Inuit culture notably; however, unlike Atwood’s explanation that the fight for survival is against Canada’s natural environment, Tagaq believes the fight to survive is against the industry and society created by settler-colonialism. She explains that her album *Retribution* is:

‘[...] a portrait of a violent world in crisis, hovering on the brink of destruction... it’s about rejecting the toxic, militaristic masculinity that’s taken over the world since the rise of Western industrial capitalism, and is rapidly destroying human life support systems through climate change and pollution’ (tanyatagaq.com, n.d.).

For Tagaq, death-anxiety cannot be repressed; it is faced head-on without any avoidance and acknowledgement of an impending death overrides the management of the terror.

In this song, greed and death-anxiety in settler-colonialism are inextricably intertwined and one cannot be separated from the other. By whispering ‘*Money has spent us. Left us in small boxes, dark rooms, bright screens, empty tombs. Left investing our time in hollow philosophies. To placate the fear of our bodies returning back into our mother*’ she directly connects consumer culture to death-avoidance. Competition, resource accumulation, and a greed for power brought the Western settlers to colonise what is now called North America, and these aforementioned motives continue to drive capitalism. The desire to accumulate and consume without end is a direct denial of the fact that, at some point, one can no longer consume or accumulate. One is no longer a participant in the capitalist machine as a cadaver. All that remains post-mortem will be the future archaeological remnants of humanity’s capitalist obsession with acquisition where landfills, pollution, and industrially-driven environmental degradation are what remains.<sup>16</sup> Becker describes this dis-corporeal paradox as ‘the experiential burden’ of humans, explaining that the body is a foreign landscape to humans (p. 51). Further, he writes:

‘[Man] doesn’t know who he is, why he was born, what he is doing on the planet, what he is supposed to do, what he can expect. His own existence is incomprehensible to him, a miracle just like the rest of creation, closer to him, right near his pounding heart, but for that reason all the more strange’ (p. 51).

Embracing the strange and uncanny, as well as acknowledging a forthcoming existential annihilation, Tagaq speaks for another body and being—Sila. Sila is the second voice in Tagaq’s performance, the harmony. Sila is alive and cognisant, but in this horror story she’s not the monster: humans are. Animating this voice, Tagaq warns that ‘*the retribution will be swift*’. While Tagaq does not articulate what that revenge will look like in this song, her message is clear: it is time for humans to face the music and consequences for their gruesome violence against a sentient being. The prior question about the absence of the second woman is answered—she is Sila. Like Gaia in ‘Cold’, Sila seeks vengeance for the violence inflicted upon her.

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<sup>16</sup> Further reading on this subject can be found in: (1) Moore, J. (2017) The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. 3 (44), 594-630. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>; and (2) Farrier, D. (2019) *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

## Conclusion

Tanya Tagaq's songs 'Retribution' and 'Cold', as well as her covers of Iron Maiden's 'Run to the Hills' and Nirvana's 'Rape Me', function as creative non-fiction horror media about settler-colonialism. Theorisation of death-anxiety and avoidance by Ernest Becker provides a useful lens for analysis of the modern socio-political climate of settler-colonialism and climate change, both of which negatively affect the Inuit disproportionately. Tagaq uses horror motifs of the uncanny, horror of the body, terror, violence, and the gruesome to communicate and embody the harm perpetuated by settler-colonialism and one of its main tools of violence: capitalism. Driven by death-anxiety, settler-colonialism and capitalism pursue progress through mutilation, rape, and murder of Sila, a case Tagaq evidences in her music. King asserts that if horror media is a 'rehearsal for death, then its strict moralities make it also a reaffirmation of life and good will' (pg. 409), or more simply, a way to assuage death-anxiety. In contrast, Tagaq uses horror, the uncanny and the gothic to force those complicit in settler-colonialism and environmental destruction to confront an uncomfortable truth—the monster is humanity, not the natural world, and it is out of control.

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**Kateryna Barnes** is a digital humanities scholar at the University of Alberta. Her interest in horror started when her father started lending her his well-worn paperbacks when she was twelve, which got her in trouble at school for bringing in 'inappropriate reading material'. Her research explores decolonising digital space, settler-colonialism as horror culture, and the educative potential of flawed simulacra. Her dual Indigenous-settler heritage comprises displaced Kanien'kehá:ka of Akwesasne, Scottish immigrants, and Ukrainian refugees.



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**The Ecohorror of Omission:  
Haunted Suburbs and the Forgotten Trees of *A Nightmare on Elm Street***

*Christy Tidwell*

**ABSTRACT**

Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) is not typically considered an ecohorror film, despite the title's focus on elm trees. To be fair, trees do not feature prominently in the film, much of which takes place indoors and underground. However, the title resonates with two environmental issues: Dutch elm disease (DED) and deforestation. By the 1980s, more than 77 million elms had died from DED, and Elm Street, 'one of America's most storied and archetypal places' (Campanella, 2003: p. 1), no longer featured elm trees. America's archetypal Elm Street was also built on the mass destruction of the continent's forests. This context provides a way to read the film as ecohorror. This is ecohorror grounded in human-created suburban nature and the loss of wild nature. It illustrates Bernice M. Murphy's *Suburban Gothic* (2009), addressing the social constructs of suburbia and the family, but it shows how these social constructs are entwined with a desire for control of nature. *Nightmare* is haunted not just by Freddy Krueger but by trees, raising the spectre of the American elm (itself a ghost of virgin forests) while suppressing the knowledge of this loss. Ultimately, the gap between the title of the film and the ecological reality of the time points to an expansion of ecohorror. Stephen A. Rust and Carter Soles (2014) argue that ecohorror 'assumes that environmental disruption is haunting humanity's relationship to the non-human world' (p. 510); this film goes even further, showing—in its failure to acknowledge the absence of the elms and the forests—how *silence* about environmental disruption haunts humanity's relationship to the nonhuman world and produces an ecohorror of omission.

‘Do you believe in the boogeyman?’

—Nancy, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

‘Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.’

—Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997: p. 8)

Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) is a horror classic and has had a huge impact on popular culture, both at the time of its release<sup>1</sup> and decades later. Freddy Krueger is still a recognisable slasher killer, and the movie and its premise (teenagers are being murdered in their dreams!) are referenced often.<sup>2</sup> Most mentions of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* have focused on the *nightmare* part and on Freddy Krueger as a villain and have not focused on the *Elm Street* part or on *elms* themselves. Similarly, the film has not typically been classified as ecohorror or included in discussions of the subgenre. However, when read in the context of relevant environmental history—specifically the histories of Dutch elm disease (DED) and deforestation—*A Nightmare on Elm Street* opens to an ecohorror interpretation; more broadly, this approach to a film that does not immediately declare itself to be ecohorror (and that even resists such an interpretation) points to an expansion of possibilities for ecohorror.

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<sup>1</sup> Financial success is not the same as cultural impact, but *A Nightmare on Elm Street* did bring in a great deal of money, undoubtedly prompting the many, many sequels to come. The movie’s budget was approximately \$1.8 million, and it made 70% (\$1,271,000) of that back on opening weekend and ultimately grossed over \$25 million (Internet Movie Database, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> It has been referenced across multiple media and forms: in music—‘A Nightmare on My Street’ by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince (1988), ‘The Night Santa Went Crazy’ by Weird Al Yankovic (1996), and ‘Underground’ by Eminem (2009); in film—*Scream* (dir. Wes Craven, 1996), *It* (dir. Andy Muschietti, 2017), and *Ready Player One* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2018); in television—*The Simpsons* (1989-), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), *South Park* (1997-), *Family Guy* (1999-), *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005-2009), *Robot Chicken* (2005-), and *Rick and Morty* (2013-); in video games—*Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), *Mortal Kombat 9* (2011), *Terrordrome: Rise of the Boogeyman* (2015), and *Dead by Daylight* (2016); and in fiction—R. L. Stine’s *A Nightmare on Clown Street* (2015) (Elm Street Wiki, n.d.). This list, though not exhaustive, illustrates the range of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*’s influence and its consistent presence in popular culture, starting in the 1980s and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The tendency to read *A Nightmare on Elm Street* as something other than ecohorror is reasonable. Trees are not, after all, central to the plot of the film. Although there may be a few elms present in the film, they are not prominent and there are at least as many visible palm trees as elms (it was filmed in California even though it is set in Ohio). In fact, much of the film takes place indoors and underground, with some of the most iconic scenes occurring in bedrooms and basements. The opening scene is set in the basement boiler room where Freddy (Robert Englund) made his finger-knives; the murders all take place indoors—bedrooms, mostly, but also a jail cell and one attempt in a bathroom; and during one central nightmare Nancy (Heather Langenkamp) has at school, she stays inside the building, moving through enclosed hallways and stairwells to descend to the basement. Furthermore, the street name—Elm Street—is never mentioned during the movie, indicating clearly that Elm Street is a concept more than a place and that, therefore, the trees themselves are not actually required.

While elms are also not mentioned by name in the film, trees and plants (or parts of them) are occasionally present, and their appearances create associations between themselves and sinister or monstrous figures. These associations reflect Dawn Keetley's (2006) concept of plant horror, which she has defined as a kind of horror that 'marks humans' dread of the "wildness" of vegetal nature—its untameability, its pointless excess, its uncontrollable growth' (p. 6). In plant horror narratives, plants 'embody an inscrutable silence, an implacable strangeness, which human culture has, from the beginning, set out to tame' (p. 1); they 'lurk in our blindspot' (p. 10), 'menace with their wild, purposeless growth' (p. 13), and 'will get their revenge' (p. 19). Given this tendency to read plants as menacing and strange, the visual connections created between trees and villains in the film are significant. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Nancy is surveilled by a man in a suit and sunglasses who stands under a tree (notably, it appears to be an elm tree), leaning in such a way that the man and the tree share a similar silhouette, which visually links them.<sup>3</sup> There are also moments when Freddy Krueger himself leaps out of bushes or leans out from behind a narrow tree to grab or threaten Nancy. The unlikelihood of his successfully hiding in these places aligns him

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<sup>3</sup> When she turns again, only the tree remains, retaining some of that sense of threat even though the man is gone. It turns out that he is a spy for her father and the police. He is therefore an instrument of paternal and societal control over Nancy, standing next to a tree that is the result of human control over nature. This underscores my argument in the next section about the role of control in the film and the way it parallels the history of humans' attempted control of elm trees.

even more closely with the plants than it would otherwise, almost like he is a part of the vegetation that has emerged to attack Nancy (lurking in her blindspot and waiting for revenge, just as plants do in Keetley's analysis).<sup>4</sup> These connections between threatening human figures and plants in the film illustrate—albeit briefly—Keetley's argument that plants horrify with their uncontrollability, even if their presence here represents more of a disappearance than an invasion.<sup>5</sup>

These moments are not the primary source of the film's ecohorror, however, which is located instead in the films' resonance with two specific environmental issues: first, the twentieth-century devastation of elm populations across the U.S. by Dutch elm disease and, second, the massive deforestation of the continent that both preceded and accompanied suburbanisation. The film uses the name Elm Street because elms had been so central to the U.S.' westward expansion and the image of home many Americans held dear. As people moved from the east coast—where elm trees were native—across Ohio and the Plains and to the west coast, they brought elms with them. Thomas Campanella (2003) writes, 'The trees were set out to shade tender homesteads on the treeless plains, or simply to serve as a keepsake of a life and landscape left behind. The range of the American elm slowly expanded until it spanned the continent' (p. 1). As a result, by 1937, more than 25 million elm trees had been planted across the U.S., including as far as California (Campanella, 2003: p. 1). This version—or vision—of Elm Street did not last, however. Dutch elm disease, a fungal disease spread by three species of elm bark beetles and first identified in the U.S. in the 1930s, spread across the continent and reshaped the nation's forests and suburbs. As David Beaulieu (2018) writes, 'Once upon a time in America, great leafy high-arching cathedral of elms lined the streets of villages and cities from the Atlantic to the Rockies, casting a deep cool shade upon life's turmoil'. But by the 1980s more than 77 million elm trees had died from the disease. The trees that, according to Thomas Campanella (2003), 'defined one of America's most storied and archetypal places—Elm Street' (p. 1), were largely gone by the time *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was released. Moreover, this 'great leafy high-arching cathedral of elms' was itself built on the destruction of many, many more trees over decades of development.

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<sup>4</sup> Plants giving villains a place to hide is not unique to *A Nightmare on Elm Street* but seems to be a feature of slashers more broadly. For instance, Michael Myers hides behind bushes in *Halloween* and Jason Voorhees hides behind trees in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, in addition to killing people against them. Thanks to Laura R. Kremmel for this insight.

<sup>5</sup> See Natania Meecker and Antónia Szabari in *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2020) for an analysis of plant horror via *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

This context provides an entry point to an ecohorror interpretation of the film. Ecohorror is most obviously illustrated by Nature-strikes-back narratives like *The Birds* (1963) or *Jaws* (1975), as well as some plant horror, like *The Happening* (2008). But ecohorror extends well beyond this. Rust and Soles (2014) argue, ‘[a] more expansive definition of ecohorror [...] includes analyses of texts in which humans do horrific things to the natural world, or in which horrific texts and tropes are used to promote ecological awareness, represent ecological crises, or blur human/non-human distinctions more broadly’ (pp. 509-10). Given this, ecohorror also includes narratives that do not spotlight attacking creatures or threatening Nature but might instead provoke sympathy for nonhuman animals and the natural world or undermine human beings’ sense of separation from the natural world. Fundamentally, Rust and Soles argue, ecohorror ‘assumes that environmental disruption is haunting humanity’s relationship to the non-human world’ (p. 510). Given the history of the elm and Dutch elm disease, as well as the longer history of deforestation, the gap between the title’s emphasis on elms and the absence of attention to elm trees in the film is meaningful. Avery F. Gordon (1997) writes that ‘[a] haunted society is full of ghosts, and the ghost always carries the message [...] that the gap between personal and social, public and private, objective and subjective is misleading in the first place’ (p. 98). The trees (elms and otherwise) of *Nightmare on Elm Street* are ghosts in this sense, challenging distinctions between past and present, safety and danger, dream and reality. They haunt the viewer through their absence, and the film’s silence about environmental disruption illustrates a type of ecohorror not addressed in Rust and Soles’ definition: an ecohorror of omission.

### **The History of Elm Street: Domestication and Disease**

Both the horror and the ecohorror of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* are rooted in attempts at control. Specifically, the film’s nightmares and murders grow out of—and worsen as a result of—well-meaning parental control while the real-world expansion and then near-extinction of elms that shape Elm Street itself are caused by human attempts to manage and manipulate the natural world. These two types of control work together and are both ultimately challenged within the film, indicating that these human desires to control others and control the natural world are themselves (eco)horrific.



The social world of the film is about control at virtually every level: parents try to control their children, the law tries to control criminality, school tries to control students' movement, the teenagers try to control their own lives and dreams. Many of these forms of control are typically accepted as normal and acceptable. For instance, when Nancy tries to call her boyfriend Glen (Johnny Depp) to warn him about Freddy, Glen's father (Ed Call) refuses to let her speak to him, saying that Glen needs his sleep, and then takes the phone off the hook. He tells his wife, 'You just gotta be firm with these kids'. And Nancy's father (John Saxon), a police officer, helps capture and arrest Rod (Jsu Garcia, credited as Nick Corri) for Tina's murder—after all, he was the only one in the room when she died. Fathers protect their children, and police officers maintain order. These are widely accepted roles in U.S. culture, perhaps particularly in suburbia.

But the unusual (and supernatural) circumstances here call these normal assumptions into question.<sup>6</sup> Glen's father's authoritarian parenting and firmness gets Glen killed, and Rod dies in his jail cell because the police will not let Nancy and Glen in to check on him. In this context, it no longer makes sense to assert parental authority and uphold the rules, and these efforts to control simply lead to more death. Gary Heba (1995) addresses this power dynamic by observing that '[t]he greatest number of tensions occur in the *Nightmare* series because of the dominant culture's coding of parent and child in a family. The traditional family of authoritative parents and subordinate children is a microcosm of the power structures evident in all institutions of the dominant culture' (p. 113). However, this structure is challenged when '[a]lcoholism, neglect, abuse, and sexual molestation are all woven into the family tapestry of the *Nightmare* movies, such that most of the parents become "monsters" along with Freddy' (p. 113), leading the films to 'code the dominant culture itself as a source of horror' (p. 108). In other words, it is not just Freddy Krueger—nightmare murderer—that is monstrous; it is all of these normally acceptable attempts at control.

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<sup>6</sup> This reiterates a pattern from 1950s horror: 'horror texts of the period used aliens [or monsters] as an image of difference through which they investigated, problematised and even rejected the notions of "normality" prevalent in 1950s America,' and such figures were 'used to criticize [...] conformity' (Jancovich, 1996, p. 82). Even decades later, *Nightmare* indicates that the suburbs remain invested in mid-century ideals of family and social structure.

This critique of social and parental authority emerges most fully in the events that lead to Freddy Krueger's dream-murders. As Nancy's mother Marge (Ronee Blakley) tells it, Fred Krueger was a 'filthy child murderer' who killed at least 20 kids in the neighborhood. However, his capture by the police did not solve the problem. There was an error in the paperwork, and he was set free. Because the first attempt to stop him failed (the police were not able to maintain order and protect the children), neighborhood parents took action themselves:

'A bunch of us parents tracked him down after they let him out... We took gasoline... We poured it all around the place and made a trail of it out the door, then lit the whole thing up and watched it burn. But he can't get you now. He's dead, honey, because Mommy killed him'.

This all occurs before the action of the film, however, and Freddy Krueger still haunts their children, making it clear that this parental exertion of power on behalf of the children has also failed. In fact, it has just wrought more violence. As Kendrick (2009) argues, 'Marge's violence has not solved the problem by killing the monster, but instead made it worse. She has sunk into an alcoholic stupor to blunt the pain of her transgressions, and Freddy now has more power than ever to traumatise the children of Elm Street' (p. 30).

The history of elm trees in the U.S. is also centrally about control, illustrated first through elms' spread and then through their destruction. As previously noted, elms were planted as settlers moved west across what became the United States. Campanella (2003) writes, 'The [elm] tree was a token of the native forest that yielded to domestication with grace and dignity, a fragment of wild nature planted curbside from coast to coast' (p. 1). Elms therefore transported to the West something of settlers' 'native forest' and home as well as representing civilised life. They were a very real way to control and domesticate new frontiers, to make them manageable and less foreign. As Eric Rutkow (2012) notes,

'Almost anywhere that a settler planted an American elm, the tree seemed to thrive. This was part of its charm—it was among the hardiest of species. Drought, salt, ice, mild flooding, heavy foot traffic, inconsiderate horses, none of it seemed to trouble

the unflappable trees. Elms also endured air pollution, including the particulate matter that coal-burning factories were generating in ever-rising quantities' (pp. 220-1).

This domestication was part of a larger process of nation-building and exclusion. The elm gained popularity during the 1840s, which 'owed a further debt to a new, fervent nationalism that was sweeping through Jacksonian America. Native trees were in vogue. Foreign trees, like the previously favored Lombardy poplar and Chinese ailanthus, were out' (Rutkow, 2012: p. 220) and 'mid-nineteenth-century nativists railed against foreign species of trees, labeling them "filthy" immigrants' (Friss, 2020: p. 5). Elms were planted, therefore, as a means of both creating and reinforcing a specific vision of what America looks like, one that ignored and superseded reality.<sup>7</sup>

This reshaping of reality led to urban tree management becoming more than a *desire* to control the natural world; it was soon perceived as a *need*. In a review of Sonja Dümpelmann's book *Seeing Trees: A History of Street Trees in New York City and Berlin* (2019), Evan Friss (2020) notes,

'Planted in piecemeal fashion and without careful management and care, the trees that did line the increasingly bustling streets decayed quickly and died in great numbers, prompting a wave of newly professionalized city foresters to push for trees to be "systematically and scientifically managed" as part of the "Taylorization of the American City" in the early twentieth century (39). In the age of standardization and for the sake of "beauty, comfort and the increase of property value," street trees were to be bred and planted symmetrically, "straight and sound stemmed" (39)' (p. 5).

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<sup>7</sup> Despite the emphasis on positive associations in this history, elms carried strong negative and potentially Gothic meanings, too. Diana Wells (2010) writes, 'Perhaps appropriately elm wood was used for coffins: elms have a dangerous propensity to lose a huge branch, quite suddenly and without warning, even on a still summer day, killing anyone underneath. The elm "hateth man and waiteth," explained Rudyard Kipling' (p. 125). This imparts a darker tinge to settlers' insistence on bringing elms west with them. Perhaps the elms weren't so docile and yielding after all.

Without human control and management, trees died. However, it was also human management and intervention—though less carefully controlled—that caused these problems in the first place. The same logic applies here as in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*: attempts by authority figures (parents and police; settlers and urban planners) to manipulate the world around them generate not safety and security but death.

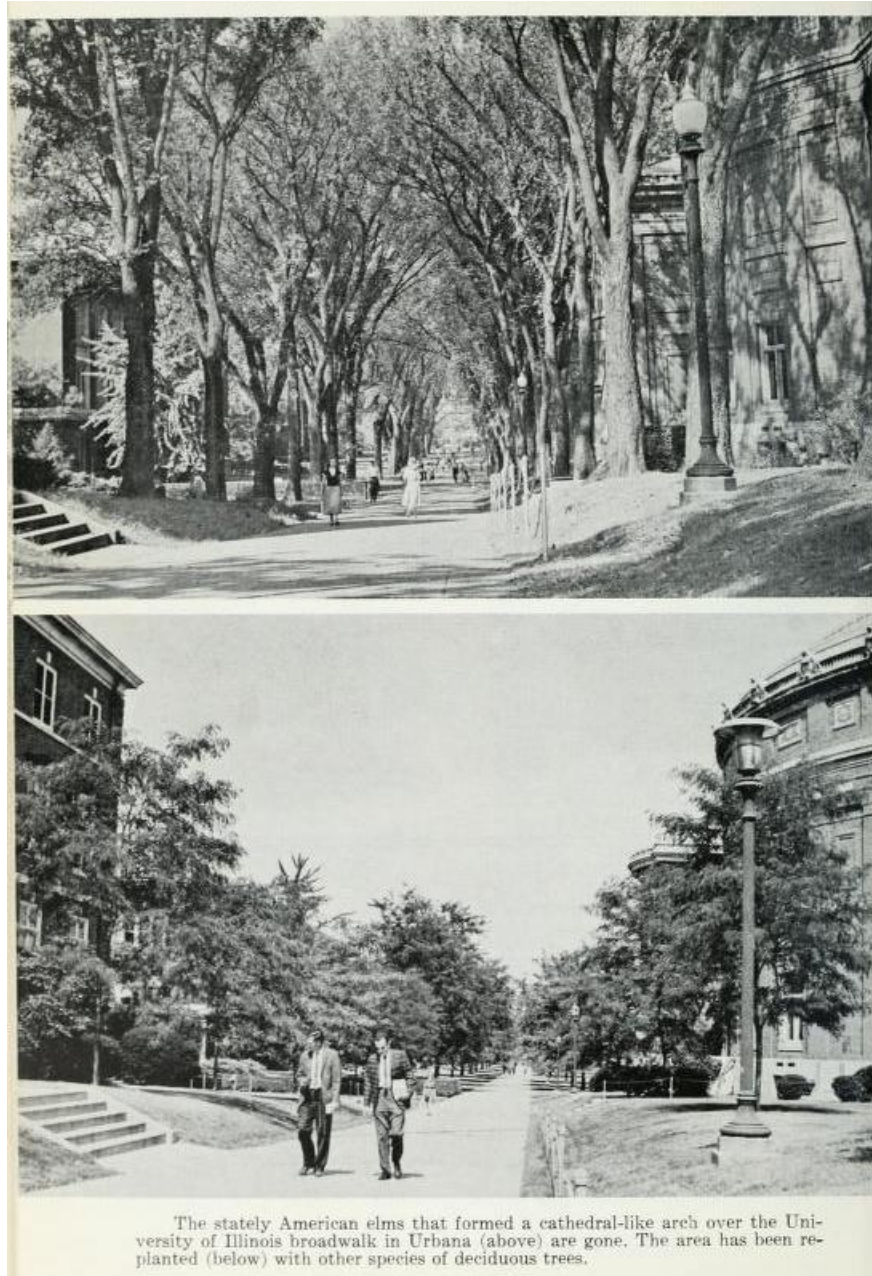


Figure 1: Carter, J. C. (1967) *Dutch Elm Disease in Illinois*. Champaign, Illinois Natural History Survey (p. 4).

The proliferation of elm trees also laid the groundwork for the spread of the disease that destroyed them, indicating the limits of short-sighted attempts at domestication and of humanity's power over the natural world (both trees and disease). The symmetrical, systematically planted, and 'scientifically managed' trees were 'living paradoxes, valued for their unnatural naturalness' (Friss, 2020: p. 6), and such paradoxes could not be sustained. The elm-lined streets (and Elm Streets) that were established across the rest of the developing nation extended this 'unnatural naturalness' further, manipulating the expanding nation (whether Ohio or California) into an unnatural new form that could not last. Campanella (2003) writes,

'The decimation of the elms in its wake altered the ecology and the environmental quality of countless city streets. It was a natural organism, set loose in an alien environment, that destroyed New England's elms. But it was human design that stacked nature's deck against the tree. Elm Street was, in spite of its natural appearance, a highly artificial creation' (p. 165).

The very 'natural unnaturalness' valued in the trees and the 'highly artificial creation' of Elm Street itself is what gave DED an advantage. In 'natural' circumstances, the elms would have had more of a chance to survive; the spread of DED would have been slower and its success would not have destroyed entire suburban and urban environments.

Human failures to control the natural world occurred with attempts to halt the disease, too. Early efforts focused on insecticides, but this did not work well—the insects spreading DED were so small and the trees so large. Spray programmes went on for decades nevertheless. Next, cities began to remove trees: 'In 1977 alone, the City of Minneapolis tagged a staggering 31,475 publicly owned diseased trees. Even if removal crews could work every day of the year, including weekends and holidays, this would require 83 trees *per day* to be removed and disposed of' (BioForest Technologies, n.d.). None of this truly worked, however, and these practices were not healthy (widespread use of pesticides) or practical (the removal of stunning numbers of trees every day).

Although the history of elms and DED is never explicitly mentioned in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, it provides important context for the film; in addition, both history and film employ

the same logic. In *Nightmare*, Freddy Krueger—rather than DED—threatens the suburbs, and parents’ attempts to control and kill him fail. Their methods mirror the disposal methods for infected elm trees: ‘In rural areas, they may be burned. In urban areas, take them to a designated disposal site’ (Beaulieu, 2008, n.p.). Once thinking of the two—DED and *Nightmare on Elm Street*—as linked, it is hard not to see attempts to control the disease by burning trees as echoed by the attempts to control—and remove—Freddy Krueger by burning him, too. However, both attempts at control fail. Neither responses to DED nor the murder of Freddy Krueger address the underlying issues. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* reiterates, both in the history that creates Elm Street and in the plot of the film, that these levels of control are not possible. Both suburban tree-lined neighborhoods in general and Elm Street in particular are revealed to be haunted by the desire to *control* and by the losses resulting from this desire—and from its failures.

### **From Forest to Suburbs: Elm Street and Deforestation**

This history of Elm Street builds upon—and risks obscuring—an even longer history of trees and suburbs, and the story of elm trees’ spread and destruction is only part of what shapes *A Nightmare on Elm Street*’s inattention to trees. Another haunting lurks behind this one, and it is about not just the design of the suburbs but the *fact* of the suburbs. As a stereotypical suburb, Elm Street is a no-place haunted by nostalgia for an imagined past. It is both utopian—*ou-topos*, no place, and *eu-topos*, good place (at least in its ideals)—and Gothic.<sup>8</sup> Bernice Murphy (2009) outlines this relationship between the utopian and the Gothic in the suburbs: the suburban dream is ‘[a] bucolic refuge from the overcrowded and polluted cities’ that, in the Suburban Gothic, becomes a nightmarish ‘[d]estroyer of the countryside and devourer of natural resources’ and ‘claustrophobic breeding ground for dysfunctionality and abuse’ (p. 3). The elms of America’s Elm Streets present the image of ‘a bucolic refuge’, an un-polluted home, but the monoculture created by planting elms and only elms leads to destruction and, quite literally, a ‘claustrophobic breeding ground’ for the insects that carry the disease. Further, Murphy observes, ‘one of the most interesting things about the Suburban Gothic is that specific geographical location is so rarely a significant factor in such

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<sup>8</sup> I have in mind Chris Baldick’s (1992) definition: ‘For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration’ (p. xix).

works. The sheer ubiquity of the suburban landscape is such that it matters little where exactly in the nation the drama is set' (pp. 10-11). Elm Street is defined less by its geographic and historical specificity, therefore, and more by the concept of suburbia—a place populated by wholesome middle American nuclear families who have white picket fences, green grass, and a car in every garage. This suburban ideal is both real and unreal, brought into being in the mid-twentieth century but never as simple as it seems. Elm Street is haunted by the history and concept of suburbia, but the environmental history of the suburbs begins before Dutch elm disease and must also include the loss of wild nature, specifically forests.

Although the geographical location of Elm Street is irrelevant to its identity as a suburb and its place in the Suburban Gothic, its location *is* critical to addressing its environmental history. The film is set in the fictitious town of Springwood, Ohio, the name of which is another gesture toward the significance of trees to this film. Ohio is fitting not only because it is a stand-in for an idea of Middle America (not the East Coast, not the West) but also because Ohio has been identified as the earliest location for Dutch elm disease in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Ohio's history of development is also a history of deforestation. According to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Forests, the state was 95% forested when settlers first arrived, but '[b]y the first decade of the 1900s, forest cover had dropped to 10 percent of the state' (n.p.). Furthermore, a pamphlet from Audubon Ohio points out, 'In the rush to develop the state, nearly every tree was cut. Cities, highways, and farm fields took the place of forests in many areas' (Hissong and Schaefer, 2010: n.p.). The maps below (Figures 2-4) illustrate the widespread loss of virgin forests, not only in Ohio but across the nation, and vividly represent Stewart L. Udall's (1963) mid-century observation that '[t]he common assumption was that trees, like Indians, were an obstacle to settlement, and the woodsmen were therefore pioneers of progress' (p. 55). This destruction in the name of progress was not solely the result of suburbanisation, but it is difficult to disentangle the development of cities, industry, farming, and suburbs. And certainly urban and suburban sprawl have not been *good* for the natural environment. Suburbs, therefore, were built

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<sup>9</sup> Despite this setting, the movie was filmed entirely in the Los Angeles area. This provides another explanation for the dearth of elms in the film because, although there are some elm trees in California, they are not as common there; in fact, the film actually includes many more palm trees than it does elms. The contrast between its setting and its filming locations, although not uncommon in Hollywood film, further underscores the loss of the trees. Not only are the elms dead or dying in real life, but they are only conceptual presences in the film. Ghosts.

on the sites of lost forests, and an ecocritical reading of a film about suburbs and missing trees must grapple with this.

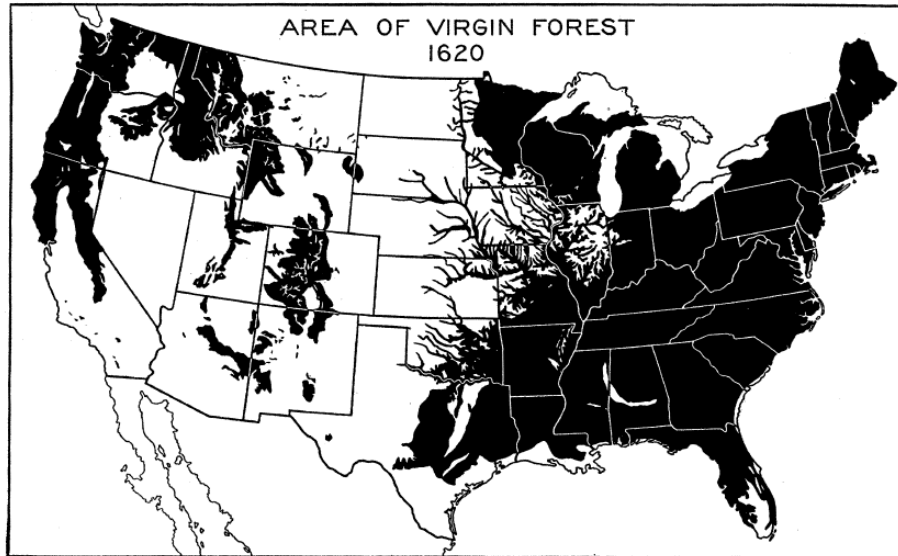


FIGURE 2.—When the early colonists settled along the Atlantic Coast nearly all the country east of the Mississippi River, and much land to the westward, notably in Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and the Pacific Northwest, was covered with a vast virgin forest,—about 820 million acres in all. (Map from U. S. Forest Service.)

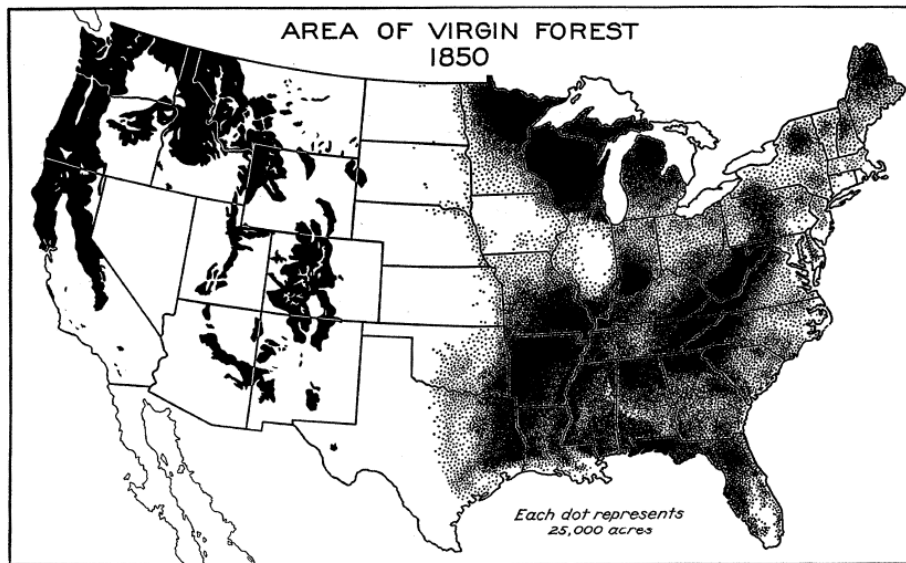


FIGURE 3.—Even in 1850 much of the forest in the eastern United States was still in a virgin condition, and the forests in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific states had scarcely been touched by man. The map was based on estimates by states and the dots are not all correctly located. Northwestern instead of south central Ohio should be densest, as the Black Swamp was almost a solid forest in 1850. Northern Indiana should likewise show a denser distribution of virgin forest, and in southern Indiana, where settlement first occurred, the dotting should be thinner. (Map from U. S. Forest Service.)



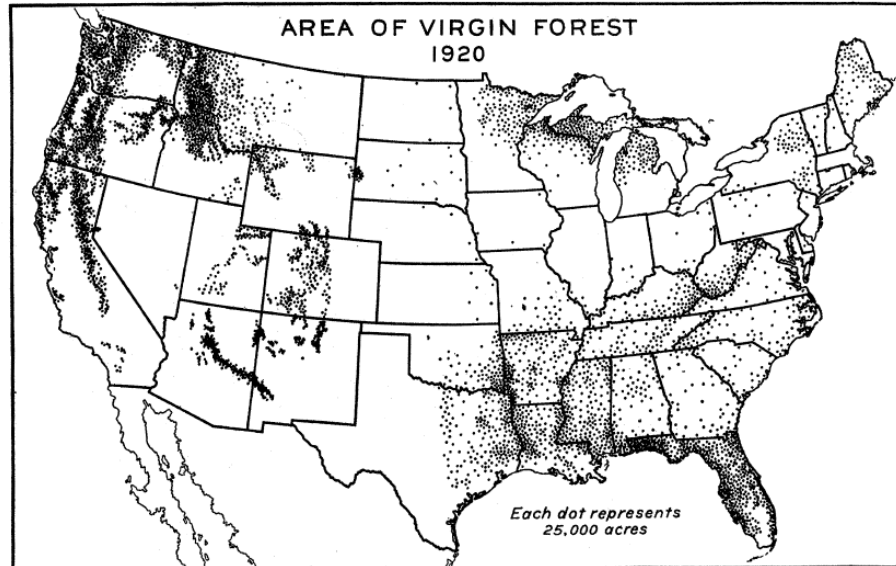


FIGURE 4.—By 1920 the area of virgin timber in the United States had been reduced to about 138 million acres, of which more than half was in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Coast states. Culled and second growth trees of sufficient size for lumber covered about 114 million acres more, and there were about 136 million acres of forest having small young growth or trees of cord-wood size. In the United States in 1920 the amount of virgin timber has been estimated at 1,600 billion board feet, and the culled and second growth stands at 600 billion feet, a total of 2,200 billion feet, as compared with probably 5,200 billion feet originally. Over half of this remaining saw timber is in the Pacific Coast states. (Map from U. S. Forest Service.)

Figures 2-4: These maps representing virgin forests in the United States in 1620, 1850, and 1920 show the dramatic deforestation that occurred as a result of 19<sup>th</sup> century expansion and industrialisation (Greeley, 1925: pp. 4-5).

However, these lost forests cannot simply be romanticised. As Robert Pogue Harrison (1992) writes, ‘The forest is at once a temple of living pillars and a scene of horror, an enchanted wood and a wood of abandon’ (p. 183). Descriptions of the Ohio forest similarly emphasise not only their beauty but also the fear they inspired:

‘Imagine a land of endless forest. Enormous old trees shade the ground. Clean rivers full of fish wind through the thick forest. Wild animals and birds are plentiful.

It may be hard to imagine today, but this is what Ohio once looked like. The first European explorers to visit the Ohio territory were amazed. They had never seen such grand forests and big trees. After many days of traveling under the thick forest, they thought they would never see the sky again. They were thankful when they finally came to an opening in the forest’ (Hissong and Schaefer, 2010, n.p.).

William Cronon (1996) articulates this fear of forests and wilderness more fully and places it in a larger historical context:

‘Go back 250 years in American and European history, and you do not find nearly so many people wandering around remote corners of the planet looking for what today we would call “the wilderness experience.” As late as the eighteenth century, the most common usage of the word “wilderness” in the English language referred to landscapes that generally carried adjectives far different from the ones they attract today. To be a wilderness then was to be “deserted,” “savage,” “desolate,” “barren”—in short, a “waste,” the word’s nearest synonym. Its connotations were anything but positive, and the emotion one was most likely to feel in its presence was “bewilderment” or terror’ (p. 8).

Although Cronon goes on to note that attitudes toward wilderness shifted dramatically in the nineteenth century as forests were removed and wild spaces domesticated, these older ideas did not disappear entirely. Elizabeth Parker (2020) indicates this in her analysis of the Gothic forest, which extends from ancient literature and fairy tales to twenty-first-century fantasy and horror. She writes, ‘The Deep Dark Forest is exactly that—deep and dark—and the exact source of its terrors is often mysterious, shadowy, and just out of sight. In Arthur Machen’s words: the forest contains some “awful secret”’ (pp. 2-3). The history of deforestation and fear insists that we consider the suburbs in relation to those lost (or defeated) forests, with the suburbs representing both civilisation as successful conqueror of the wilderness and ‘civilisation’ as destroyer of nature’s beauty.

The suburbs may not be deep and dark, but there are shadows there—and, as we see in *Nightmare*—there are definitely awful secrets. John Carpenter’s comments on suburbia as horror setting illuminate the source of fear within it:

‘A lot of horror films in the past were set in a haunted house or some dark environment to begin with, so that you’re immediately alerted to the fact that, oh, this is going to be scary. Well, the harder thing to do then is to take a horror movie

and put it into a suburban atmosphere, with a nice little row of houses and beautiful manicured lawns and some place that you can assume is very safe. Because if horror can get there, it can get anywhere . . . Suburbia is supposed to be safe. Your house is supposed to be a sanctuary. Nowadays, maybe because of conditions beyond our control, there is no sanctuary' (Qtd. in Murphy, 2009: p. 143).

The shift from 'some dark environment' (like the forest) to perceived sanctuary in his formulation indicates a contrast, but the contrast is only superficial. 'Suburbia is supposed to be safe', he says, but it is not.

What we find in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is not, of course, the deep dark forest, and, with the loss of the forest, internal spaces take on the role it fulfills elsewhere—but these spaces still bear traces of the forest. For instance, during Nancy's dream at school, when she wanders the school hallways and descends into the basement to find Freddy, her abandonment of the safe schoolroom for dangerous, isolated hallways is marked by dead leaves floating in the hall. These leaves come from no discernible tree and make no sense in this space, except as a reminder of death and the forest. Elizabeth Parker (2020) writes, 'Though our forests may be increasingly out of sight, they are not out of mind. Far from it. As [Robert Pogue] Harrison attests, they are "everywhere in the fossil record of cultural memory". Indeed, forests loom all the larger in the popular imagination *because* they are increasingly destroyed. The woods—symbolically—are all around us' (p. 12). Carpenter's suggestion that the loss of sanctuary in suburbia might be 'because of conditions beyond our control' is belied by the environmental history addressed here; the suburbs are human-created, including their dangers and their ghosts. And, as the association between dead leaves and Nancy's nightmare of Freddy Krueger indicates, although the actual forest may no longer exist as a threat, the *idea* of the forest still triggers anxiety.

This anxiety about the forest shaped the suburbs, led to the monocultural planting of elm trees (which then hastened their destruction), and has played a role in the ongoing environmental destruction we now live with. Thomas Fahy's (2019) ecocritical reading of the film (and series) puts this in a larger context:

‘The eighties witnessed devastating heat waves, a shortage of landfills, and enough damage to the ozone layer to exacerbate fears about global warming. Like the rest of America, the Elm Street teens contributed to these problems. Not only did they eat too much junk food, but they also spent too much money on cars, clothes, exercise equipment, video games, and other material goods that taxed natural resources. [...] Whether through the development of tract housing, the car culture enabling it, or the goods filling these houses, suburbia posed a serious ecological threat in the 1980s. Such an interpretation aligns with actor Robert Englund’s reading of his character. In a 1988 interview, he explained that “Freddy is pollution. Freddy is evil. Freddy is what’s wrong with the world [. . .] racism, pollution, child molestation, child abuse, alcohol, drugs” (Fo 72). Freddy, in other words, represents the harm we do to ourselves, each other, and the planet’ (p. 5).

Fahy focuses here on the ecological threat of 1980s suburbia, but an ecocritical reading of *Nightmare* should look backward, too, and address the history of suburbia’s trees: deforestation, overmanagement, monoculture, disease.

This reading not only challenges the sense of suburbia as sanctuary but also creates a space for acknowledging its haunted environmental history. Suburban elm trees *are* the deep, dark forest tamed and rearranged along suburban streets.<sup>10</sup> By selecting only particular trees to line suburban streets (creating a monoculture and domesticating wild nature) and simultaneously removing pre-existing forests, settlers and urban planners created a sanctuary full of ghosts, a double haunting. Although the suburban elms are meant to be tamer, safer versions of nature, they still exceed human control and stand in our neighborhoods, outside our homes, as the ghostly fragments of the deep dark forest, as reminders of what has been lost. By the 1980s—and *A Nightmare on Elm*

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<sup>10</sup> Historically, this process occurred across the United States, on the prairies as well as the forests. Dara Downey (2014) observes ‘the irreducibly paradoxical attitude toward the great outdoors in the United States – the longing for open, uninhabited spaces, and the fear of actually occupying them’ (p. 137). As settlers moved West, they found these open, uninhabited spaces and tamed them—in response to this fear—by transforming them into domesticated versions of home back East, elm trees and all.

*Street*—the elms have gone, and what remains are the ghosts of ghosts. What remains are the empty spaces where fragments of the forest once stood.<sup>11</sup>

### **‘Just a Dream’: Silence, Denial, and Reckoning with Ghosts**

*A Nightmare on Elm Street* is haunted, therefore, not just by Freddy Krueger but by elm trees and lost forests, raising the spectre of the American elm and the American forest while also suppressing the knowledge of the trees’ loss. The film’s silence about Dutch elm disease and deforestation connects past, present, and future; it draws a history of environmental loss and destruction into the present, and it gestures toward a future of even further loss in the face of climate change and denial of environmental damage (both historical and ongoing).

*A Nightmare on Elm Street* thus illustrates what I call an ecohorror of omission. Adding to Rust and Soles’ argument that ecohorror includes ‘texts in which humans do horrific things to the natural world’ and ‘horrific texts and tropes are used to promote ecological awareness’ (p. 510), *Nightmare* points to a form of ecohorror that does not actively represent such harm or promote ecological awareness. Further, where Rust and Soles argue that in ecohorror ‘environmental disruption is haunting humanity’s relationship to the non-human world’ (p. 510), *Nightmare* demonstrates that humanity’s relationship to the nonhuman world is also haunted by *silence* about environmental disruption and provides another vision of what environmental disruption might look like—invisible, marked by absence, overlooked in the text. This approach to ecohorror builds on Avery F. Gordon’s (1997) discussion of ghosts and offers a way to start our analyses ‘with the marginal, with what we normally exclude or banish, or, more commonly, with what we never even notice’ (pp. 24-25). The ecohorror of omission requires paying attention to the environmental disruptions that are overlooked and the environmental histories that are taken for granted.

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<sup>11</sup> It must be acknowledged that it is not just the forests that were forcibly removed. As Renée Bergland writes, every suburban home must be haunted because of America’s ‘history of murders, looted graves, illegal land transfers and disruptions of sovereignty’ (p. 8); therefore, ‘the land is haunted because it is stolen’ (p. 9). In fact, she writes, ‘In another context, setting out to build a haunted house would be absurd. However, in America, where every white house displaces an Indian one [...], it may be inevitable’ (60).

*A Nightmare on Elm Street's* ecohorror of omission shares a concern with blindness and amnesia (or forgetting) that recurs in many discussions of plants, landscapes, and our relationship to them. This follows Ingrid M. Parker's argument that 'to understand the relationship of humans to our landscape today, we have to come to terms with two challenges, which I will call amnesia and blindness' (2017, p. M160). For instance, Monica Gagliano (2016) argues that 'our modern Western societies are afflicted by *plant blindness*, a pervasive condition inherited from our forefather Aristotle and accountable for the current state of vegetal disregard and hence environmental catastrophe' (p. 19). *A Nightmare on Elm Street* illustrates that we are too often blind not just to the plants themselves but to the *loss* of them as well. And Dara Downey (2014) turns to the relationship between memory and landscape, arguing that 'memory is what makes a landscape a fit place in which both to live and work [...] A landscape that calls to mind past horrors is haunted by the ghosts of those who endured them, while situating those horrors firmly *in* the past' (p. 151). When those ghosts and horrors go unnamed, however, a new danger arises. As Downey writes, 'The nineteenth-century (fictional) American West was a scarred landscape precisely because it refused to show its scars' (p. 151). Although *Nightmare* addresses a different historical context than the nineteenth-century women's ghost stories that Downey analyses, this logic illuminates a central issue: there is a haunting presence on Elm Street (Freddy Krueger and the missing trees), but this haunting presence is made more dangerous by the lack of memory and by the suburb's unwillingness to 'show its scars'. Finally, Elaine Gan et al. (2017) address the environmental amnesia that accretes over time:

'As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what was there before. Ecologists call this forgetting the "shifting baseline syndrome." Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality. Admiring one landscape and its biological entanglements often entails forgetting many others. Forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages over others' (p. G6).

This tendency to forget what came before is exemplified by the way *Elm Street's* histories of environmental disruption must be excavated layer by layer. The suburban trees we know now seem normal, but they are only traces of the elm-lined streets planted decades before, which are themselves only traces of the forests that stood before settlers removed them.

The omissions that produce such hauntings can be unintentional; however, the ecohorror of omission is founded not only on ‘what we never even notice’ (Gordon, 1997: p. 25) but on what we *choose* not to notice. Here, omissions reinforce ongoing apathy about environmental disruption and, more specifically, climate change. Kim Stanley Robinson’s (2012) description of the period we live in now as the Dithering (2005-2060) identifies the problem—not ignorance but inaction. Robinson also predicts the resentment that future generations will feel: ‘How they despised the generations of the Dithering, who had heedlessly pushed the climate into a change with an unstoppable momentum to it, continuing not only into the present but for centuries more to come’ (p. 316). This goes beyond ignorance to denial.

This denial and refusal to understand is a significant element of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, too, and is directly linked to the generational divide within the film. It is clear that the teenagers of the film are suffering the consequences of their parents’ past actions—and their current *inaction*. As Murphy (2009) writes, ‘The parents of Elm Street may have aroused Krueger’s wrath, but it is ultimately up to Nancy to face him alone’ (p. 153). Tony Williams (1996) similarly argues that ‘*Nightmare on Elm Street* emphasises the dangerous nature of parental silence. On many occasions it indirectly aids Freddy’ (p. 228). Parents are not simply silent, though, but actively in denial. Because they ‘do not believe what their children are telling them’ (Heba, 1995: p. 110), they are therefore ‘as dangerous to the young people as Freddy Krueger, the “monster”’ (ibid.: pp. 108-9). This scene between Nancy and her mother, Marge, demonstrates the centrality of parental denial. Nancy demands information from her mother—‘Do you know who that is, Mother? Because if you do you better tell me because he’s after *me* now!’—and accuses her of avoiding responsibility by ‘getting good and loaded’. Her mother repeatedly insists that Nancy will feel better after some sleep, denying her own knowledge and refusing to take responsibility, leading to this exchange:

Nancy: ‘Screw sleep!’

Marge: ‘It’s just a nightmare!’

Nancy: ‘That’s enough.’

What Nancy knows and Marge denies is that although Freddy Krueger's murders are a nightmare, they are not *just* a nightmare. Nightmares are powerful, and so is parental denial, but neither must be accepted without a fight. The Dithering demands the same logic. Climate change is a terrifying threat—a nightmare—but it is not something that we can ignore out of existence.

The ecohorror of omission is—necessarily—a wake-up call for its audience. As Gan et al. (2017) observe, forgetting is powerful, '[y]et ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces' (p. G6). Ghosts and hauntings are not simply negative; they are valuable reminders and can prompt action. As Gordon (1997) writes, 'If you let it, the ghost can lead you toward what has been missing, which is sometimes everything' (pp. 57-58). Thus, once omissions, silences, and denials are made visible, we have a choice to make: Do we continue to pretend there is no problem? Or do we take action? One tagline for *A Nightmare on Elm Street* says, 'If Nancy doesn't wake up screaming she won't wake up at all'. The same is true for us. We must wake up screaming or we will have no future to wake up to.

The ending of the film enacts the latter possibility. In the final dream, Nancy sees the truth of Freddy and addresses him directly, but her resistance is still fundamentally a denial: 'I know the secret now. This is just a dream. You're not alive. This whole thing is just a dream'. She turns to face him and says, in what should be a vanquishing move, 'I want my mother and friends again. I take back every bit of energy I gave you. You're nothing. You're shit'. This seems to work, since Freddy reaches for her and fails to grab her, then he disappears. However, the concluding scene of the film immediately negates this success. In this scene, Nancy and her once-again-living friends get into a car decorated with Freddy's distinctive stripes and are driven away while screaming for help; in the meantime, Nancy's mother smiles in the sunshine (still in denial) before being dragged back into the house by Freddy. Nancy denies Freddy's reality, following in her mother's footsteps, and fails to vanquish him. Neither Nancy's attempt to kill Freddy (again), repeating the parents' attempts at vigilante justice and control, nor her denial of his reality effectively deal with Freddy and what he represents.



An ecohorror of omission acknowledges and does not deny ‘hauntings, ghosts and gaps, seething absences, and muted presences’ (Gordon, 1997: p. 21) and thereby opens the possibility of healing. In *Nightmare*, awareness of the trees’ ghostly presence provides the potential for audiences to overcome our plant blindness, our amnesia, and our denial. One of the central features of haunting, Gordon explains, is that the ghost is ‘pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding. This something to be done is not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present, a reckoning with that which we have lost, but never had’ (p. 183). This movement between past and present—and toward the future—evokes Ryan Hediger’s (2019) concept of homesickness. Hediger writes that homesickness allows us to ‘embrace a nonlinear movement in time, returning to older texts with new concerns in order to revisit them and reframe the present’ (p. 9). Further, he argues, ‘Such homesick modes of recursive interpretation loosen the firmness of the present and facilitate rethinking possibilities of the future. [...] The past is present and helps dictate the future’ (p. 9). *A Nightmare on Elm Street* invites this kind of homesickness and uses ‘the more-than-rational power of images, dreams, and feelings to jar us out of the small cabins of our selfhood’ (Hediger, 2019: p. 284). The more-than-rational here also primes us to look for ghosts and, hopefully, to see them. ‘Do you believe in the boogeyman?’, Nancy asks. Within *Nightmare*’s ecohorror of omission, we must say yes in order to experience the ‘transformative recognition’ (Gordon, 1997: p. 8) required to reckon with the ghosts of environmental history and to shape a new future.

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**All You Need Is Love?: Making the Selfish Choice in *The Cabin at the End of the World* and  
*The Migration***

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Cabin at the End of the World* (2018) by Paul Tremblay and *The Migration* (2019) by Helen Marshall explore the prospect of choosing a loved one's survival over the preservation of humanity as a whole. These texts are set in worlds defined by two very divergent but fast encroaching Apocalypses, whether this is expressed via the characters' isolation in a North American cabin or in Oxfordshire as they become cut-off from the world by increasingly extreme weather conditions. The small family of *Cabin* are held hostage and forced to make an impossible choice—pick one member to die or the world ends—whereas the family of Marshall's text are faced with a longer battle to protect the family unit against a mysterious and horrifying epidemic targeting teenagers, eventually revealed to be a new stage of evolution, at the cost of preserving human civilisation as they know it.

This article will explore the ramifications of such a choice in the wider context of ecoGothic, arguing that these texts both advocate different forms of selfishness in the face of environmental disaster. Where Marshall's protagonist represents the fear that humanity has already lost the fight against climate catastrophe, Tremblay's novel proffers a symbolic triumph of togetherness in the direst of circumstances. These explorations of two very different family units reflect a turn towards resignation in the cultural response to climate change. Both reflect the apathy that can result from improperly processing the losses of global environmental catastrophe, but they each offer divergent solutions: *The Migration's* protagonist Sophie sees no future for humanity, whereas Eric and Andrew of *Cabin* see no future without it.

Paul Tremblay's novel *The Cabin at the End of the World* (2018) and Helen Marshall's novel *The Migration* (2019) both centre on the prospect of looming environmental collapse kept at a distance, separated from their human protagonists by virtue of sturdy cabin walls, cars, or advances in medical science. What is kept unthinkable and out of reach remains dark and catastrophic, difficult to contemplate at any great length. In *Cabin*, a series of huge environmental disasters spells the end of the Holocene, whereas in *The Migration* the rapid spread of a terminal illness targets the young and transforms them into strangely alien insectile beings. These events are horrifying because their narrators—their witnesses—have ignored the approach of these events for so long, letting them build up until they became impossible to ignore. These narrators are then pushed to sacrifice a loved one in order to preserve humanity, all while their disintegrating environments convey the fear that their choice whether or not to sacrifice is merely a formality and that humanity has already lost the fight against climate catastrophe.

As discussed by Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (2017), contemporary Gothic texts often incorporate commentary on the social and existential consequences of neoliberal ideologies. In this sense, these texts are performing 'the same kind of cultural work that was carried out by the gothic mode in earlier periods of socio-economic turbulence' (p. 1), such as the *fin de siècle*. Blake and Soltysik Monnet argue that the family home has become 'the primary site of everyday life under neoliberalism' (p. 11) with the neoliberal subject 'recast as agent of his or her individual destiny' (p. 4). The fate of the family in *Cabin* in particular is overtly a result of their specific choices, reflecting the individualistic prioritisation at the heart of neoliberal ideology. However, these novels reflect less on their characters' individual financial or socioeconomic choices and more on their distress over the broader world they are losing. *The Migration* was not marketed as a young adult novel—front cover endorsements from Neil Gaiman, M. R. Carey and Paul Tremblay situate it within the adult science fiction/fantasy/horror field—but it often reads like one, adhering to a familiar coming-of-age structure with a parental conflict and a budding romance while also attempting to tell a much darker story about the end of the Holocene. *Cabin* was significantly more commercially and critically successful than *The Migration*; the film rights

were acquired by FilmNation before the book's release and it received the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award for Novel in 2018. It is also rather easier to categorise, with praise from Stephen King, Mariana Enriquez and Caroline Kepnes emphasising the claustrophobic tension of its premise and situating it clearly within the field of contemporary adult horror.

Despite these differences in tone and reception, *Cabin* and *The Migration* share similar concerns. Both texts explore the build-up of emotion surrounding climate catastrophe and its associated losses, indicating the apathetic hopelessness that can result when the necessary process of mourning for those losses is delayed or denied. However, neither text is precisely elegiac in the manner of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) or Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), both of which place an emphasis on mourning for what has already been lost. Instead, Tremblay and Marshall use hallmarks of the horror genre such as high stakes and claustrophobic intensity to convey their characters' worldview narrowing down to the preservation of their own immediate circle of loved ones. While their acts of love are engaging on a personal level, the characters' collective rejection of sacrifice as a valid method of tackling climate catastrophe evokes the harsh and haunting consequences of such inflexibility. They respond with panic when forced into action and are eventually unable to sacrifice anything personal in the hopes of forestalling an apocalyptic outcome, indicating the dire need to engage more directly with the loss provoked by climate catastrophe so that more assertive action can be taken without succumbing to hopelessness. As Rosemary Randall (2009) argues, '[w]hen loss remains unspoken, neither grieved nor worked through, then change and adjustment cannot follow' (p. 119). As part of the horror tradition, these characters are placed within pressurised and traumatic circumstances when asked to make sacrifices for the greater good, but their refusal to do so reflects the limited and panicked way in which people often respond when faced with humanity's responsibility for climate change.

In *Cabin*, the creeping horror of climate change infiltrates the home through news reports on increasingly frequent natural disasters. *The Migration* depicts the effects of extreme weather seeping into the family home over the course of months. Both texts posit nature as the Other which infiltrates, fitting common definitions of the ecoGothic given by prominent academics. For example, Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (2017) define ecoGothic as an ecocritical lens



which ‘orients us [...] to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with nonhuman ecologies’ (p. 1). Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013) define it as a genre which fills in uncomfortable gaps, arguing broadly that the intersection of Gothic and ecocriticism seeks to confront the ‘semiotic problem’ that nature poses (p. 3). David Del Principe (2014) is more specific, arguing that ‘[i]n contemporary society, the [e]coGothic serves to give voice to ingrained biases and a mounting ecophobia – fears stemming from humans’ precarious relationship with all that is nonhuman’ (p. 1). This is the definition which I will be proceeding with, as it mostly closely relates to the texts under discussion: the families of *Cabin* and *The Migration* fear nature getting *in*, dissolving the boundary between the human and the nonhuman. They fear the loss of the creature comforts which have come to define that boundary, resulting in a reluctance to engage with ecological destruction and humanity’s collective responsibility for it.

This concern is not limited to ecoGothic. Many scholars of ecocriticism have expounded on this train of thought more broadly, not least Randall in a more sociological capacity and Timothy Morton from a literary perspective. Morton’s *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2018) engages extensively with the prospect of a future too dark to contemplate, as well as the sheer ‘weirdness’ of admitting responsibility for climate change on an individual basis:

‘Every time I start my car or steam engine I don’t mean to harm Earth, let alone cause the Sixth Mass Extinction Event in the four-and-a-half billion-year history of life on this planet. [...] Furthermore, I’m not harming Earth! My key turning is statistically meaningless. In an individual sense this turn isn’t weird at all’ (p. 8).

But admit responsibility we must, as Morton insists. We all form part of the whole: ‘I am responsible as a member of this species for the Anthropocene. Of course I am formally responsible to the extent that I understand global warming. That’s all you actually need to be responsible for something’ (p. 8).

This sense of responsibility seems simple but is profoundly difficult to process and accept, as articulated by George Marshall in *Carbon Detox* (2007) when discussing the slow emotional impact of environmental campaigning: ‘Belief in climate change is not a switch – it exists in

degrees and it takes years to acquire' (p. 88). George Marshall's description of the 'B-roll of visual clichés' which usually accompanies climate change reporting—'sweating penguins, polar bears stranded on icebergs [...] shimmering heat over cracked earth'—reflects the supposition mentioned above that (to Western viewers) 'climate change is caused by something else, happens somewhere else and will affect someone else' (p. 14). Tremblay and Marshall are able to construct their apocalypses from relatively scant material on the actual page simply by gesturing at apocalyptic events that are happening somewhere in the distance, drawing on the anxiety which characterises prominent discourses surrounding climate change. Fear of environmental disaster is just that intense; the concept of climate catastrophe has ballooned in recent years until it has come to encompass most, if not all, visions of the future. *Cabin* and *Migration* are not deliberately inflammatory representations of characters who refuse to engage with this idea out of a sense of malice or lack of care, but expressions of this build-up of climate anxiety, as well as dread of the alterations that must occur if it is to be averted. Pretending that climate change is something that happens somewhere out there, to other people, and probably in the future instead of right now, has the inevitable effect of rendering it the bogeyman: '[t]he present continues to feel safe but at the expense of the future becoming terrifying. On the one hand, nightmare, on the other false comfort' (Randall, 2009: p. 119). This encourages the perspective that the situation is hopeless, leading to the entropy which characterises Sophie's narration in particular.

Both books contain calls to action which sit in tension with the acknowledged struggle of taking that action. Tremblay and Marshall capitalise on the emotional pull of familial relationships to personalise a situation which often seems abstract and too huge to contemplate. In *Cabin*, familial love is characterised as the last outpost of a species which has lost other means of hope—the family in question wins a triumph of personal integrity in being unable to sacrifice what they love for the sake of humanity's survival. In *The Migration*, the representation of family ties is more complicated as the narrator saves her beloved little sister's dead body from the authorities only to watch her evolve into one of the insectile creatures believed to be the next stage of evolution. In both cases, the end of the Holocene becomes abruptly personal and urgent. *The Migration* finds hope in a new evolution and the abandonment of humanity, whereas *Cabin* suggests real hope lies in the preservation of human connection. In true American tradition, Tremblay privileges a triumph of personal integrity over survival, following in the footsteps of *Bartleby's* passive resistance in

‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ (1853) by Herman Melville and John Proctor’s refusal to sign his name to a false confession in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953), even when it costs him his life. This prioritisation of personal integrity at all costs could be interpreted as an approval of individualistic neoliberal ideologies were it not for Tremblay’s subversion of the solitude usually found at the heart of such stories. In the final pages of *Cabin*, it does not come down to just one person—Eric and Andrew make the choice to go on together, eschewing the call to sacrifice and resolving not to hurt each other. ‘We will go on’, they decide, in what seems like a deliberate and powerful reference to the last line of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable* (1953), replacing the individual ‘I’ with the promise of ‘we’.

By contrast, *The Migration* stakes its bet for the future on flight—both literal and figurative. The transformed Sophie follows her sister Kira into the sky to join the hivemind of their new forms, equipped both to fly and to communicate telepathically, rendering the continuation of human existence in a crumbling environment a moot point. Sophie’s last words to the reader—‘it is me, it is all of us’ (p. 377)—share a sense of collective experience with *Cabin*, which slips into the first person plural in its final paragraphs to telegraph a sense of coming together. However, here the similarity ends; Marshall’s novel advocates for the abandonment of current civilisation, to ‘let nature take its course’ (p. 300), a strand of thought which replicates elements of troubling ecofascist ideologies on the necessity of human extinction for the planet to thrive. To the extent that *The Migration* can envision a future at all, it is one in which our current way of life should be cast aside; it lacks faith in humanity to mitigate the impact of its mistakes. The final lines of *Cabin*, in contrast, force the reader to look beyond the boundaries of the text to the future it *knows* will exist, however challenging: ‘We will walk down the road even if it is flooded by raging waters or blocked by falling trees or if greedy fissures open beneath our feet. And we will walk the perilous roads after that one. We will go on’ (p. 315).

## **Climate Dread**

*The Migration* stretches over a longer timeframe than *Cabin*, allowing for a more insidious creep of environmental ruin which is largely accepted by protagonist Sophie. The events of *Cabin* take place within a couple of days as gay couple, Andrew and Eric, and their adopted daughter, Wen,

are held hostage in their remote holiday cabin in New Hampshire. They are told by their captors Leonard, Redmond, Sabrina, and Adriane that in order to prevent the upcoming apocalypse one of them must sacrifice another, putting a claustrophobic and sadistic twist on the home invasion trope. *Migration* engages in a more protracted sense with questions of humanity's place on earth through the lens of a pandemic plot. Protagonist Sophie and her family are Canadian but begin the novel having moved to Oxfordshire in an attempt to treat her younger sister Kira's mysterious and potentially deadly illness, the technical term for which is 'juvenile idiopathic immunodeficiency syndrome' or JI2 for short (p. 13). This is the first of two migrations reflected in the book's title; the second comes when Kira and the rest of the youths infected by the disease, transformed into insectile new forms capable of telepathy and given the nickname 'nymphs', take flight in their new forms and embark somewhere new—somewhere Sophie cannot follow until she transforms too, leaving her humanity behind.

The backdrop to the unfolding tragedy of Kira's initial death and then transformation is that of steadily worsening environmental damage. Sophie, Kira, and her mother live with Sophie's aunt Irene in a small ramshackle house next to the River Cherwell, a location frequently impacted by extreme flooding. Initially mentioned just as local colour sketching in Sophie's immediate environment, this quickly broadens out into evidence of disaster across the country:

'Storms have been worsening everywhere [...] All over England, rivers have been breaking their banks, or trying to, only held in check by levees and diversion canals. Whole villages in the south have vanished and in Wales the flooding has stripped away the peat, leaving behind ancient animal bones – bears, red deer and aurochs, things that have been extinct for hundreds of years' (p. 12-3).

Other signs of environmental breakdown, such as flying ants acting out of season because they are 'confused by the heat' (p. 154), are juxtaposed with practical consequences such as dwindling supplies of fresh food and frequent power outages. Sophie describes a normal morning eating dry toast (no tea) for breakfast standing next to the stove for warmth because the butter and milk in the fridge have soured after the power cut out during the night. Here the apocalypse is not sudden and

theatrical but slow and mundane, domestic; not one dramatic event which can be resisted but the slow creep of irreversible environmental damage.

Sophie's crumbling environment, both local and global, does not permit much of a division between nature and the human. The River Cherwell breaches its bounds not only when it floods but also more surreptitiously; the walls of Irene's house do nothing to stop it infiltrating Sophie's bedroom:

'the air [...] is so chilly I feel sheathed in ice. "It's the river," Aunt Irene told me when we arrived, "that's why it's so cold. I have to wear gloves if I want to get any work done in here. It can get colder in here than it is outside"' (p. 119).

Here, nature is characterised as a pervasive presence, something Other which penetrates civilised spaces and makes the work of human hands falter. This is in keeping with aforementioned definitions of ecoGothic by Keetley and Sivils' (2017) and Smith and Hughes (2013), both of which foreground the terror and wonder of human and nonhuman coalescing. If taken too far, as in *The Migration*, this can imply a separation between nature and culture which tacitly permits the putting-off of responsibility for things like climate change and global warming—again, if it is happening out there, outside, away, then it can be ignored, and can thus build up into a terrifying, unthinkable event which it is impossible to plan for or mediate. A perspective such as Donna Haraway's seems more constructive. Haraway (1992) argues that this common distinction between nature and culture is a convenient fiction, that nature is 'not a physical place to which one can go, nor a treasure to fence in or bank, nor an essence to be saved or violated. Nature is not hidden [...] It is not the "other"' (p. 65). Positioning nature as the 'other' which infiltrates, as *The Migration* does, only contributes to a sense of helplessness, although unlearning this may be easier said than done when most of our cultural work implies or demands a division between the two. Consider the earlier example of milk and butter going sour after an overnight power cut; this is an unrealistic detail as milk and butter were in circulation long before fridges became commonplace and presumably would not have become unusable in the circumstances described, especially considering how cold Irene's house is supposed to be. This demonstrates the cast-iron divide between the human and nature in the novel. Sophie is unable to imagine a world without

refrigeration for dairy products, conceiving herself and all the human trappings around her to be completely detached from nature.

Tremblay's *Cabin* also depicts nature in this fashion, although it portrays a much more violent intrusion. The novel's action is situated largely in a remote picturesque cabin in New Hampshire which is surrounded by staggeringly beautiful views, following the long American horror fascination with such settings. As Bernice M. Murphy (2013) wryly comments about Drew Goddard's popular horror comedy *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011), '[t]he audience doesn't need to have it explained to them that the isolated cabin in the midst of the deep, dark forest is a locale in which horrific events will take place: they've seen it all before' (p. 15). However, Tremblay's novel broadens out from home invasion horror into the realm of environmental horror, heightening the stakes of what is usually a very precise threat limited to a small group of people. Leonard, the leader of the home invaders, informs them:

'Your family must choose to willingly sacrifice one of your three in order to prevent the apocalypse. After you make what I know is an impossible choice, you must then kill whoever it is you choose. If you fail [...] the world will end' (p. 99).

That Eric and Andrew initially do not take Leonard's ultimatum seriously is no great surprise. However, as the hours tick down and the family is forced to witness seemingly large-scale environmental destruction occurring on the news, including multiple earthquakes, a tsunami in Hawaii and a freak number of plane crashes, their incredulity begins to seem more pointed. They are held hostage not only to their own fate but to the fate of humanity at large, with the unthinkable prospect of an environmental apocalypse for which they are responsible gradually invading their home, previously seen as an island of safety in the wilderness. *Cabin* thus acts as a cautionary tale demonstrating how unease and grief at the prospect of climate crisis can build up to such an extent that it becomes an unthinkable horror, impossible to deal with or make changes for because it annihilates the moment it becomes visible.

Before the home invasion begins, Tremblay is careful to highlight exactly how isolated this presumed oasis is. Eric and Andrew are lounging on the back deck overlooking the lake while

Leonard's crew approach from the front, with Eric pondering 'the ancient humpbacks of the White Mountains in the south', noting that the 'surrounding landscape is as spectacularly New England as it is alien to their everyday urban lives' (p. 34). Wen later notes that '[h]er dads chose this place because there would be no Wi-Fi or cell reception so they could unplug and it would be just the three of them hanging out, swimming, talking, playing cards or board games without any digital distractions' (p. 47). The family choose the cabin specifically in order to escape from the pressures of work and the city; they *choose* isolation in what they imagine to be a safe section of nature, only for that isolation to turn against them. The threat of environmental ruin begins at a distance, postponed by the more immediate threat of the home invasion, but as the narrative progresses it seeps into the house through the television, an agent of culture they indulgently dismissed previously as a 'digital distraction' (p. 47).

Tremblay never confirms whether or not the apocalypse is actually taking place. The environmental disasters witnessed on the television are too far away and too huge to be witnessed personally by Eric and Andrew, the only survivors at the close of the novel. They initially assume that the home invaders could be faking the disasters and acting with ulterior motives. However, this theory is cast into doubt once it becomes apparent that the home invaders are compelled to sacrifice one of their number every time the family refuses to do so. This ghoulish pattern of ritual murder-suicide, in addition to their sheer ineptness and reluctance to participate, suggests that they are victims of circumstance too. Leonard, at least, truly believes himself to be merely a 'vessel' at the mercy of the higher powers who commanded him (p. 223); the reader is briefly given access to his perspective after Wen's accidental death. This framing distinguishes *Cabin* from other home invasion narratives such as *The Strangers* (2008), *The Purge* (2013), and *Funny Games* (1997) in which a family is held hostage by invaders which seem almost inhuman in their cruelty, trapped in circumstances designed to reveal that the association between home and safety is a fallacy. Leonard and his crew are not cruel or inhuman. They are largely new to criminal enterprise and distressed at the prospect of committing violence upon the family or witnessing them commit violence upon each other, as eager for the nightmare to be over as Eric, Andrew, and Wen. This leaves a vacuum of blame for the family's dire circumstances which unavoidably loops back, over and over, to their refusal to cooperate.

The natural disasters relayed by the television continue to mount and yet Eric and Andrew cannot bring themselves to consider the prospect of sacrifice. In their panic, they focus on short-term solutions, trying to manipulate their captors into making mistakes or playing on their emotional weaknesses. Their short-sighted response acts as an allegory reflecting human failure to respond adequately to the threat of climate catastrophe, keeping the unthinkable in the distance where it cannot cause more pain. Tremblay places his characters in this situation not to attract criticism but to demonstrate how easily this mistake is made. The pressure-cooker atmosphere of the present tense narrative, with its leaping to and from numerous different character's perspectives, impresses upon the reader that the demands of the family's immediate situation feel much more pressing than anything happening outside the cabin. This also has the effect of distinguishing Eric and Andrew's change in perspective at the end of the novel, after they are finally able to engage with the concept of sacrificing each other, demonstrating that their ultimate decision to remain together and not to hurt each other is a deliberate one rather than the default response borne from defensiveness that it has been for the majority of the novel.

### **The Lure of Inaction**

The protagonists of *Cabin* and *Migration* do more than suffer in silence with their climate grief. Where Eric and Andrew struggle to engage with the bigger picture, Sophie succumbs to the apathy which Timothy Morton (2018) insists is never far away: 'Nihilism is always number one in the charts these days. We usually don't get past the first darkness, and that's if we even care' (p. 5). Morton refers to 'the first darkness' of ecological awareness as 'dark-depressing', difficult and time-consuming to push past into later stages which signify emotional processing of climate catastrophe. In comparison to the compressed timeframe of *Cabin*, Sophie's character arc in *The Migration* has more time to move from speculative hopelessness to directly advocating for inaction. One of her defining features as a protagonist is her steadily growing determination to 'let nature take its course' (p. 300) with regard to the accelerating disease wiping out the younger generation. Part of this attitude stems from political despair; Sophie loses her belief in figures of authority to control the crisis, undergoing a protracted breakdown of trust as she witnesses hospitals becoming quickly overwhelmed by JI2 patients. Neither is she soothed by the news that the local hospital has opened a new set of wards: 'It just means they haven't found a solution yet



and more kids are getting sick' (p. 22). A later scene in the same hospital after Kira's 'death' conveys the mounting chaos:

'There are more scattered cars than I would have thought outside the trauma ward [...] The patient bays are mostly full and more people are trickling in, clutching snotty kids complaining of bad stomach aches. One father grabs an orderly by the arm. "For Christ's sake, my daughter won't stop bleeding," he's shouting' (p. 90).

Sophie's entropy is exacerbated once she contracts JI2 herself, lapsing into hopelessness: 'There's no end to it. No escape' (p. 176). Her aunt Irene is a history scholar specialising in researching the Black Death who advocates for governmental precautions such as cremating the bodies of those infected with JI2, representing the opposite perspective: 'I don't trust despair. It's selfish. It frees you of your responsibilities' (p. 182). In an odd reversal of the usual older/younger generational dynamic, Sophie insists the outlook is bleak, viewing failure to contain the disease and its ramifications as inevitable, but Irene chastises her inertia and challenges her to remain hopeful. She assures Sophie that it is possible to 'grow stronger' (p. 182) as a result of adversity, representing Randall's (2009) perspective that there is still 'much to hope for and much to play for' (p. 121) in response to climate change. Their arguments demonstrate that both sides view the other as ethically irresponsible, but the reader is privy to Sophie's internal narration and not Irene's, meaning that Marshall bolsters her perspective while leaving Irene's unrepresented outside of her conversations with Sophie.

Irene's research leads to the revelation that JI2 is not actually a pathogen at all, instead having been environmentally triggered. JI2 can only be identified through the presence of a specific hormone in the bloodstream, a juvenile hormone which 'seems to trigger a reaction that results in the host's death, followed by the beginning of some sort of new biological processes' (p. 180). These processes being the hardening of the individual's skin and something called the 'jitters' (p. 180) involving the body continuing to move after 'death'. Irene draws a connection between her research into the spread of the Black Death and the environmental circumstances in which JI2 came into being: she points out that at the time of the plague 'the warmer temperatures were spreading diseases such as malaria and dengue [...] as the climate changed, so did the

transmission of all those diseases’ (p. 40). This leads naturally to the theory that JI2 developed in response to ‘environmental triggers [...] The amount of carbon dioxide in the air [...] the melting glaciers. Something in the water [...] Or the storm conditions’ (p. 180). The later revelation that JI2 ‘hit earliest in places where there was massive flooding’ (p. 179) confirms the theory that the planet is self-regulating, and that JI2 should not be designated a disease at all but a new biological process which transforms the body of the host into something fit to withstand the conditions of environmental disaster in a way that humans cannot. This revelation confirms Sophie’s desire to ‘let nature take its course’ (p. 300) as she beseeches her aunt to stop trying to stop the spread of JI2, insisting that ‘[n]ature finds a way when it’s threatened, doesn’t it? It changes itself so the next generation will survive and have a better chance’ (p. 300). In the end, JI2 spreads so fast that the opportunity to stop it simply never arises; Kira and eventually Sophie complete their transformations and flock to a sort of hive-mind in the sky, reunited with each other but separated from their mother and aunt.

Critics largely appear to have viewed the mass transformation of global youth and subsequent flight as a hopeful ending, with Tremblay himself offering an endorsement deeming the novel to be ‘full of heart and difficult, defiant hope’ (back cover quotation). However, I take a more sceptical view. Marshall’s portrayal of a teenager pleading for the authorities to do nothing about the transformations combines uneasily with Sophie’s assertions that ‘[t]he planet was in a tailspin before [...] There isn’t any safety in the way things were. So what if there’s an answer here, something radical and new?’ (p. 304) On the surface this *is* a hopeful message, until it is unpicked to reveal the same hopelessness which characterises much current public discourse surrounding climate catastrophe: that doing nothing is the safer option because it represents nothing lost, nothing gained. No hope ventured and so no disappointment possible. Some of Sophie’s pleas to let the transformation run its course bear similarities to ecofascist schools of thought calling for what Michael E. Zimmerman and Teresa A. Toulouse (2016) term ‘draconian cuts in human population, or even human *extinction*’ (p. 65, original emphasis) as a viable method of tackling encroaching environmental disaster. *The Migration* does not problematise these trains of thought as much as it should; the slow creep of environmental destruction infiltrating Sophie’s everyday life convinces her that there is nothing to do but give up, even if this is at the expense of the future of human life on earth.

It would be easier to read Sophie's pleas to inaction as a result of her desire to preserve herself and Kira in their new forms were it not that her response to her physical surroundings earlier in the novel is characterised as similarly entropic. Sophie is receptive to the slow dissolution of the environment around her even before the scale of the disaster becomes clear, finding comfort in the thought of environmental entropy as she contemplates the ruined castles dotting the English landscape: 'I love the smell of damp stones and moss [...] Ivy crawls over every surface [...] For some reason it feels good to me, being in a place so close to being forgotten' (p. 15). That the castle is a humanmade structure overtaken by flourishing ivy, an emblem of invading nature, seems no accident. Sophie's attitude towards her aunt's ramshackle house in Oxford mirrors this. The house is half-falling down, '[s]o many things are broken [...] I like how this place seems to say, "There are more important things to be worrying about"' (p. 18). The earlier quoted description of extreme flooding included details of the ancient animal bones revealed once the peat was stripped away from Welsh riverbanks, the implication being that the flooding plays a part in stripping away pretences of civilisation and progress and returning the planet to a preferred state of pre-civilisation authenticity. The revelation of wonders such as these extinct animal remains simultaneously renders the environment uninhabitable for all its displaced human occupants, reflecting the troubling thread of ecofascist sensibility which characterises Sophie's perspective and which Marshall leaves largely unchallenged.

Similar sentiments have reared their heads during the current COVID-19 crisis, with a viral tweet claiming that swans and dolphins had 'returned' to the Venice canals eventually being debunked as false, with a fact-check by *National Geographic* revealing that the swans in the video were native to the canals of Burano, not Venice, and the dolphins were filmed at a port in Sardinia (Natasha Daly, 2020). Such stories, while usually not intended to be malicious, are nevertheless emblematic of discourses which treat humanity as a plague upon the earth and promote the ability of nature to 'hit the reset button' without concerted effort from any of us. 'Sandbags line the river but why we're still fighting the water I don't understand. We should abandon the city and move to higher ground: Cumbria, Northumberland, the Scottish islands', Sophie thinks. 'Except there won't be enough room, will there? Not for everyone' (p. 79). Sophie's realistic assessments of the impact of climate catastrophe nevertheless carry an ominous ring which echoes the central thesis

of these discourses; that there is simply not enough room for everyone, and that means difficult choices have to be made.

### **Future Loss**

Tremblay subverts this entropic attitude in *Cabin*. Eric and Andrew are primarily invested in the survival of their child Wen as an emblem of the future while they are held hostage, only for this to be abruptly cut short Wen is shot in a scuffle midway through the novel. The gun was in Andrew's hands, which were in turn encased in Leonard's while Andrew attempted to escape, leaving both parties somewhat responsible for her death. The shock and grief of losing Wen has the immediate effect of actually increasing Eric and Andrew's desire to get away from the cabin so that the three of them can be together: 'She's coming with us', Andrew says. 'Wherever we go' (p. 236). The structure of the home invasion falls apart with Wen's death because the most crucial element which might have been used to persuade her parents has been lost: there is no longer any future for their daughter whether or not they decide to sacrifice a member of their family. Leonard's initial promise that if they fail to make the choice they will 'only live long enough to witness the horror of the end of everything and be left to wander the devastated planet alone' (p. 99) still holds true, but now for an audience of two rather than three. In both *Cabin* and *The Migration*, children are the future, but as a result of widespread inability to engage with climate catastrophe and possible mitigating action, that future is dead.

That Eric and Andrew's relationship does not suffer overmuch for Andrew's role in Wen's death makes a statement about the endurance of queer love in dire circumstances—Eric refuses to let Andrew blame himself, telling him: 'It's not your fault. I will never allow you to say it is' (p. 239). It is made clear from the opening of the novel that Eric and Andrew are not just a parental unit but are in a genuinely loving relationship, a characterisation which influences their reluctance to even confront the possibility of sacrificing each other. Their loving parenthood and good relationship with their daughter initially seems to reject the idea of queerness linking to a genetic dead end—a concept explored in more detail in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Edelman deconstructs the idea of the Child at the heart of political discourse, rejecting the sheer scope of 'a value so unquestioned, because so obviously unquestionable, as that

of the Child whose innocence solicits our defense’ (p. 2). Edelman argues that ‘the figure of this Child seems to shimmer with the iridescent promise of Noah’s rainbow, serving like the rainbow as the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now— or later’ (p. 18).

Wen’s shocking and abrupt death could be read as a cruel about-turn from the idea of queer family to an agreement with Edelman that putting hope in the figure of the Child is fruitless. However, I am more inclined to read it as an articulation of the sheer chaos of their situation—her death is accidental and in itself forces no major change in how Eric and Andrew view their circumstances. The deterioration of the environment outside the cabin continues much the same after Wen’s death, with television reports of an ‘avian flu strain in Suffolk, England, Germany, and at a Grayson chicken farm in Tennessee [...] increasing fears of a possible pandemic’ (p. 245). At this point Eric expresses serious doubts for the first time, protesting to Andrew that Leonard promised a plague and appears to be delivering one; by the end of the novel, on the road back to town with Wen’s body carried between them, he argues with Andrew that one of them should sacrifice themselves. But ultimately, overwhelmed by the thought of committing such an unthinkable deed, they are unable to follow through. With the gun held to Andrew’s sternum:

‘Eric implores, repeating his question. “What if it’s all real?”

Andrew inhales, and his defiant answer is in the exhale. “If it is. Then it is.

We’re still not going to hurt each other.”

“What will we do? We can’t go on.”

“We’ll go on”” (p. 314).

As previously mentioned, this intertextual reference to the final line of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable* (2010)—‘You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on’ (p. 175)—with an alteration from ‘I’ to ‘we’ makes a firm statement of togetherness even after the apparent loss of agency and hope. Eric and Andrew’s desire to consolidate their family unit is so strong that even death cannot alter it, even as the evidence of their senses begins to overwhelm them. Storm clouds threaten on the horizon: ‘[t]he sky is a depthless black, impossible to not attribute malignancy and malice to it as strobing flashes of lighting split it open. Wind and thunder rattle through the forest, sounding like

the earth dying screaming' (p. 314). But it is too late for Eric and Andrew to make any other decision; they are determined to remain together at all costs, even if that means extinction.

With this in mind, it is tempting to read the family's individualistic prioritisation of their needs and desires as a comment on encroaching conservatism as a result of neoliberal ideology. However, I would argue that if *Cabin* is commenting on the conservation of the nuclear family archetype in neoliberal ideologies, then it is doing so with a clear view of the consequences—Tremblay's portrayal of the crumbling happy family trapped in a house that becomes deadly is comparable to that of the Harmon family in season one of *American Horror Story* (2011). Karen E. Macfarlane (2017) argues that this season acts as 'a commentary on the anxieties generated by the unravelling of the narrative of the American Dream' (p. 146). In the penultimate episode of the series:

'the Harmon family [...] stand around a beautifully decorated Christmas tree in the picture window of the house. This moment consolidates the ideals of the American Dream: family, prosperity, a stable home. But the fact is that the series is clear that this ideal is only attainable in death' (Macfarlane, p. 155).

Like the Harmons, the family of *Cabin* act as a death knell for the neoliberal ideal of the American family unit. By the end of the novel they have been stripped of all material wealth and socioeconomic status, reduced down to only their relationships with each other. Tremblay suggests that the idealised existence of the Child has no place in the future; whether or not Wen survived the initial home invasion, she would be left in a world either robbed of one parent or keeping both but watching the world around her slide into apocalyptic chaos. In these circumstances, the decision against sacrifice seems like a bolder one than ever, imparting a symbolic message about the principle of maintaining hope even after the archetypal symbol of hope has died.

## **Conclusion**

*Cabin's* apocalyptic resolution makes it an odd vehicle for hope, but what it proffers is undeniably a triumph of principle more than any practical suggestions. Its conclusion is deliberately vague,

leaving it up to the reader to envision a future for Andrew and Eric which sadly cannot include their daughter but in which they remain devoted to each other. *Cabin* attempts to assure the reader that—at least on an individual basis—it *is* possible for love to endure, and for that love to prevent people from turning on each other even when the circumstances appear to warrant such a turn. In contrast, the politics of *The Migration* offers the kind of false nihilistic comfort which plagues common discourses surrounding global action and climate change, urging inaction and entropy and consequently offering up no real solution at all. The final chapter is told from the perspective of Sophie and Kira's mother Charlotte, left behind as both her children literally fly the nest. Charlotte even helps Sophie on her way, driving her comatose body out to the country so that Sophie can join the rest of the new species in the sky when she finishes her transformation. Charlotte holds Sophie in her arms, a mirror image of Eric and Andrew carrying Wen's body down the road into an uncertain future. But here the resemblance ends. Charlotte's final message is one of inward-turning denial, a refusal to face the future, rather than an acknowledgment of the hard road ahead: '*Shhh, baby girl, the storm is passing. It's going to be alright*' (p. 385; emphasis in original).

The nature of our current circumstances is prompting more urgent exploration into concepts of sacrifice and global action than has been seen for years. It would be remiss of me here not to acknowledge the ways in which the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated both humanity's capacity for widespread community action and, in some cases, the state's ruthless prioritisation of the economy over the survival of its most vulnerable citizens. Those who disappear first, in these circumstances, will always be those who already struggle with resource scarcity: those living in poverty or incarceration; those in minority groups. Those who are repeatedly failed by the political systems that are charged with their safety will always be those who lack the means to travel to higher ground. In such circumstances, a message advocating the refusal to do harm seems preferable to one urging that humanity abandon hope for change, even if on the surface they can both be characterised as selfish. The selfishness to try and save each other, then, is offered up as the best chance humanity has.

## BIOGRAPHY

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## The Haunted Seas of British Television: Nation, Environment and Horror

*Mark Fryers*

### ABSTRACT

Historically, the sea holds symbolic power within British culture, a space of imperial triumph and mastery over nature. The British coastline, similarly, has served as both a secure defence and a space of freedom and abandonment. However, since the decline of both the empire and the maritime industries, these certainties have eroded, along with the physical coastline itself. Subsequently, these spaces have become haunted, returning them somewhat to more primal conceptions of the natural world. This article examines how television, as the cultural exponent of choice in Britain during the same period, has provided the perfect medium to explore the gothic seas: an environment of terror and unease, fear and uncertainty. From Jonathan Miller's *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (1968) to *Remember Me* (2014), this article details how the appearance of the gothic sea in British culture hastens a broader examination of national myth, virtues and values.

The Philosopher Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1952) opined that the character and history of a nation can be explained by its climate. The weather patterns enforced on the British Isles by its proximity to the North Sea dominate the spirit, culture and identity of the nation, providing an almost discretely British conception of the gothic and supernatural as bound to water in its various manifestations.

For Britain, the sea has historically represented the site of imperial triumph—the space in which Britain's imperious navies presided over martial, economic and colonial dominance. Similarly, the British seaside holiday was established as a national institution, and the seaside itself has acquired a reputation for frivolity, freedom and excess: a place where the fruits of imperial endeavour can be savoured. Such was the importance of seafaring to notions of British national

identity and collective experience, the ship often serves as a metaphor for the nation in miniature, the carefully stratified hierarchy of position, rules and command acting as a shorthand for the organisation of British political and social economies. As Elias Canetti writes, ‘every Englishman is prone to see himself as the Captain of a ship at sea’, whilst Conrad noted that ‘salt is in the blood of the English’ (in Raban, 2002: p. 7). The ship therefore takes on extra significance within British culture and if lost, represents a symbolic loss of nationhood (Rayner, 2007). When these carefully ordered rules are threatened, a similar disruption threatens the very core of nationhood. It is unsurprising therefore that aquatic spaces lend themselves naturally to a gothic treatment, whereby the fracturing of the natural or unnatural order of things provides a dramatic collision. British television, with its long association with supernatural, gothic and horror content, has consistently offered water and the maritime environment as a conduit for the repressed. When spirits manifest in the spaces of imperial triumph, freedom and levity, they offer an opportunity for self-examination. Indeed, the appearance of water in its many forms in British supernatural television presents an opportunity to reflect and interrogate some of the potent and foundational myths of British society, and their relationship with the natural environment.

As this article will explore, television’s domestic context of spectatorship renders it an ideal medium to offer a re-imagining of national myth through the supernatural and gothic form. From *Whistle and I’ll Come to You* (BBC, 1968) to *Remember Me* (BBC, 2014), the horrific and ‘return of the repressed’ is manifested through seawater: either at sea or on the periphery of maritime experience, sometimes as a trickle, sometimes as a flood, in instances of both littoral and liminal terror.

This article will consider the inverse treatment of these bodies of water in a British national context through a number of indicative examples, whereby human interaction with these spaces often represents the binary opposite of the Imperial oceans: terror instead of triumph, confinement instead of freedom, fragility instead of strength, death instead of life and in all instances, a secure identity is displaced. This article will balance textual and contextual analysis of British televisual environmental terror with a historiographical overview of sea horror within British cultural history.

### **Britain and the Dark Seas**

Following the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the British Navy became increasingly associated with notions of national identity, while the Merchant Navy was seen to bring prosperity through its mercantile networks. Over time, the maritime sphere became a shorthand for all that was good, fine and British, arguably reaching its apotheosis during the Victorian era and the ‘cult of the navy’ (see Cynthia Behrman, 1997 and Victoria Carolan, 2012). The antithesis of this was a conception of the sea as a place of death and catastrophe. Sailing was a hazardous profession, the ‘here be monsters’ tradition of cartography attests to this, and with a reliable way of plotting longitude not established until the late eighteenth century, shipwreck and drownings came to be a daily threat to those who sailed in ships, most of whom could not swim. As Foulke states, ‘death, and the fear of it, is a constant shipmate in most voyage literature, real or imaginary’ (in Jonathan Peck, 2001: p. 13).

It is during the Enlightenment period in which the sea is enshrined as a space of doom within British art, and gothic literature, especially, has a long association with the sea which positions the ocean and sea journeys as brooding and oppressive. As Joseph Conrad, who claimed that the sea was the proper venue for British masculine virility to thrive, also asserted, ‘the writer who goes to sea finds himself confronting a disturbed reflection of his own age, personality and preoccupations’ (in Raban, 1992: p. 3). Ann Radcliffe’s gothic tales were peppered with descriptions of the sea, and it is a terrible, dark and destructive tempest—while it is a ‘devouring monster’ in which Count Dracula is borne unto the shores of Whitby from the Black Sea in Bram Stoker’s novel. The ‘roaring and devouring’ sea and seascapes of Whitby, become the spaces of death (Stoker, 1996: p.76). Similarly, Stoker’s *The Mystery of the Sea* (1902) also features ghostly echoes of both Britain’s naval legacy, and those whose fates were sealed by the brine.

In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), the doomed scientist escapes his horrifying creation to the North Pole where he encounters a British Sea Captain intent on finding a passage through the frozen Arctic waters. On hearing Frankenstein’s tale, he decides to turn back, convinced that the hubris of man in the face of terrifying nature can only lead to death and destruction (chillingly foreshadowing the fate of both John Franklin’s 1845 Arctic Expedition and Ernest Shackleton’s equally doomed Antarctic journey in 1911). The romantic poet, Samuel

Taylor Coleridge, also created an intensely gothic vision of the sea in his poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), in which the sailor is cursed to sail alone with the skeletons of the crew he doomed when he slayed the albatross, giving cultural expression to another mariners fear, and linking the sea to superstitious beliefs (1991: pp. 9-35). Having never ventured out to sea, Coleridge conjured the gothic maritime from mariner's tales and imagination, clearly influenced by Judeo-Christian conceptions of the sea (especially Jonah and Noah). In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), when the angel Lucifer is expelled from heaven he is plunged into the depths of the abyss—the leviathan was imbricated as a space of devilry. For Coleridge though, it was also a space of redemption. Thus, the sea was marked by a tension between opposing forces and conceptions.

It was the sea and ocean that also provided the Romantics with a space of the 'sublime'. According to Raban (1992), Lord Byron 'takes credit for mostly inventing the nineteenth-century sea in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*' whilst in Edmund Burke's 'On the Sublime and Beautiful' from 1757, he 'created for the ocean a philosophical space in the very centre of things...and partly legitimised the sea as a great subject' (pp. 9-14). It was depth as well as height that also inspired J. M. W. Turner in his sea paintings, espousing Edmund Burke's conception of the term as both plumbing the depths as well as scaling the heights: terrifying and redemptive by turns and 'associated with feelings of terror most powerful' (Smith, 2006: p.6). The gothic is associated with the dark, labyrinthine, subterranean spaces of castle dungeons and other areas, and the ocean, likewise, is a natural site of sub-marine darkness.

In many ways, there is always more than one 'sea'. It is mutable and undulating by nature, existing in wildly differing depths, shapes, colours and contexts. Indeed, it is precisely this mutability that suffuses water with a gothic quality. In a more practical sense, the space where the sea meets the land, tributaries and estuaries, coastlines, beaches and human-made resorts are separate spaces, and all offer different visions of the sea. In all these cases however, the sea is a social construct as well as a natural environment. If myths of nationhood mobilise the seas as a mythical frontier and the British countryside (the 'green and pleasant land') as its sacred spaces, the gothic sea manifests as an irrepressible energy that strips these bare. This is especially tangible in moments of national self-examination. As Valdine Clemens observed of the gothic form,

‘A national brand of gothic fiction seems to proliferate whenever the political and economic dominance that a given country has acquired appears to be passing its peak and about to decline...’ (1999, p.5).

The rise in popularity of television in Britain, between the 1950s and 1970s, coincided with the rapid decline of the British empire after the Second World War. Gothic and supernatural television thus helped to give expression to this sudden absence. Television became the foremost cultural form in Britain in this era, and thus its output is of particular value to cultural historians. Many of the examples discussed here were produced by the BBC, which had its own remit in promoting a form of national identity, during a concomitant period of decline (e.g. Jean Seaton, 2009). The BBC had a remit to ‘inform, educate and entertain’ and the affectionate nickname ‘aunty Beeb’ suggested that the institution was part of the family, at home in the corner of the living room, (a position also occupied by commercial networks when they were introduced in the 1950s). It also meant that gothic programming occupied the same exalted position, inviting phantoms into the epicentre of domestic existence.

British film has a history of nautical horror. Haunted ships appear sporadically in films such as *The Mystery of the Marie Celeste* (1935) and *The Ghost Ship* (1952) and the Anglo-Canadian *Death Ship* (1980), the seaside resort has been imbricated as the space of death in *Byzantium* (2012) and the sea and coastal spaces (including islands) marked as deathly in *The Wicker Man* (1973), *Neither the Sea Nor the Sand* (1972) and *Wake Wood* (2009). Many of these share common aesthetic features with the televisual examples discussed here; however, television offers a more sustained and consistent evocation of maritime fear, more interior and more insular in their context of domestic reception. As Stacey Abbott and Lorna Jowett (2014) point out, they allow a space to explore the ‘spectacle of the supernatural’ (p. 12). In British culture, the spectacle on display has frequently been the sea.

For Paul Wells (2000), ‘the domestic space has become the locality for the worst of horror’ (p. 18). This offers scope to analyse these texts as examples of the gothic being a largely domestic genre. As Helen Wheatley (2007) observes of gothic television: ‘These programmes demonstrated

a clear consciousness of their domestic reception context' (p. 28). Also emanating from a national broadcasting context, these texts are infused with a 'Britishness' that may set them apart from, for example, films intended for an international audience.

## **Haunted Seas**

The wide, open seas are those often romanticised within British culture as a masculine frontier, the place in which dominance of the seas brought Empire and wealth- prosperity and security. As discussed, the sea vessel commands a very specific position within British history and culture. They evoke both the romance of the age of sail and echoes of an Empire protected by the Royal and merchant navies. As such, the nautical journey motif is engrained within British culture as a venerating myth of masculine potency and onward progress, from Sir Francis Drake and Captain Cook to Ernest Shackleton and Sir Francis Chichester. Interstitial sailing sequences in audio-visual texts depicting the sea are characterised by a form of 'nautical panacea' (Fryers, 2014), seductive images of romantic sailing that help buffet against the more unsavoury aspects of maritime warfare and expansion.

Filming at sea is especially difficult, dangerous and expensive, as waterproof equipment is required, weather is unpredictable and seascapes and horizons constantly shift, which may explain why there are less 'open sea' gothic texts. A show such as *The Onedin Line* (BBC, 1971-80), as a lavishly mounted costume drama, was a rare example that was granted a sufficient budget to do so. It celebrated the age of sail and the construction of Empire through merchant shipping, conflating the romance of sailing with onward national capitalist progress. It did so at a time of industrial and economic decline, offering nostalgia for a time of national strength and virility and equally for a time when the 'English were inclined to regard the seas of the world as their exclusive colonial possession' (Raban, 1992: p.21).

Elsewhere in British televisual evocations of sailing and inland waters, the gaiety, frivolity, and overt symbolism of the journey evident in classic literature, such as the novels of Arthur Ransome or Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), are questioned in gothic, supernatural or other dramatic renditions, that provide an eruption of the psychic energy of the past and offer a



‘counter-narrative’ to the ‘progress of modernity’ (Frank Botting, 1999: p.1). Prominent amongst these is the BBC’s adaptation of Alan Ayckbourn’s play *Way Upstream* (1987). Ayckbourn’s allegorical drama plays with traditional British notions of inland sailing tranquillity and naval traditions as two couples on a river cruise experience tyranny and nightmares when they allow a mysterious stranger aboard, before ultimately finding salvation. Similarly, ‘Three Miles Up’, an episode of the BBC series *Ghosts* (1995) features two brothers sailing on a canal barge as they try to deal with the tragic fact that their mother drowned in the cellar. Their journey ultimately leads to disaster.

Thus, the main examples discussed here are instances where the sea meets the land and not the other way around. From the perspective of the land, the sea is separate space—somewhat ‘othered’ as an environment. Paul Gilroy (1993) theorised that the Black Atlantic, the route of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave trade, can be recalibrated and conceived as a post-modern space whereby traditional colonial notions of nationality and territory no longer apply: a *tabula rasa* for subjective, de-centred and de-stabilised identity. It is a place that therefore displaces the security of the land. Indeed, the ghosts of colonial and mercantile activity haunt a number of televisual texts, including *The Sailor’s Return* (1978), *Jamaica Inn* (1983, 2014), *Wide Sargasso Sea* (2006) and *A Respectable Trade* (1998).

However, a couple of important examples are the exception that prove the rule. *Ghostboat*, produced by ITV in 2006 (based on a novel by George F. Simpson and Neal R. Burger) represents a very masculinised British conception of the sea, but offers a different journey, not of triumph, but of self-immolation. *Ghostboat* ran for three episodes in 2006 and centres around actor David Jason as Professor Jack Hardy, a former Navigation Officer aboard the submarine HMS Scorpion, which was lost in the Baltic on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1943, during World War Two and which mysteriously resurfaces in 1981, at the height of the Cold War. Hardy is asked to crew the ship again, and, possessed by its former inhabitants, the ship proceeds to lead them towards starting world war three.

*Ghostboat* creates an all-male environment by supplanting the present day for World War II, thus engaging with absence as well as presence. By excising any female presence in the story,

it ironically focuses on the excess of masculinity devoid of feminine influence (e.g. Doane, 1987). There is also an added resonance in the linking of the supernatural here and World War Two. Since 1945, Britain has fostered for itself the myth of this war as being Britain's 'finest hour'. Yet this mythology works to veil the death and suffering of the conflict. Lucie Armitt (2012) suggests that in the twentieth century, the world wars replace the 'imagined horrors' of the supernatural gothic (p. 2). Here they are sutured together, providing an obverse to the triumphant mythology of heroism and bravery. There are metaphorical references to this obsession with nostalgia within the drama, with such lines as 'the past is breaking through', 'we seem to be slipping into the past' and 'every rivet, everything seems to be resonating at the 1943 pitch'. Here, history is a vortex or a portal through which martial horrors are birthed. The largely working-class crew also serve as a reminder that the depths of the sea are a graveyard for the poor or subaltern.

In this sense, *Ghostboat* is an unusual text, an inversion of the glorious myths of World War II still routinely perpetuated in twenty-first century Britain, not least through television.<sup>1</sup> The vessel here, is 'uncanny', and not the vessel of nautical victory, but one which highlights the dangerous myopia of masculine, martial endeavour. A similar effect can be seen within the BBC's 2005 adaptation of William Golding's Booker prize-winning trilogy *To the Ends of the Earth*, which turns the grand and triumphant image of the sail-rigged ship of Nelson's Navy into a leaking, creaking, dark and gothic floating asylum populated by criminals, drunkards, death and defilement, similarly turning the heroic and romantic notion of the voyage askew (Fryers, 2018). Misfortune seems to follow the crew following the slaying of an albatross, as in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, recalling how the sea is also a place of dark superstition. The journey, therefore, which historically stands as a site of national triumph, is here represented as god forsaken. The gothic provides a corrective: an insidious reverse of the national story of masculine triumph.

## Haunted Coastlines

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<sup>1</sup> This is particularly evident in documentary or docu-drama programming, often fronted by male presenters. See for example *The Other Side of Dunkirk* (BBC, 2004), *Jeremy Clarkson: Greatest Raid of All Time* (BBC, 2007), *Little Ships* (BBC, 2010) and *D-Day: The Last Heroes* (BBC, 2013) among numerous others.

The British coastline, especially the southern coast and the white cliffs of Dover, have served in British film and television, and in British culture generally, as a synecdoche for stability and security. The coastlines and the sea around the British Isles are the secure drawbridge against invasion and the last line of defence—the liminal boundary in which Churchill mobilised the British people to fight for their liberty in World War Two. Indeed, in recent years, the visual language of television has given specific privilege to coastal spaces—the new technology of high-definition filming and drones offering a view of clarity and power, manifested in documentary television such as *Coast* (2005–) and numerous BBC and commercial idents (Wheatley, 2016). But, again, these spaces have a cultural doppelgänger, their darkness exacerbated by their inverse positioning to such configurations of power and security. In the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries, coastlines have somewhat abandoned their role as secure protector and instead served as a sinister index both for the effects of coastal erosion and rising sea levels, and the despoliation of the natural environment through pollution. A sea that reflects back the folly and arrogance of humanity, alongside also the threat of the sea returning to reclaim the land, are constant preoccupations within contemporary society. This serves somewhat to challenge or de-stabilise secure notions of national identity based on landscape and topography.

Perhaps as a result, and for more deep-rooted cultural associations outlined, coastlines have featured as a significant environment of fear within British television. Several episodes of the long-running BBC fantasy series *Doctor Who* (1963–), for example, feature a maritime ‘return of the repressed’ emanating from the sea at the point at which it meets the land, in particular the episodes ‘The Sea Devils’ (1972) and ‘The Curse of Fenric’ (1989).

Jonathan Miller’s 1968 *Omnibus* adaptation of M. R. James’ short story ‘Oh Whistle and I’ll Come to You my Lad’ (foreshortened to *Whistle and I’ll Come to You*) is perhaps the most famous example of maritime horror on British television. Indeed, Armitt (2016) posits that James’ original story, alongside *A Warning to the Curious* (1972), discussed below, offer shape and contours to the abstract fear of coastal erosion in the Eastern coast of England where they are set, with the sea manifesting as a ‘predatory form of supernatural agency’ (p. 97).

Miller's adaptation was filmed in North Norfolk and starred Michael Hordern as a socially aloof Cambridge professor holidaying in a coastal guest house who discovers an old whistle near a grave in the sand dunes, which bears the inscription 'who is this who is coming for you?' Having blown the whistle, Parkin is plagued in his dreams and on his daily constitutional along the seafront by a ghostly manifestation, an eruption of what Clemens would describe as 'subconscious psychic energies' (1999: p.9).

The story was re-worked by the BBC in 2010 and starred John Hurt as the professor who is plagued by visions. On this occasion the manifestation is a female form and more specifically, that of his Alzheimer's-stricken wife whom he places into a care home before taking his holiday, and the conduit for terror a ring discovered among the dunes. The coastal break, often an excursion that engenders tranquillity and freedom, is invested with dread in these instances.

In these examples, the liminal spaces of the seaside are a place of death and terror. The incessant sound of the sea—an aural backdrop to the psychological effects of the supernatural and a generally bleak and unforgiving place—treats human interlopers as unwelcome outsiders. Peter Hutchings famously wrote about the 'uncanny landscapes' of British film and television, whereby the bucolic landscapes so beloved of British natural identity (and heritage film and TV) conceal sinister forces below the surface, which wreak havoc on those who encounter or disturb them. Hutchings (2004) posits *Quatermass* (1955) as the archetypal example. Hutchings, alongside Wheatley (2007), argues that these are the dark underbelly of the British heritage and costume drama. The spiritual cousin of these uncanny landscapes in British television are the haunted and isolated seascapes which invert Shakespeare's 'precious jewel set within a silver sea' into cruel, dangerous and remote liminal spaces which hint at the fragility of the human condition in comparison to the cruel and arbitrary forces of both nature and history.

A similar effect is created in *A Warning to the Curious* (1972), another M. R. James adaptation which was also filmed on the forbidding North Norfolk coast. This was one of the first in the BBC's annual 'Ghost Stories for Christmas' strand, written, directed and produced by Lawrence Gordon Clark and a staple seasonal televisual ritual in the 1970s (shadowed by entries from the commercial networks). The drama opens, like the original *Whistle and I'll Come to You*,

with a long, lingering, shot of the beach. The mysterious figure of Agar appears and murders an interloper who had located the ancient crown of the Britons amongst the firs and sand dunes. A similar fate appears to await lead protagonist Mr Paxton (Peter Vaughn), an antiquarian who similarly uncovers a crown whilst digging in the sandy pines by the sea. It is said to be the last of three crowns that protected East Anglia from foreign invasion, a constant pre-occupation within British history which hints at the fragility of the nation state. That the crown should be buried in the liminal realm of the isolated coastline, with one stolen and melted down, another succumbed to the sea, again hints at the fragile state of the coastline and national security.

Paxton is stalked and chased on the beach by the terrifying figure of Agar, an incarnation of an ancient protector of the crown's resting place. Paxton is characterised as insignificant within the landscape and engulfed by the seascapes, especially the expansive beach at Holkham, emphasising the power these spaces hold over him. The manner in which this nautical landscape can distort human experience is emphasised by the text in the way in which it elides established boundaries of perception: 'You can't tell where the beach ends and the sky begins' opines Dr Black (Clive Swift) as he sits behind a canvas. Indeed, the environment functions as a powerful character in its own right. This was no coincidence, as the locations were carefully selected, composed and utilised for their epic scale. As Lawrence Gordon Clark (2012) pointed out, once the locations are chosen, the script can be written to incorporate their scope, therefore Paxton is haunted not by claustrophobia, but by wide expanses. Similarly, the 2010 remake of *Whistle* unusually employs the cinematic aspect ratio of 2:35:1 to emphasise the maritime spaces. Expansive landscapes are more commonly associated with the 'masculine' spaces of the cinema (perhaps as they attune to the virility inherent in expansive genres such the western), but here, further tension is provided by their containment within the 'feminine' domestic televisual form (e.g. Sue Thornham and Tony Purvis, 2004).

In these utterances, the place of the beach takes on significance as a representational space between life and death, or as Greg Denning (2004) describes beaches as 'in-between places, where every present moment is suffused with the double past of both sides of the beach and complicated by the creative cultures that this mixture makes' (p. 13). The duality of the spaces of the beach as both in-between spaces and spaces of death are made explicit in a number of these texts by the

proximity of graveyards and tombstones to the sea. Parkin comes across his whistle by a tombstone in the dunes, Paxton seeks out a graveyard in a church overlooking the sea in *A Warning*. The same location is visited by the protagonists in *Do Not Disturb* (1991), as they seek to uncover the grave of an elusive writer, a mystery it transpires they should leave uncovered. *Do Not Disturb*, part of the drama BBC anthology series *Screen Two* (1991), similarly warned that the past, once disturbed, would return to disrupt the equilibrium of the present. Again, this warning and its execution is played out in the fog and tidal tyranny of dangerous maritime spaces.

In other texts, the cumulative negative energy of the past is irresistible, and similarly, the irrepressible forces of the maritime provide the theatre of menace. In the film adaptation of *The Woman in Black* (1989), Arthur Kidd (Adrian Rawlins) first encounters the vengeful, wraithlike Alice Drablow (Pauline Moran) in the graveyard adjacent to Eel Marsh House, a location cut off by a tidal causeway (as with the beach in the 2010 version of *Whistle*), again emphasising the otherworldliness of these locations and the horrific nature of seascapes. Similarly, the BBC adaptation of *Dracula* (1977), utilises the coastal graveyard at Whitby. *The Shades of Darkness* entry *Bewitched* (1983), adapted from the Edith Wharton short story of the same name (by Alan Plater), is set in a small coastal village with a maritime church and graveyard as the centre-piece, and features both funerals and exhumation. This tale of superstitious villagers seeking to purge the restless spirit of a recently buried young woman, who is thought to be a witch and still having mortal relations with a married man, was originally set in the harsh winters of New England. Mysterious footprints in the snow test the resolve of the villagers. Here, this is transposed to the isolated maritime community and the footprints manifested in the sand. *Bewitched* is framed, literally, by coastal gravestones and the supposed spirit is seen dancing and frolicking at the water's edge, linking the undulating shoreline with the creature that transgresses states of living and death, as well as invoking patriarchal fears of independent and strident females. These are both instances (snow in the original tale and water here) whereby liminal maritime environments or extreme weather patterns both supplant the certainties of human civilisation or provide confusion as to recognised limits or boundaries. This elision or transgression of comfortable or accepted boundaries is at the heart of the horror genre, and thus, environmental boundary transgression, as emphasised in these instances whereby the marine environment functions as the conduit for terror, is at the heart of the environmental gothic.

A similar recurring motif within nautical terror is the figure that returns to the land from the sea, changed beyond recognition as though returning to the world of living from the land of the dead or from the depths of hell itself (as the sea often represents). The *Westcountry Tales* entry *The Visitor* (1982) purports to tell the true story of a woman, Kelly (Kelly Arkless), who moves to a cottage near the sea with her young daughter, Janis (Janis Winters). A mysterious visitor, Fran (Joanna Foster), inveigles herself into their lives and forms a bond with Janis, over which Kelly becomes increasingly maternally envious. In a climactic sequence, Fran appears inexplicably by the shoreline as Kelly and Janis stand on the cliffs, before disappearing. Janis is drawn to the sea and Kelly has to rescue her before she runs off the cliff-edge to her doom. An explanation is offered, in that the coastal area is renowned for ships wrecking on the jagged rocks. The story is related that, on one occasion, a woman was swept ashore with her infant who she placed on a rocky ledge before being swept out again. The woman is subsequently rescued but her child lost. The viewer is invited to speculate that Fran is the incarnation of this woman, set on claiming any child to replace hers. If Fran is the woman returned from the sea, she is altered—having the appearance of a human but transgressing the states of life and death, with malevolent intent. The sea breeds monsters, halfway between life and death, who haunt the interstitial spaces between the sea and the land (Fryers, 2019).

Sound is a vital index of environment in these texts. The aurality of the sea, marine noises and other horrific sounds are in part the necessity of television, with budgetary restrictions placing an emphasis on sound to convey horror and atmosphere. But they are also in part an aesthetic choice, of creating an austere atmosphere to utilise sonic terror to compliment the visual and create a landscape which positions the environment as a functioning protagonist/antagonist. In these instances, the mundane sounds of the sea lapping, the screeching of seagulls and other maritime noises, culturally associated with the peace and escapism of the coast, are turned into conduits of evil. *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (1968) is a symphony of mundane, gently probing everyday sounds, punctuated by eruptions of disturbing sound energy. The proximity between the screech of a gull and the sound of a baby crying as a sound that unsettles boundaries of recognition is explicitly referenced in two of the examples discussed. *The Visitor* posits that 'gulls can sound extraordinarily human at times', suggesting that the sea can confuse one species for another. In

*The Woman in Black*, the phenomenon is offered as an example of the trickery and unreliability of sound to match vision and experience, as Sam Toovey attempts to console Arthur Kidd after he thinks he hears the accident that claimed the lives of Mrs Drablow's children on the causeway many years ago. Again, the manner in which the maritime sphere can blur distinctions is a manifestation of the horrific.

### ***Remember Me* (2014) and The Haunted Seaside Resort**

The BBC's three-part supernatural drama *Remember Me* was screened in the run-up to Christmas 2014. In this mini-series, written by Gwyneth Hughes and directed by Ashley Pearce, Michael Palin stars as Tom Parfitt, a man whose recent arrival at a nursing home prefigures the mysterious death of one of the care workers and triggers an eerie mystery that draws in police detective Rob Fairholme (Mark Addy) and care worker Hannah Ward (Jodie Comer). It transpires that the ghost of Tom's former nanny, Isha (Mayuri Boonham) an Indian woman who died after the ship that was taking her back to India was torpedoed off the coast of North Yorkshire during the First World War, has plagued Parfitt for years. She cannot let go of her former charge and brings a curse upon any person who she deems to come between them.

The opening shots of *Remember Me* invoke the sea and shorelines as ominous. Shots of the sea and a mysterious figure washed on the shore are inserted into the opening coda, mixed with equally moody and gothic images of the Yorkshire landscape. Water surrounds and penetrates and is linked to the appearance of the supernatural. Taps drip ominously or overflow. Water appears where it should not; through light fittings, dripping on a corpse on a mortician's slab, in the lungs of a victim who died falling out of a window. Water, and more specifically seawater, signifies death and is furthermore associated with the appearance of the 'monstrous feminine' in the form of Isha. Alongside this, the attendant unexplained manifestation of seashells inverts their association from beach holidays, childhood and frivolity to something unexplained and sinister. The synchronicity between the malevolent spirit in this supernatural tale and the seaside resort is suggestive of the earlier examples, as a sinister agency is unleashed from Britain's past. The choice of Scarborough as a seaside resort is also instructive as it is Britain's oldest resort town (Braggs and Harris, 2006). Isha represents a symbolic loss of control within this arena of vitality, and by



extension serves as a reminder of the death of a particular British way of life. The seaside spa resort, once the symbol of leisure and the playground for prosperous Britain, suffered a vertiginous decline, paralleled by the fatal contraction of the British Empire. The spa as a site of health and rejuvenation is here inverted as a place of disease and death. The crumbling edifices and bleak and deserted seaside towns stand as a continual reminder of decline, in the spaces once so closely linked to prosperity. The phantoms of Empire and decline are thus evoked and the text functions as what David Punter describes of the gothic: ‘Gothic fiction becomes a process of cultural self-analysis’ (in Clemens, 1999: p .6) and for Armit, ‘Gothic, then, has become a means of reading culture, not just a cultural phenomenon to read’ (p. 10).

The haunted seaside also resonates within contemporary British culture as a space in which secure parameters have been disrupted, or what Theano S. Terkenli (2004) describes as a ‘cultural battleground’. The southern seaside resorts and ports at places such as Dover, Hastings and Margate are visible places in which immigrants have been housed in large numbers, a fact seized upon by sections of the British press and politicians as examples of an uncontrollable ‘flood’ of immigration attendant with their bleak economic prospects following the decline of maritime industries and coastal tourism (see for example BBC, 1999; Gillan, 1999; Barrow, 2013). These resorts therefore vividly indicate a loss of a certain traditional white ‘Britishness’ and enact a fear of invasion and contamination. The Indian Isha therefore offers a triple threat to secure notions of patriarchal Britishness (as a female who originates from a place Britain no longer controls and haunts a place no longer representative of colonial success).

*Remember Me*, alongside the previous examples, also recalls Alain Corbin’s (1994) conception of the seaside as a site that signals a return to animality: ‘Near the strand, that indeterminate place of biological transitions, the links connecting mankind with the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms can be seen with remarkable clarity’ (p. 223). Corbin and Habermann (2002) both indicate that this animalistic urge can be seen in literature that focuses on the practice of deliberate shipwrecking: the arena of the ‘wrecker’ who entice ships to dash on the rocks and forfeit their cargo. This was a theme of Daphne Du Maurier’s *Jamaica Inn*, adapted for ITV in 1983 and the BBC in 2014, both adaptations suffused with gothic imagery and eruptions of violence and a Manichean sense of the individual—‘two images of the human coexist, one the

shadow of the other, in a precarious and uncanny equilibrium' (Habermann, p. 112). This 'animality' is also linked to the appearance of the 'monstrous feminine'. The motif of monstrous female associated with the sea and perpetuating a deadly curse also links thematically with *The Woman in Black* (1989), *Bewitched* (1983), *The Visitor* (1982) and the 2010 version of *Whistle and I'll Come to You*, as well as the ghostly first Mrs De Winter, personified as the sea in Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (BBC 1979, 1997). They all position the gothic 'return of the repressed' in the form of an aquatic iteration of Barbara Creed's 'monstrous feminine' (2011). In *The Woman in Black*, the titular woman in black haunts the central character as he visits Eel Marsh house, a site only accessible across a narrow causeway, which is entirely engulfed by the sea on a daily basis. Michel Foucault (2001) suggests that the sea is often personified as female, particularly in western culture, as it is seen as irrational and un-tameable compared with the relative stability of the land. The maritime monstrous females, in their irrational hatred and inability to slake their thirst for revenge exemplify this. In this regard, Isha, being Indian, may be viewed as the expression of repressed colonial guilt: an unhappy past, which cannot be denied, which returns to haunt the present. Barbara Creed (invoking both Freud and Kristeva, 2011) discusses the 'monstrous feminine' as an enactment of the abject which transgresses borders, and here the border is once again the liminal space between the sea and the land, between sleeping and waking life. That which is encountered at the place where the sea meets the land, or returns from the depths of the sea, is not human, determinable, clean, whole or properly functioning.

The effect of horrific repetition is also apparent in these texts in the form of dream sequences and repeated images, often involving hauntings and apparitions along the seashore. In both versions of *Whistle*, the beach visited during daylight hours provides the material for nocturnal nightmares, as the protagonist is chased and terrified by an unknown apparition. In the 2010 version of *Whistle*, the chasing figure has a certain clarity, alluded to be a female, alike to be the protagonist's wife (and a manifestation of both grief and guilt). In the 1968 version, it is entirely indistinct, and characterised by unsettling and jarring, animalistic sounds, perhaps closer to the both Conrad's dark doppelganger and Habermann's uncanny equilibrium. In *the Woman in Black* (1989) the central character, Arthur Kidd, is haunted by an aural reminder of a tragedy in which the eponymous woman's child drowns at high tide. The tragedy is re-enacted on a daily basis with the regularity of the tide, linking the natural diurnal maritime with the horrific. Similarly, in

*Remember Me*, Hannah has recurring dreams where Isha plagues her, with the recurrent images of seashore, turbulent sea, lighthouse, drowning and the black and white tiles of Scarborough seafront. On each occasion the dream is curtailed with Isha turning her face towards the camera and a short, sharp terrifying noise (in the same manner as the Professor's dream in the 1968 *Whistle*). If the space between the sea and the land provides an in-between space, and the dream provides a site in-between the sleeping and waking life, then dreams about the beach may be said to offer a form of hyper-liminality: an excessive disconnect to the 'known', the rational and the tangible.

## **Conclusion**

Aided by the insular and intimate nature of British television as well as its propensity to history and nostalgia, British supernatural drama has been punctuated by numerous gothic conceptions of water. The maritime sphere has been integral within British culture as a site of national triumph and success, and ships, sailing and attendant maritime activities have all contributed to a sense of national identity, character and spirit. Yet, as the examples discussed here testify, the aquatic also gives birth to monsters and monstrous fear, providing an antithesis to these myths of national triumph. Beaches, seafronts, seas, rivers, lakes and other sources of the aquatic all harbour the possibility of the eruption of an unwanted past. Water in these claustrophobic televisual texts, whilst occasionally baptismal, is not characteristically sustaining or rejuvenating, but dangerous and liminal: it echoes the misdeeds of personal and colonial history, of hubris, warfare and of patriarchy. If the ship is a ship of state, and the sea journey a source of linear national triumph, these examples offer a nation veering dangerously off-course, and rife for self-destruction. In a twenty-first century climate of comfortable nostalgia for an imagined British past, these examples offer the opposite: the sea washes up a fearful and uncomfortable history. With the concomitant loss of empire and influence, and the decline of coastal towns and industries, these spaces have a ghostly resonance, a return to an older, even biblical, conception of a ravenous and punishing sea. The environment is a deathly echo of humanity's sins.

The sea is haunted and dangerous, and the place where the sea meets the land is equally the place of death. In a Britain where coastal areas do not always have the happy and carefree

associations they once had, where the sea is no longer a place of national prosperity, and where rising sea levels and coastal erosion highlight the vulnerability and fragility of the British Isles, a line uttered regarding the appearance of Isha in *Remember Me*, ‘There’s always water - water that shouldn’t be there’, takes on a deeper and eerie significance.

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**Mark Fryers** has published numerous articles and chapters on film and television scholarship, including in the *Journal of Popular Television*, and on topics such as the British costume drama, British maritime film and television, the sound aesthetics of British horror television and on *Jaws* and the nautical spaces of death. He has also contributed chapters on global folklore and animated films, constructions of identity in British children’s maritime television and the British costume drama to edited collections. His principal research interest is in the intersection between environment and identity. He is currently Visiting Lecturer in Film, Television and Media at Greenwich University and previously at UEA and NYU London.

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## Tentacles from the Depths: The Nautical Horror of D. T. Neal's *Relict*

*Antonio Alcalá González*

### ABSTRACT

In D. T. Neal's novella *Relict* (2013), the action centres around the attempts of the protagonist to escape from a giant octopus which keeps her trapped on an atoll of the Pacific Ocean, after it has devoured her three crew mates. The presence of the creature sustains a constant feeling of horror and despair in an isolated maritime region, which confirms to the protagonist, and the reader, that humanity does not possess the supremacy we have claimed on Earth. Drawing on Timothy Morton's reflections on the fractured relationship between humans and Nature, this article analyses Neal's text as an example of 'Nautical Horror', introduced here as a subset of ecohorror. Nautical Horror, I argue, borrows a sublime maritime background from Nautical Gothic and combines it with a monstrous and horrifying encounter with the nonhuman, ultimately highlighting humanity's lack of control over the powerful forces of a watery wilderness. The final intention of this article is to provide a reference point for further studies on Neal's ecohorror fiction and to encourage the development and theorisation of Nautical Horror and explorations of monstrous cephalopods.

There is never just one tentacle, but many. And yet, the many tentacles always seem to trail off into nothing, into a distant ocean abyss as black as the ink it secretes.

*Eugene Thacker* (2014: p. 150)

In horror narratives, characters who confront monsters experience two stages of horror. First is the distressing experience that comes when facing and, consequently, having to fight the monster if the observer is to survive. The second is an even more devastating moment, when the irrefutable

existence of the monster forces the human viewer to accept that our planet contains more than we could possibly know. Indeed, human knowledge is limited by mobility and accessibility. Even in the twenty-first century, we know that many secrets are yet to be discovered on Earth—secrets lurking, in particular, in the dark ocean depths—but we keep this idea repressed or, at least, to the back of our mind. Consequently, when an experience with the unknown in Nature takes place it triggers an uncanny collapse of (the illusion of) human control over the environment. In D.T. Neal's novella, *Relict* (2013), Paige, the protagonist, illustrates through her experience the occurrence of these two moments of horror in a nautical scenario, in which the horror stems from the immediate threat to survival amidst the hostilities of a watery wilderness and the awful realisation that we are not alone, nor are we in control. This article analyses said novella as a Nautical Horror text, revealing the limited possibilities of humankind to survive when faced with primeval Nature. In doing so, my purpose is to leave a precedent for further studies on both the particular ecohorror branch in Neal's fiction and Nautical Horror more generally, as well as promote explorations of tentacular monstrosity.

D. T. Neal is an American writer. In 2013, he started a branch of 'creature feature eco-horror novellas' (as quoted on his website: [www.dtneal.com](http://www.dtneal.com)) and, so far, he has published three works within this line: *Summerville* (March 2013), a Southern Gothic text where flowers and wasps attack a group of friends; *The Day of the Nightfish* (2020), which renders a violent attack on the crew of a fishing ship performed by several, apparently intelligent, members of the nightfish species; and *Relict* (August 2013). In *Relict*, a group of four sailing companions (two couples), arrive at an atoll to spend some hours of leisure. Soon after their arrival, three of them are unexpectedly killed in turn by a giant octopus that drags them into the lagoon it inhabits at the centre of the atoll. The protagonist, Paige, survives the annihilation of her husband and the other two companions, but the creature keeps her prisoner on a small strip of land where she is separated from the commodities on board the *Affinity*, a ketch inside which the domestic world of humanity can travel around the ocean: '*Affinity* was a prototype, an experimental boat, designed for and capable of transoceanic transit, but she was, most of all, a pleasure boat' (Neal, 2013: p. 85). Paige manages to escape the attacks from the sublime cephalopod, a creature which has lived and survived on Earth longer than humans and other mammals. Indeed, the creature's status as a surviving remnant from distant eras is precisely what provides the title for the text. Determination

allows the protagonist to regain use of some human artefacts, an axe and a shotgun, and even to access the state-of-the-art vessel that the giant octopus tries to keep out of her reach; nevertheless, the creature proves inescapable. It follows her off the atoll, proving its superiority over any human attempt to escape its predatory attack.

My analysis draws on Timothy Morton's theses on ecological awareness in order to examine Paige's experience within the context of the broader conflict between the human and nonhuman animal, building on conversations central to critical engagements with 'Gothic Nature' and laying the foundations for a proposed subset of ecoGothic and ecohorror: Nautical Horror. Neal's novella is scrutinised as an example of said subset, in which the nonhuman world is confirmed as a threatening *other*. I explore Paige's gradual immersion into the events that engender a weird uncertainty which ends up becoming absolute horror when she confronts a monstrous creature that threatens the presence of all human life. Its attack reveals that humans are *not* the masters and owners of the planet, much as we endeavour to convince ourselves otherwise. According to Timothy Clark (2011), our surroundings—which we call 'Nature'—have two main definitions: they can refer either to everything that exists in the universe, thus including humankind, or only to the nonhuman entities around us that we can contemplate, mould, and exploit to our benefit (pp. 6-7). Clark identifies the existence of an 'enlightenment project of the "conquest of nature"' (p. 7) which consolidates the exploitation and devastation of the environment without any consideration 'based on the view that humanity is separate from and superior to it' (p. 23). The first two decades of the twenty-first century, the context in which Neil's novella takes place, shows a planet where this manipulation of Nature for our own benefit is more evident than ever before. We have forgotten to think of ourselves and all other beings on the planet as what Timothy Morton (2010) calls a 'mesh', which 'extends inside beings as well as among them'. Inside it, 'there is no definite "within" or "outside" of beings'. Instead, 'everything is adapted to everything else' (p. 39). Into such mesh, all creatures coexist in a complex network of interlaced links of mutual relationships that emphasise their differences and exist because of them. Morton's view finds echo in Donna Haraway's (2016) proposal on 'tentacular thinking'. She applies the term 'tentacularity' to refer to the interconnectedness of life 'passing relays again and again, in the generative recursions that make up living and dying' (p. 33). The result of our separation from this network has led to the end of the Holocene and the beginning of the Anthropocene (or even the

Capitalocene<sup>1</sup>), a new geological epoch jumpstarted by significant human activity. Having left on the Earth's surface and its atmosphere visible marks of our impact, we seem to have, in Morton's (2016) words, transformed Nature into 'a blank sheet for the projection of human desire' (p. 65). Actually, Morton names our times *Homogenocene*, the age in which 'humans have stamped their impression on things they consider as ductile as wax, even if those things cry' (p. 23). Indeed, we 'consider' our perspective to be the only valid one; from the moment 'agrolistics' started shaping our civilisation, we spawned 'the concept of Nature definitely outside the human' (p. 56), thus creating our artificial world as separate and different from that one.

Nature is neither abandoned nor destroyed by human activities and processes. Morton (2016) argues that anthropogenic activity transforms Nature into a latent form of catastrophe (p. 59), viewed as something separate from our own existence and development on the planet. The result of this transformation is the end of all dialogue between humanity and Nature. Haraway (2016) reminds us that we are not the only important actors on the stage we call Earth, 'with all other beings able simply to react' (p. 55), and that the planet is much wider than our limited anthropocentric view. Outside from it, we would look on a scenario where 'human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story' (p. 55). Although Nature is indifferent towards us, Clive Hamilton (2017) further suggests that we behave towards it as if we were facing an opponent with selfish intentions similar to ours, and thus start a violent competition:

*'Humans are more powerful; nature is more powerful. Taken together; there is more power at work on Earth. A power struggle between humankind and Earth is underway, a tug-of-war in which humans strain to drag the Earth into our sphere of influence while Earth attempts to pull us back into its domain'* (p. 40).

This competition means that the survival of nonhuman entities is more in danger every day as well as our own existence, which requires more technification that increases our isolation from all other forms of life. In *Relict*, even the Palmer Atoll, a fictional isolated piece of land on the Pacific, has

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<sup>1</sup> Jason W. Moore (2016) proposes the use of the term 'Capitalocene' to emphasise that we live in an age where Nature is shaped to serve capitalistic interests (p. 6).

been invaded by the traces of human presence; for example, we are told early on of a sign that reads ‘Palmer Atoll. 10° 28’ N 170° 07’ W. Population 01. Elevation 5.2 feet. DANGER! KEEP OFF!’ (Neal, 2013: p. 13). This tag, which objectifies the atoll as if it were a human possession, expresses the need to leave our footprint on Nature. On the island, this statement of human presence is manifested through the ‘corrugated tin shack’ surrounded by human garbage thrown into the ocean: ‘like bones was plastic of all shapes and sizes, sunbleached. Bottles, mostly, but also netting and other things. Cigarette lighters in great stacks’ (p. 16). After observing this scene, Sebastian, Paige’s husband, emphasises the impact humanity has on Nature, reminding the others that we have turned the sea into our dump: ‘The litter is carried by the currents. There are some places out there where there is just this great swirling mass of plastic garbage, floating out there—a Sargasso Sea of plastics’ (p. 16). To this, Paige adds that ‘People are pigs’ (p. 16), critiquing our disregard for anything nonhuman (ironically through the critical comparison of humans to popularly derided nonhuman animals). The final evidence of infecting human presence is the ‘planking that had been nailed up’ (p. 71) on the grove which serves for Paige as an ultimate shelter unreachable for the kraken’s tentacles, reinforcing the fact that humans need to alter Nature in order to survive. The kraken’s overwhelming power over any other living being on the atoll is the reason why a strange alien nonhuman becomes a monstrous source of horror in Neal’s text.

A key facet of horror is being confronted by creatures that annihilate our faculties and shatter all knowledge, perceptions, and convictions. Eugene Thacker’s (2014) definition of horror reinforces this conceptualisation of the term; for him, ‘horror is the always potential threat of the senses being overwhelmed, of something being sensed that is in excess of the sorting mechanism of the understanding, and the synthetic function of reason’ (pp. 117-118). In this article, the term horror is used to refer to experiences that annihilate reason and freeze the senses, particularly when faced with a monstrous force. When this encounter of fear is connected with environmental concerns, some critics (and Neil himself) have applied the term ‘ecohorror’. Christy Tidwell, Stephen A. Rust, and Carter Soles have previously provided explanations of this genre that are helpful here. For Tidwell (2018), ecohorror applies to ‘narratives in which the central narrative is frequently one of some elements of the natural world attacking humanity’ (p. 115). Rust and Soles (2014) locate ecohorror in texts ‘grappling with ecocritical matters’ where ‘environmental disruption is haunting humanity’s relationship to the non-human world’ (p. 510). Both definitions



define ecohorror texts as those in which the damage made by humans to ecology is responsible for an attack on humanity from natural forces. Building on these ideas, my intention here is to further discussions around what I propose is a significant subset of ecohorror: Nautical Horror. In Nautical Horror, the striking threat from Nature originates specifically in aquatic contexts, such as oceans and waterways, as well as more liminal spaces, including shores, islands, and ships. Foucault (1967) defined the ship as ‘a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea’ (p. 27). Ships allow us to move on bodies of water that we tend to forget are also permanently moving.<sup>2</sup> This notion of a ‘double movement’ evidences the fact that there is always another perspective (or, indeed, something more) emanating from Nature, though we tend to wilfully ignore this and give importance exclusively to our own anthropocentric view.

To differentiate Nautical Horror and Nautical Gothic<sup>3</sup>—another category that has recently caught scholar interest—I consider it essential to indicate that the latter ‘focuses on how the sea is represented in Gothic literature – and on how it is represented Gothically in literature (including non-fiction)’ (Alder, 2017: p 1). Nautical Horror, meanwhile, is a subcategory of ecohorror which borrows a sublime maritime background from Nautical Gothic and combines it with a monstrous and horrifying encounter with the nonhuman. Margaret Cohen (2013) identifies the persistence of viewing the sea as something sublime from the eighteenth century to the present day: ‘Shaped by this Enlightenment view, the aesthetic of the sublime would yield the wild ocean, a terrific domain of uncontained nature, which remains the vision of the ocean that springs to mind when we think of this realm today’ (pp. 116-117). Resonances of this sublime oceanic obscurity appear in Edgar Allan Poe’s early manifestations of Nautical Horror, where the vastness of the ocean causes terrifying experiences. Specifically, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), and ‘MS. Found in a Bottle’ (1833) are both obvious examples that precede contemporary narratives of Nautical Horror since they illustrate the struggle for survival against a threatening maritime environment that opposes human will.

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<sup>2</sup> Philip E. Steinberg (2013) points out that the ocean is in constant movement contrary to what we experience with land surface: ‘the ocean becomes the object of our focus not because it is a space that facilitates movement the space across which things move but because it is a space that is constituted by and constitutive of movement’. (p. 165)

<sup>3</sup> Emily Alder identifies an early use of the term ‘Nautical Gothic’ in 1986 when ‘Dennis Berthold used the term to distinguish between the fantastic and the realistic in sea writing’ (2017: p. 1).

While a Nautical Gothic reading focuses on the connections of the ocean and its depths with ‘the unknown, the uncanny, the secret and the secreted’ (Packham and Punter, 2017: p. 28), Nautical Horror emphasises the arbitrariness of the human idea of supremacy over Nature when contrasted with the presence of unescapable monstrous creatures. The resulting encounters evidence the inferior position of humans when we are pitted against both the threatening creatures that emerge from the depths and the vastness of the oceanic waters that challenge the ability of human minds to comprehend size and volume. We label the attack from the ocean and its creatures against our presence on ships, islands, or the coast as a violent irruption of horrifying proportions. Nevertheless, from the perspective located in the sea and its creatures, it is us, humans, who are the intruders that have disturbed and polluted the place they inhabit. From the very moment we turned to rivers and seas to satisfy our excessive need for natural resources, our presence on and under the water has left marks of erosion and pollutants that have become much more evident in the last two centuries. Nautical Horror narratives serve to remind us about the dangers of our insatiable exploitation of aquatic resources as well as the absurdity behind the feeling of superiority over Nature on which we base such extractionism. In the specific case of *Relict*, although it is not a widely known text, I consider that the interaction of oceanic predator and prey that occurs between the monstrous octopus and human characters makes it a relevant example of contemporary Nautical Horror. The creature’s attack makes anthropocentric attempts to claim supremacy over the ocean fail, despite the existence of revolutionary technology such as vessels like the *Affinity* and the presence of multiple residues of human manufacture like the lighters piled on Palmer Atoll.

*Relict* presents two elements I suggest essential for a text of Nautical Horror: first, of course, it must have an aquatic background—in this case, an atoll in the sublime extension of the Pacific Ocean; and second, the presence of a monstrous creature that awakens an annihilating fear in the human characters who encounter it. Horror narratives are recurrently based on an encounter of the human and the monstrous in liminal regions, which include:

‘...two worlds, settings, environments impinge, where crossing (and the resulting experience of horror) is the basic action. Movement (at least in many explicitly

fictional contexts) can be in either direction in these mirror worlds. That is, some spook invades our commonplace reality, or our apparently sane and rational self enters a categorically malign environment' (Salomon, 2002: p. 9).

The doorstep dividing our realm and an alien one is crossed in either or both ways, bringing menaces in the shape of monsters and incoming destruction. In the case of Nautical Horror, those two worlds are the civilised comfort afforded by the stability of the land or on board a vessel versus the unpredictable vast oceanic surfaces and depths, populated by creatures that can easily move in a watery environment into which humans cannot venture for long without artificial aids. Such creatures, better adjusted to their environment, are monstrous only to the human eye: 'That monsters invariably upset and therefore call into question the boundaries of existing conceptual categories tells us something else essential about them: that what is or is not considered monstrous depends on and is defined against prevailing conceptions of the human and of normalcy' (Weinstock, 2014: p. 3). Concerning ancestry, cephalopods have inhabited the Earth for much longer than primates. Octopi fossils as old as 95 million years have been documented (Williams, 2011: p. 61). On the contrary, modern humans appeared only 200,000 years ago (p. 270). Neal's kraken irrupts from the natural environment of its lagoon into the human setting represented by the reduced confines of the *Affinity* from whose portholes Paige 'could see the great barred yellow eye of the octopus peering in, looking at her' (Neal, 2013: p. 84). From the animal's viewpoint, she is just food; from her perspective, the monster is attempting to breach the borders between her artificially created human world and the natural one: 'It was an odd contrast for her, the luxurious appointments inside the cabin of the *Affinity*, contrasted with the monstrosity outside' (p. 85). From her first contact with the creature, Paige is reminded of the struggle for survival in Nature; she sees a 'long, thick, snake-like thing slip out of the water and snatch up' a coconut crab (p. 26). Not long before that event, Sebastian had exclaimed that a crab 'must be the dominant predator on the island obviously. Only in isolated places like this can you have a crab at the apex of the food pyramid' (p. 25). Sebastian's words anticipate the kraken's role as the top of the pyramid towering over them on the atoll. In the end, as Paige and Meg (the other woman in Paige's group) conclude, the creature is just an animal 'playing with its food' (p. 49). When this behaviour makes Paige judge it as 'malevolence incarnate' (p. 48), and Meg describes it as 'evil' (p.54), they emphasise humanity's self-praise in thinking we are the only ones with the right to kill for sport. However,

the cephalopod's superiority over any other living being in the place grants it that possibility as well.

In Western cultures, huge octopi have historically reminded us of our impossibility to dominate either the sea surface or its depths. An example of this is Pierre Denys de Montfort's woodcut, which is described by Williams to depict

‘...a truly monstrous eight-armed, bug-eyed octopus as large as the three-masted ship it was seizing. Three octopus arms entwined the ship's masts like snakes. Two other arms grasped each end of the ship, as though to pull the ship closer to its beak. The other three arms hung there, unoccupied, as though perhaps waiting for sailors to fall into the sea and be eaten’ (2011: p. 204).

Weinstock's (2014) research on the recurring presence of krakens in western narratives concludes that ‘in literature and film, both literally and metaphorically, the kraken slumbers beneath the sea, heralding terror and apocalypse when it awakes or is disturbed’ (p. 364). Haraway (2016) indicates that ‘Octopuses are called spiders of the seas, not only for their tentacularity, but also for their predatory habits’ (p. 55). In Neal's novella, the kraken brings havoc and certain death to any human being who crosses its way. Paige becomes nearly paralysed after her first encounter with its enormous tentacle, which confounds her categories of being and knowing. She wonders about the proportions of the larger body connected to the tip of the limb she witnesses emerging from the water. The very small part she has seen of that bigger body is sufficient to trigger in her a sense of insecurity and dread about her survival in a place where humans are not the best skilled for survival at all. Even though the diary left by Seth, a former occupant of the island, calls it a kraken, Paige insists on calling it a ‘thing’ (Neal, 2013: p. 34). Throughout the story, the creature remains an unknown object without a definite name from a human perspective, thus emphasising its condition as something beyond both human comprehension and therefore our limited ability to control nature: ‘Paige wondered how old the kraken was, how long it had lived at this place, whether it migrated, whether it was alone, or whether there were others, whether it was male or female’ (p. 51).

In addition to being an unknown animal, what overwhelms Paige about the creature is its excessive body, which dwarfs the *Affinity*. Although it is a ‘big boat’, in comparison to it, the octopus is described as ‘massive’ (p. 83). Confrontations with monstrous entities force human reason to realise that the control of Nature is a mere illusion when we are cast into the scenarios where the Darwinian perspective of the survival of the fittest rules. In such places, we become pray for other species that, instead of having forced Nature to adhere to their intentions, remain adapted to it. After having set foot on the atoll, the two men from the boat, Sebastian and his employer, John, who both work for a company that has built revolutionary vessels intended to improve oceanic mobility like the ketch they travel in, are the first two victims of the kraken. In the wild, their knowledge of technology proves meaningless upon facing the creature whose adaptability is emphasised by its ability to change colour. It performs what for Paige seems to be ‘a marvellous transformation like a chameleon, going from that hideously smooth green-black to a lumpy, dusky red’ (p. 48). Later, Paige cannot but recognise the beauty in the colours of the kraken’s body: ‘It had turned itself an inky blue, a beautiful hue that played well to its golden eyes’ (p. 72). A few lines before, she had seen it as a ‘malevolent star’ looking at her from the water’s surface; her change of perspective echoes the division inside humans when recognising the beauty in nature and claiming superiority over it, especially after we identify the presence of nonhumans that could challenge our claim of supremacy.

From the beginning of the story, it is obvious that Paige and her companions have entered a scenario where the idea of humanity as master of the planet is contested. The text starts with the description of ‘overcast skies [that] painted the jungle black. Great rainclouds loomed and desultory drizzle fell as the ketch, *Affinity*, cruised toward Palmer Atoll, a coral comma that punctuated the middle of the Pacific Ocean’ (p. 9). As mentioned above, the ketch is emphasised as a minimal thing when pictured against the unpredictable and overwhelming maritime weather. Besides, the island where they find some remnants of the manufactured environment of humanity is but a microscopic speck in the oceanic immensity that defies the mind when trying to rationalise its surface and abyssal extensions. In the end, the only thing that remains on the boat at the moment it is found by other humans is the tentacle that Paige doubly secured in a cooler inside the freezer. Based on this evidence, the creature is identified as ‘*Enteroctopus giganteas*, a hitherto undiscovered giant octopus’ (p. 99). As a species never before documented, the octopus is a weird

being which challenges the categorisation that we have made of the world to make us feel at home in it. Accepting the existence of the creature becomes undeniable as its tentacle preserved by Paige remains as proof of the accounts in her diary. At that moment, the reader is forced to accept that ‘The weird thing is not wrong, after all; it is our conceptions that must be inadequate’ (Fisher, 2016: p. 15). It is not a coincidence that this limb is preserved by means of technology. The text is filled with references to the artificial commodities provided by human advances available at the beginning of the twenty-first century, primarily the *Affinity* and the shelter on the atoll. The ketch serves as a reminder that, in Paige’s words ‘humans have forgotten to live beyond their artificially created environments’ (Neal, 2013: p. 17). As for the abandoned tin shack at the lagoon, it reminds us how easily evidence of human presence on the planet can fall into ruins when left abandoned at the mercy of natural elements.

The asthmatic condition of the protagonist makes her an example of the artificiality created by human scientific advances; the reader can easily infer her increased struggle to survive, especially on open sea, without her inhaler. Even the ketch proves unsuccessful for venturing into the wild since the emphasis on its characteristics as a pleasure craft rather than suitability for transoceanic voyages, makes its crew easy prey for the creature because ‘the wheelhouse was not fully enclosed above them’ (p. 85). Contrary to Paige, the kraken at the atoll is the master of the place, at the top of the local food pyramid: a role not disturbed by the arrival of humans as the 315 skulls on the atoll, presumably former victims of the creature, seem to demonstrate. Moreover, the creature’s way of marking and arranging those skulls proves its intelligence from Paige’s view: ‘She jumped, seeing a pile of skulls. Human skulls, in a massive stack, all of them clean and white, all of them missing their lower jaws, all of them with a wedge-shaped gouge taken out of the skull’ (p. 74). She is convinced of the monster’s cunning: ‘It’s smart and sneaky’ (p. 91), she says to Monica, the girl who survives the attack on the catamaran on which she and her male partner enter the lagoon thinking the masts from the *Affinity* may correspond to a ship in need for help after a storm. Her ignorance concerning the facts around the ketch’s condition reinforce the limitations of the human perspective, since Monica and her sailing companion would have never thought of the truth occurring in Palmer Atoll before entering it.

Neal's election of an octopus as the monster that causes the weird experience of horror in his protagonist relates to the primeval origins of such creatures. Its presence reminds us of other life forms existed before us and may remain after our departure (extinction). In fact, Paige mentions that Hawaiian 'mythology held that the octopus was the only survivor of a previous, alien world that had been destroyed before the time of man' (p. 58). In addition, we must consider that the octopus seems intelligent according to Paige. Williams (2011) describes octopi's intelligence as 'only logical' and 'for successful predation' though not always recognised by us (pp. 245-246). Hanlon *et al.* (2018) point out that 'Cephalopods certainly process many features that we equate with smartness or intelligence in vertebrate animals with which we, as humans, are more familiar: think of birds, rodents, and dogs' (p. 170). Such intelligence is divided among its eight tentacles since each of them contains a considerable portion of the creature's brain:

'Roughly three-fifths of the cephalopod brain resides not in the central system but in the arms and tentacles. This makes cephalopod arms weirdly independent. Arms and tentacles, at times, seem to be able to make their own "decisions". If an arm separates from the body, which might happen for any number of reasons, it can continue to function for many hours' (Williams, 2011: p. 35).

This multiplicity of independent tentacles and the animal's formless head make 'coherence fall apart once one tries to make sense of the whole creature. Emerging from a lightless ocean depth, the tentacles seem to lead back down to the abyss from which they came, a multiplicity dissipating into a slumberous, slow, and alien depth' (Thacker, 2014: p. 150). Based on said expansion of the brain into the numerous limbs of the creature, I suggest their projection from the water, in Neal's text, represents the multiplicity of possible views that arise from the 'mesh' of interconnections in Nature described by Morton and continued by Haraway's 'tentacularity'. However, our insistence to impose our one-sided view on everything we consider nonhuman makes us ignore the existence of those perspectives. As a result, Paige considers that the kraken is the one putting her life and those of her companions at risk while, from the creature's standpoint, all humans intruding into the atoll are just more preys in the long list under its reach.

In connection with the cephalopod, Neal marks a clear reference for a reader familiar with another Nautical Horror story: After confronting the kraken, Paige thinks of Cthulhu, ‘the octopus-faced creation of H. P. Lovecraft’ (Neal, 2013: p. 58). The reference to *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) links to the fact that Paige’s experience relates to three pieces of physical evidence: Seth’s journal which she finds in the atoll and extends with her own entries, her single entry left on the *Affinity* without any evidence of her whereabouts, plus the kraken’s frozen tentacle inside the boat. In Lovecraft’s text, the protagonist assembles the notes left by his uncle, plus newspaper clippings and a diary to comprehend the implications of several, apparently isolated, events around the world. Lovecraft’s and Neal’s stories coincide in the presence of three different sources of evidence that make it difficult to deny the existence of the Nautical Horror monsters that provide the title for both narratives. Besides, there is the fact that, in Lovecraft’s story, Cthulhu is presented as a cosmic entity that is much older than any other living being on the planet and that sees humans as an inferior species whose dreams it can control (Lovecraft, 2014: pp. 142-143).

Neil’s octopus embodies our impossibility not only to dominate but also to comprehend the vastness of the sea: ‘It frightened Paige to see this little sliver of land in the middle of absolutely nowhere, surrounded by the deepest, darkest sea and an endless sky...’ (p. 14). We lack the means to establish permanent control over and under the seawater. This occurs because the fluid nature of nautical surfaces and depths makes it impossible to leave a permanent footprint that would claim the waters as human dominions; besides, we cannot restrict the physical movement of nautical creatures as we do with animals on land. In this context, Paige’s plans go wrong two times because she is unable to defend against a creature that rises beyond the artificial adequation of Nature into human designs. When she decides to row with Meg in separate ways using a dinghy and a kayak, the kraken anticipates her plans and removes both ships from shore. Second, her promise to Monica about finding salvation by escaping from the lagoon proves wrong when the tentacles of their enemy grab Monica on open sea, a place where Paige had assumed the kraken would not venture. The horror that arises in these two episodes is based not only on the overwhelming attacks from the kraken but on the cunningness with which it acts. The undeniable intelligence behind the creature’s moves decentres and confounds the human characters who cannot control the situation around them as they did before leaving the apparent security aboard their ships. In the end, Paige’s



story exemplifies the human idealisation of Nature based on a secure approach to the borders of the wild:

‘She’d never thought of it back home; she loved the ocean, loved the coast. But there was in her mind, a distinction between the comfort of the coast, and being here, in this place, far from everything, away from the world. There was no comfort here, only loneliness, emptiness, and lurking fear. She could not deny it. It was different in the boat, because the boat was going places, could travel the world— here, there was no place to go’ (p. 32).

Outside the protection of the ketch, she comprehends that Palmer Atoll is a minuscule piece of land that sooner or later will be swallowed up by the sea level because ‘even the greatest island would one day be drowned by the sea’ (p. 31). While that occurs, it remains a spot isolated from civilisation where a castaway can only attempt to preserve the vestiges of commodities left at home.

As the story progresses, it becomes clear to the reader that Paige is dealing with a case of human-nature confrontation. She considers the *Affinity* as ‘Safety. Sanctuary’ (p. 29) because she sees it as salvation from the threatening ocean concealing the monstrous kraken. When she finally reaches the ship, it grants everything a human being needs to survive in our civilised version of existence: ‘Down here, in the cabin, she had food and water and safety. With the batteries charged, she could run for a long time, she presumed, and [thanks to the possibilities of the radio onboard] just hoped someone rescued her’ (p. 85). Moreover, this place provides her with the weapons that allow her, at least momentarily, to overcome the kraken: ‘Paige slipped the shotgun free and blasted the tentacles at her feet, gratified by the roar of the gun and by the explosion of octopus flesh and blood at the point of impact. She cocked the shotgun again and fired another shot, severing one of the tentacles’ (p. 93). She arms herself with manufactured weapons: ‘Paige slung the shotgun over her back, took the axe in hand, figuring that she’d have a better chance with the axe against the tentacles than trying to blast them with the shotgun’ (p. 87). This scene reminds the reader of the event from the previous day when the hot metal of a washtub made the creature’s arm retract, accidentally burnt. Nevertheless, human power on the atoll is limited, and the

overwhelming quality of sublime Nature is confirmed by the storm that hits before Paige's escape and the final attack in the open sea. Similarly, the ketch ends up providing only relative refuge from the creature's attack.

When confronted with the human dominions represented by the *Affinity*, the kraken looks like an intruder that pollutes the whiteness of the ship: 'Paige pried the writhing tentacle off her leg, saw the green-blue blood splashing on *Affinity*'s pristine white and wooden deck' (p. 93). However, a broader scope reveals humans are the intruders on the atoll they have decided to name Palmer. The tentacular ability of the kraken that allows it to reach out for its human preys is contested in the novel by this reference to the presence of human junk everywhere in the ocean; the previously mentioned 'Sargasso Sea of plastics' (16) has reached every remote oceanic corner of the planet like Palmer Atoll. Similarly to the rest of the ocean, this place has become humanity's junkyard: 'She was amazed and appalled at the amount of litter there was, how people could be so sloppy and slovenly, as careless to just dump things like this into the beautiful ocean. The beautiful ocean that housed monstrosities like the kraken, she had reminded herself' (p. 61). That reflection coincides with Seth's diary entry about the position of the kraken as the rightful owner of the place since it has proven fitter than any other being to rule there, thanks to the predatory tools the evolutionary path has given him. Seth's long stay on Palmer allowed him to observe the situation from both the human view and the natural one:

"It lives in the lagoon", he said. "That's his home. Somedays, safe in my treehouse, I can see it swimming. Beautiful and green-black. Horrible thing, but with monstrous grace... Yesterday it ate a shark that slipped into the lagoon. The shark just slid through the channel, and the thing snatched it up, throttled it. Didn't see what type; didn't matter. The kraken made short work of it—just trashing and splashing and down it went with its prize. And I thought for a minute that maybe, just maybe I could swim for the *Lady* while the thing was busy tearing apart the shark. But then I thought that if something with many hundreds of millions of years of evolution behind couldn't beat the kraken, what chance could I have? I just watched, rooted in place. I couldn't move'" (p. 36).

His confirmation of the kraken as the true lord of the place is recognition of the fact that the creature is disgusting only when scrutinised from a civilised human position. After days of being just another creature trying to survive the beak of the kraken, Seth's perspective oscillates between admiring a superior creature, on the one hand, and fearing an alien-like monster, on the other. As for Paige, the artificial comfort of the human ship does not allow her to anticipate that the creature may leave its apparent home in a final attempt to catch her and Monica. Seth's growing admiration for the kraken is contrasted with Paige's short-term view that makes her consider the open sea as a safe location. She fails to comprehend the kraken's position as the fittest species outside of the artificial comfort of the *Affinity*. From her limited standpoint, the predator is a 'fucking mollusk'. We are told that 'she couldn't believe she was at the mercy of a mollusk, that this was what her life had come to' (p. 92). She speculates the kraken may be an intelligent creature but fails to accept the superiority of the nonhuman over her and the remainders of human technology on the *Affinity*. At the end of her story, this miscalculation is what brings about her ruin. To the end, she insists that no proof exists, beyond her mere speculations, of the kraken's level of intelligence: 'She wondered if, smart as it was, it would have wanted some kind of revenge on her for having taken one of its limbs. There was no way of knowing. She really had thought they were safe' (p. 97). Her final conclusions confirm that the kraken and its actions are beyond human control. Her experience of Nautical Horror—a presumable death at the hands (tentacles) of a giant octopus—confirms we can become overwhelmed by natural forces at any time, despite whatever preparations we might make. In the end, Neal's Nautical Horror, *Relict*, goes beyond shattering our assumptions of human dominion over oceanic waters. It also undermines our faith in technology and progression in shielding us from what we consider hostile and threatening forces, but which are just other species better adapted for survival in the wild. Having analysed the devastating portrayal of humanity in Neal's novel, this article is intended to encourage others to explore similar manifestations of ecohorror experiences in maritime contexts that can be scrutinised as examples of Nautical Horror.

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**Real Mermaid vs. Nuclear Power Plant:  
Ecofeminist Vengeance and *Ama* Divers in Japanese Horror**

*Timo Thelen*

**ABSTRACT**

This essay draws on ecofeminist theory to investigate cultural images of Japanese *ama* divers (professional free-diving women) in the twentieth century and their relationship with Nature through the examination of Japanese horror movies, with a particular focus on Toshiharu Ikeda's *Mermaid Legend* (1984). Japanese folklore traditions lack an obvious equivalent to the Western mermaid. With no clear counterpart for this seductive and potentially dangerous female of the ocean, I argue that *ama* divers serve as the 'real mermaids' of Japan: mysterious and increasingly exoticised figures who were interpreted in similar veins to the mythical mermaid throughout the twentieth century. Much like mermaids, they are imagined in both foreign and Japanese media texts from the 1950s/60s as female 'Others' that are closely linked to the seas. They are envisioned as sexualised and 'conquerable'—echoing anthropocentric fantasies of dominating and defeating a much-feminised construction of 'Nature'. The 1984 horror movie *Mermaid Legend*, however, stands out in opposition, refreshingly subverting this trope through its innovative and violent story of ecofeminist vengeance. The movie centres on an *ama* diver allied with Nature, who seeks revenge for her own violation as well as that of the oceanic environment which is menaced by the construction of a nuclear power plant. By telling this story, *Mermaid Legend* provides a strong ecofeminist message thoroughly unique for a media text of its time—and invites us to reconsider these 'real mermaids' in contemporary times in the context of Gothic Nature.

The ocean is not only Earth's largest ecosystem but also a rich habitat of horror tropes. Emily Alder (2017), who coined the term 'nautical Gothic' for horror/Gothic texts centring on the ocean

or oceanic themes, suggests a reading that ‘requires recognition of the sea as environment and medium as well as metaphorical device, and, in doing so, shifts us towards an oceanic critical perspective’ (p. 5). In other words, it is fruitful to bring together the different but often conflated meanings that the ocean—as well as Nature—possesses, both as an actual environment and the coincidental product of cultural imagination. I propose that the ecofeminist lens can offer a suitable approach here, because it examines the mechanisms of oppression for both women and Nature that emerge in media texts as well as in human society and the environment.

When looking for an oceanic trope clearly linked to femininity, the mermaid is an obvious choice. Jon Hackett and Séan Harrington (2018) give three arguments for why ocean creatures in popular culture provide valuable research objects: (1) they offer ‘an evident mythical resource’ for re-interpretations and re-imaginings; (2) they can be used as a ‘figure for the unrepresentable, the sublime or the ineffable’; and (3) they ‘provide tropes for representing social or cultural concerns’ including environmental issues and gender (pp. 2-3). All these arguments are very applicable to the mermaid with its countless portrayals from different times and cultures, its impossible human-fish hybrid body, and last but not least its sexualisation in the (stereotypically) male gaze.

In the last decade, however, many Western media texts, for instance the TV series *Siren* (2018–20) or the movie *The Lure* (2015),<sup>1</sup> depict mermaids from a progressive feminist and environmentalist perspective (Angierski, 2019: pp. 300–303). This essay will analyse another such movie, *Mermaid Legend* (1984), which contains a strong ecofeminist message and which is, moreover, three decades older and from Japan, a culture with no folklore tradition of mermaids. Thus, maybe the most paradoxical aspect of this movie is that it does not even feature a mystical mermaid but a so-called ‘real mermaid’: an *ama* diver (professional free-diving woman). Yet, scavenging this curious and—from the Western perspective—‘exotic’ relic will exemplify that the idea of ecofeminist retribution also exists in non-Western cultures, here Japan, and that the media depiction of this idea is not exclusively to be found in recent times. Furthermore, this movie deals with ecoterrorist resistance against nuclear power in Japan—and let us not forget this is arguably the origin of ‘ecohorror’—a country where the general acceptance of nuclear energy in politics and mainstream media remains solid, even after the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi incident.

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<sup>1</sup> See Issue I of *Gothic Nature* for Kristen Angierski’s discussion of ‘siren sisters’ and review of *The Lure*.



This essay starts with a short introduction to some broad ecofeminist ideas, namely the construction of both women and Nature as objects of male domination and violation, provoking female rage and vengeance. I assemble these theories with the trope of the mermaid as an illustrative allegory of feminised nature, then discuss the absence of Western-like mermaids in Japanese folklore traditions. In the second part, I introduce my theory that *ama* divers can be regarded as substitutes for the mermaid trope. I analyse the cultural history of *ama* divers' depictions, recalling their sexualisation and exoticisation, which was firmly influenced by Western spectators. I briefly discuss two *ama* diver horror movies from the 1950s as examples of how these women were conventionally constructed as female 'Others' close to Nature. In the third part, I then compare these observations with the 1980s movie *Mermaid Legend*, where the *ama* diver takes merciless revenge for the violation of both herself and the oceanic environment. In the conclusion, I summarise and draw connections between these ideas, making clear that *Mermaid Legend* provides an ecofeminist—and ecohorror—critique that was quite ahead of its time.

### **Assembling Ecofeminism and the Vengeful Mermaid**

Many cultures—especially in the Western world, but not exclusively—have a long tradition of gendering Nature and the environment. The most prominent example is of course the trope of Mother Nature, which still persists in modern popular culture (Roach, 2003). The logic of gendering Nature implies a quasi-naturalised binary and thus becomes a powerful ideology for the domination and oppression of both women and Nature. As Karen J. Warren (1997) notes: 'The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalizing them' (p. 12). Ecofeminist scholars aim at deconstructing and overcoming these issues as well as the exploitative systems based on them. Gerta Gaard (1993a) notes: 'ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature' (p. 1). The tendency to feminise Nature can be traced to back to seventeenth-century European philosophy (Merchant, 2009); yet, as Simon C. Estok (2018) has noted, environmental concerns in twenty-first-century media continue to present a sexist ecophobia 'simply perpetuating the idea that nature (and women) should be controlled' (p. 54). In

addition to gender biased media representations of Nature, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (2014) argue that ‘the impact on women of ecological disasters and deterioration was harder than on men, and also, that everywhere, women were the first to protest against environmental destruction’ (pp. 2–3), drawing on nuclear power plant incidents and anti-nuclear movements as one example.

Val Plumwood (1993) claims that ‘the association of women with nature and men with culture or reason can still be seen as providing much of the basis of the cultural elaboration of women’s oppression’ (p. 11). She notes that this ‘master story of western culture [...] has spoken mainly of conquest and control, of capture and use, of destruction and incorporation’ (p. 196). This ‘conquest’ is often illustrated by images of sexual violence. Gaard (1993b) observes that ‘[i]n Western culture, to feminize nature is to sexualize nature. Phrases like “virgin forest” and “rape of the land” suggest various “uses” and “potentials” for nature. In these constructions, rape is something that simply “happens” to nature and to women’ (p. 304). Rape here, however, is more than a mere expression of domination, as Susan Griffin (1997) notes, ‘it describes the desire to conquer and violate woman and nature, and a less evident fear of both’ (p. 225).

This aspect of fear is crucial for the genre of horror. Fred Botting (2014) notes, in relation to the role of female heroines and male villains in classic Gothic texts, that ‘[h]er vulnerability and his violence play out the lawlessness and insecurity manifested in settings and landscapes’ (p. 5). Likewise, the oppression and vulnerability of the female subject is commonly presented in ecoGothic/ecohorror texts and reflected in their environments. Estok (2018) argues that an adverse perception of nature is essential to provoke the fear of Nature/the environment, which he calls ‘ecophobia’: ‘Ecophobia is all about power. It is the something-other-than-humanness that is dangerous in the monster and the mad, and in order for this danger to have any potency, we need a fairly hostile conception of the natural world’ (p. 124). He draws on witchcraft and hysteria as an example for this madness: ‘Such deformity [witchcraft/hysteria] is an environmental issue not only because of the sexist association of women (as a general category) with the natural world but also because of the many links imagined specifically between witches and the natural environment’ (p. 127).

Madness or chaos not only stands in opposition to the idea of reason, which is primarily attributed to men in Western tradition/philosophy (Plumwood, 1993), but can lead to vengeful violence against the dominating forces. Estok (2019) describes that '[t]he imagining of nature as a menacing threat is central to ecoGothic texts. The menace can (and often does) involve the idea of nature as an agent bent on vengeance. An agential nature is menacing in itself; a vengeful one is truly horrifying' (p. 39). Looking at Western horror films from a feminist viewpoint, Isabel Cristina Pinedo (1997) argues that '[t]he horror film speaks both *to* women and *about* them, often by articulating the legitimacy of female rage in the face of male aggression' (p. 95, italics in original). This female rage, that is the reaction to male oppression, can coincide with environmental/ecological themes. Elizabeth Parker (2020) observes this tendency in analysing contemporary horror movies including elements of ecoGothic/ecohorror: '[W]omen and nature are portrayed as in dark sympathy with one another. Allied by a shared history of being subjugated, backgrounded, and silenced, they promise ecofeminist revenge' (p. 114). For this trope of women allied with a dark and vengeful nature, she proposes the term 'she-devil in the wilderness' (p. 117). In the case of dark and Gothic water-related narratives, the mermaid may thus become the 'she-devil in the ocean'. Boria Sax (2000) states that '[m]any tales record of terrible revenge taken by mermaids on those who harmed or offended them' (p. 49) and much academic attention has been devoted to mermaids, sirens, or similar merfolk (e.g., Fryers, 2018; Hayward, 2018, etc.). In pre-modern narratives, mermaids were commonly depicted as potentially dangerous and seductive supernatural female human-fish hybrids, who lured men—mostly sailors—into tragedy.<sup>2</sup> Following from the legacy of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* (2004 [1837]), which employed a more sentimental and romantic approach to the motif, popular mainstream movies at end of the twentieth century like Disney's *Little Mermaid* (1989) or *Splash* (1984) established a bright and cheerful image of mermaids that approached kitsch and was translated into consumerism (e.g., Starbuck's mermaid brand logo) (Sax, 2000: p. 53). However, in the last decades, more progressive and dark narratives of mermaids have emerged that depict the motif from critical feminist perspectives, like the Russian movie *Mermaid* (2007) or the Polish movie *The Lure* (2015) (Doubivko, 2011; Angierski, 2019). For instance, Kirsten Angierski (2019) argues that '*The Lure* rewrites the anti-feminist messaging of the Danish original by giving the

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<sup>2</sup> Sax (2000) identifies the frequent banning of women from ships as an important reason for the many mermaid legends and their sexualisation through the male gaze (pp. 48-49).

doomed mermaid a growling vampiric sister who takes ecohorrific revenge on the exploitative humans' (p. 300).

Looking at Japan, the trope of a Western-like mermaid was unknown until the late nineteenth century, although Japan's pre-modern culture is rich with monstrous water creatures like the *kappa*, an infamous river demon possessing visual features of ape and turtle. The creature most similar to a mermaid is the *ningyo* (human-fish, *Figure 1*),<sup>3</sup> which appears for instance in Toriyama Sekien's<sup>4</sup> (1712–1788) bestiaries of folklore creatures (third volume, 1780) (Toriyama, 2005: p. 140). A *ningyo* has human or ape-like features from its shoulders upwards and possibly an animalistic face, but its arms possess webbing between the fingers and its fish-like main body ends in a fin. Generally, a *ningyo* looks more obviously monstrous than its Western counterparts and is genderless. The heroine *Ponyo* of director Miyazaki Hayao's eponymous animation movie (2008) can be considered a 'cute' *ningyo*. Even though *ningyo* is often translated as 'mermaid'—for instance Andersen's tale is titled '*Ningyo hime*' (human-fish princess) in Japanese—the folklore backgrounds of both are quite different. In recent decades, the adopted foreign term *māmeido* ('mermaid' written in the Japanese syllabary alphabet katakana used for introducing or translating foreign words) is also sometimes used to refer to Western-like mermaids, whilst pop cultural narratives in anime and manga tend to mix up both terms and concepts (Hayward, 2018: pp. 55–58).

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<sup>3</sup> In his collections of Japanese folklore tales, Lafcadio Hearn (known as Koizumi Yakumo in Japan, 1850–1904) mentions one creature similar to the *ningyo*: the grotesque and genderless human-fish hybrid *samebito* (shark man) (Ueda, 1975: pp. 37-43).

<sup>4</sup> For Japanese names, the family comes first followed by the personal name.



Figure 1: Toriyama Sekien's *ningyo* (1780)

While clear mermaid equivalents may be missing, vengeful female ghosts are a popular trope with a long tradition in East Asian culture (Scherer, 2016). For instance, internationally known J-horror movies from late 1990s/early 2000s prominently featured avenging female ghosts potentially linked to Nature, and especially water. Elisabeth Scherer (2016) argues that Sadako from *Ring* (*Ringu*, 1998) ‘originates from the island Izu-Ōshima, that is to say from the exterior, the marginal—from a zone where nature is rough and uncontrollable [...] the idea of untamed nature [is] thus constructed as a source of the uncanny’ (p. 74). In addition, the movie vaguely suggests that Sadako’s true father might be sea demon (White, 2005: p. 40). The opening sequence of ocean waves fading into the blue screen of the ghostly videotape also underscores this connection. In *Dark Water* (*Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, 2002), the ghost of a woman drowned in a water tank terrorises an apartment complex and is allied with the wet element. However, both movies are mainly located in decaying technologised urban environments that generate the horrific atmosphere, and the vengeful female ghosts are linked to collapsing nuclear families, not to Nature (Scherer, 2016).

In other words, the watery creatures from pre-modern Japanese sources as well as the female ghosts from modern J-horror movies seemingly possess very little connection to the idea of a feminised Nature comparable to the trope of Western mermaids. However, I suspect that in Japan the absence of a seductive female ocean creature was at least in part filled by a similar trope, one grounded in reality: that of *ama* divers, the so-called ‘real mermaids’. In the following section, I will explain why and how these women became culturally mystified and constructed as sexualised female ‘Others’ intimately linked to Nature.

### ***Ama* Divers: The Real Mermaids of Japan?**

The term ‘*ama*’ in Japanese combines the characters of ‘ocean’ and ‘woman’. It refers to the profession of women diving for abalone, turban snails, sea urchins, and seaweed, which dates back to ancient times in Japan and Korea (there known as *haenyeo*). It can be estimated that there are still approximately 1,000 active *ama* divers in Japan, who are predominately but not exclusively women. Today, *ama* divers still use very limited modern equipment; they did not wear wetsuits until roughly the 1960s and reject the use of oxygen tanks. The common image of them being pearl divers traces back to the 1930s, when Mikimoto—the first company to cultivate pearl oysters—hired them as staff for placing and heaving oysters. Ironically, their jobs in the pearl industry have long been taken over by machines, although Mikimoto still employs them as ‘mascots’ and hosts ‘*ama* diving shows’ in their oyster theme park/museum Mikimoto Island. Many *ama* diving communities used to migrate within Japan during medieval times in search of new or better diving grounds. Consequently, *ama* divers were often meant to live in separate settlements and experienced social exclusion as outsiders, some groups even until the 1980s (Thelen, 2017: p. 13). Their ‘special’ and ‘low’ social status makes them perfect ‘monsters’ in horror narratives, as the ‘return of the repressed’ (Wood, 1978) is of course a common and popular trope of the genre.

The mystification of *ama* divers can be traced back to the pre-modern era. In the Edo period (1600–1868), Dolores P. Martinez (2004) perceives an opposition between two figures of Japanese femininity: the *geisha* and the *ama* (pp. 35–36). While the *geisha* belongs to the so-called ‘floating world’ which is characterised by a cultivated femininity and sexual constraint, the *ama* divers work in the *real* ‘floating world’, representing pure and uncivilised femininity as well as sexual freedom.

In other words, they came to reflect an untamed female nature, somehow similar to that imagined in the West—a nature which was something to be conquered, controlled, and violated. Following this train of thought, it is no surprise that *ama* divers were depicted in many historical woodcut prints (*ukiyo-e*) belonging to the category of *shunga* (erotic art). The most famous example is Hokusai Katsushika's *Tako to ama* (octopus and *ama* diver,<sup>5</sup> 1814), which is commonly translated as 'The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife'. This artwork depicts sexual intercourse between a woman and two octopuses, and has been countlessly referenced in modern pop culture (Carbone, 2018). Despite the possible interpretation that Hokusai aimed to parody and vulgarise the folktale of Princess Tamatori and the Dragon King (Talerico, 2001), the picture nonetheless reflects the cultural tendency to sexualise *ama* divers at that time, as well as imagining them in a position more 'natural' than human, having intercourse with ocean creatures. Other woodcut prints of that time depict them similarly, for instance being raped by *kappa* (river demons).

Even though it might sound paradoxical, the academic discussion on *ama* divers in the mid-twentieth century fostered their image as a mysterious Other. Segawa Kiyoko (1895–1984), one of the leading Japanese folklore scholars of her time, studied *ama* diving communities between the 1920s and 1950s. Her research describes *ama* women as strong and individualistic, in contrast to urban middle-class women (Martinez, 2004: p. 40). During the 1950s, Japanese humanities scholars were unable to go abroad in the aftermath of the war. Thus many of them conducted extensive fieldwork in remote and supposedly exotic areas inside of Japan including *ama* diving villages. In response to this development, some *ama* divers opened inns for the travelling researchers and began engaging in tourism. Later on, they started attracting visitors coming on holiday trips, and their stereotype of being 'sexy women' proved to be especially alluring (Martinez, 2004: p. 149).

The conflation of Western mermaid images with Japanese *ama* divers also occurred during this time. Hungarian photographer Francis Haar's book of *ama* in Mie Prefecture titled *Mermaid of Japan* (1954) was the first—and today relatively forgotten—combination of mermaid imagery

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<sup>5</sup> It is unclear whether the depicted woman is an *ama* diver or the wife of a fisherman, as a minor meaning of the term *ama* is 'fisherman's wife', but considering how widespread erotic woodcut prints of *ama* divers were in that era, it is more reasonable to think of the depicted woman as an *ama* diver.

with *ama* divers. Haar employs the term mermaid as a synonym for *ama* divers throughout his book, which is full of photos of bare-breasted *ama* divers. A few years after Haar, the Italian ethnographer Fosco Maraini (1962) went in search of the ‘real *ama*’ (p. 19), since many *ama* divers in Mie were actually hired by the pearl company Mikimoto and, in Maraini’s nostalgic view, were thus spoiled and distanced from their roots. Eventually, he found the ‘real *ama*’ on Hegura Island, a remote small isle in Ishikawa Prefecture. The *ama* divers there were still diving quasi-naked, wearing only loincloths at the time of Maraini’s visit in 1954. In his well-known photo book and travelogue *Hekura* [sic]: *The Diving Girls’ Island* (1962), he calls *ama* divers ‘sea goddesses’ (p. 19) and ‘children of Neptune’ (p. 37). The women here appear as a kind of female Asian ‘noble savage’ yet unspoiled by civilisation and primordially connected to Nature, captured through the male gaze of Maraini’s camera lens, which objectified their bodies. Some video footage filmed by Maraini was later used in the Italian-Japanese-American sexploitation movie *Violated Paradise* (1963), which tells the story of a young *ama* diver who goes to Tokyo to become a *geisha* but is eventually disappointed by urban society, remembers her roots, and moves back to her *ama* divers’ island. As the movie’s title alludes, the rather Western idea of a ‘violated’ feminised Nature was transferred to a Japanese context here, and more precisely to the case of *ama* divers. Maraini’s work strongly influenced Ian Fleming’s James Bond novel *You Only Live Twice* (1964). The *ama* diver Kissy Suzuki (played by Hama Mie in the 1967 movie adaptation) is both conquered and saved by James Bond. The *ama* divers—here possibly a *pars pro toto* for all Japanese women—are portrayed as being close to Nature. The movie in particular established the image of ‘sexy’ *ama* divers in the Western world,<sup>6</sup> which even led to cultural appropriations of ‘blond, blue-eyed divers [being] billed as “Japanese *ama*, or Pearl-Divers”’ in California and Florida at that time (Martinez, 2004: p. 37).

These new interpretations from a Western perspective conflated ideas of mermaids and a feminised Nature with older native traditions and so influenced the cultural reception of *ama* divers inside of Japan. Kogure Shūzō (2018) explains the popularity of *ama* depictions in Japanese movies in the post-war period by the fact that these female figures expose and represent ‘healthy

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<sup>6</sup> In another example of the contemporary cultural impact, the US-American *Playboy* of June 1967 featured a six-pages-long ‘Exotic Pictorial of the Oriental Beauties from *You Only Live Twice*’ with Hama Mie and other Japanese actresses from the movies posing, for instance, naked in nature and the ocean, recalling their roles as *ama* divers.



beauty’ and ‘wildness’ (p. 23). He considers the commercially successful movie adaptation of Mishima Yukio’s novel *Sound of the Waves* (*Shiosai*, both 1954)<sup>7</sup> as the beginning of a long-standing trend for *ama* movies: between 1945 and 1974, at least 33 Japanese movies dealt with *ama* divers as a major topic. Though *Sound of the Waves* is an innocent love story between an *ama* diver and a fisherman, most later movies belong to the genre of erotica (*pinku eiga*).

The film company Shintōhō (1947–1961) released a series of five movies related to *ama* divers in the late 1950s. They were labelled as ‘erotic grotesque’ (*eroguro*) because they combine eroticised depictions of glamorous actresses with elements of crime, violence, and horror (Kogure, 2018: p. 23). Three of them fall under the category of horror movies: *Cannibal Ama* (*Hitogui ama*, 1958; considered lost), *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* (*Ama no bakemono yashiki*, 1959), and *Ghost of the Girl Diver* (*Kaidan ama yūrei*, 1960). These three are the only horror movies centring on *ama* divers, besides the much later *Mermaid Legend* (1984).

*Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* and *Ghost of the Girl Diver* both follow a similar generic story. In a remote coastal village, a series of mysterious murders occur that seem related to the vengeful ghosts of *ama* divers. The horrific elements, however, are surprisingly absent in the oceanic motifs and visuals (*Ghost of the Girl Diver* at least shows one victim being pulled into the water, and another is stabbed underwater while diving). In the same vein, the ghosts look rather standard for Japanese horror media texts—pale deformed faces, ruffled hair, clad in white dresses with blood spots (Scherer, 2016: p. 62)—and were hardly marked as *ama* divers. In both movies, men from the city come to solve these problems, revealing that the ghostly menaces in each case can in fact be exposed and demasked as they are mere costumes adorned by the entirely human. Such a rational debunking of supernatural horror is typical of Japanese horror movies in the 1950s (Scherer, 2014). In other words, reason—which is likely associated with men and culture (Plumwood, 1993)—triumphs over Nature, women, and superstition.

In both movies, the *ama* divers and their families are shown as the marginalised and repressed ‘Others’ of the coastal countryside, living in archaic communities outside of modern

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<sup>7</sup> Curiously, the inspiration for *Sound of the Waves* came from Mishima’s travel experience in Europe and the ancient Greek tale of *Daphnis and Chloe* (Kinkley, 2006: p. 55).

society. They are loud and impulsive, living near the shore in rustic hamlets, and they believe in the supernatural, as demonstrated for example in performed exorcism rituals against the seeming vengeful ghosts. Most ‘ordinary’ Japanese, in contrast, live in a civilised urban environment, wear Western clothes, and inhabit Western-style houses. They see the *ama* divers through a discriminating and eroticising lens. The *ama* divers here wear thoroughly inauthentic white bikinis, which sometimes even slip away in the diving scenes and turn transparent when leaving the water (*Figure 2*). Even though the female bodies were deliberately intended to appeal to voyeuristic male gazing, this kind of depiction managed to avoid censorship.



*Figure 2: Ama women after diving (Girl Diver of Spook Mansion, 1959: 00:03:28).*

In *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* as well as in *Ghost of the Girl Diver*, *ama* divers are linked to Nature, depicted in healthy beauty, and associated with primordial wilderness. The two movies similarly contain extended fight scenes on the shore, which resemble mud wrestling, in which *ama* divers wallow in the wet sand and waves. Their rage and madness in these scenes presented not as a reaction against male oppression or misbehaviour, but rather as their archaic way of solving conflicts. The instances of *ama* women in water, in contrast, create a peaceful image, constructing them as imitate allies of nature. The diving scenes are very similar in the two movies—they even share ca. 90 seconds of the same footage (Kogure, 2018: p. 32). Accompanied by dreamy background music, the camera focuses on the female bodies joyfully swimming and diving around in clean, bright water, evoking the impression of an idyllic harmony between *ama* divers and

Nature. This aesthetic resembles the early twentieth-century ocean-themed fantasy movies starring professional swimmer Annette Kellerman (1887–1975), the ‘Australian mermaid’, like *Neptune’s Daughter* (1914) or *Venus of the South Seas* (1924), in which swimming/diving and romantic imagery were blended (Mortensen, 2018). Kogure (2018) argues that in *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* and *Ghost of the Girl Diver*—like in all movies of Shintōhō’s *ama* movie series—*ama* divers were not necessary for the story but predominantly served promotional purposes (p. 33). Their depictions were meant to satisfy the male audience’s desire for naked skin and ‘natural’ femininity. Thus it also comes as no surprise that both movies contain sexual violence against *ama* divers, i.e. the symbolic simultaneous conquest of women and Nature. Roughly twenty-five years later in the history of Japanese cinema, however, the repressed female Other would seek revenge.

### **Violated Nature Strikes Back: *Mermaid Legend* (1984)**

In comparison to the two movies from the late 1950s discussed above, *Mermaid Legend* (*Ningyo densetsu*, 1984, dir. Ikeda Toshiharu) offers a much more progressive approach to *ama* diving and ecohorror. The film’s story is loosely based on the two-volume manga *Ningyo densetsu*<sup>8</sup> (1978) by Miyaya Kazuhito. The movie begins with a fisherman (Etō Jun), who gets assassinated offshore after accidentally witnessing a murder, while his wife, the *ama* diver Migiwa (Shirato Mari), is underwater. She too gets wounded by harpoon projectiles from above the surface but somehow seemingly survives the attack and washes up on shore at night. The police suspect her of murdering her husband. With the help of Shōhei (Shimizu Kentarō), a friend of her late husband, Migiwa finds refuge in a shady, brothel-like, night bar. Shōhei forces Migiwa to sleep with him, which she feels pressed to accept in her miserable situation. Through working at a business party in the night bar, Migiwa hopes to find information about the murder of her husband, and she suspects the local business mogul Miyamoto (Aoki Yoshirō), Shōhei’s father, is the culprit. Miyamoto had begun building an amusement park in the coastal seascape, but changed his plans to support the construction of a nuclear power plant, which promises more profit. One of the party guests rapes Migiwa and subsequently reveals to her that not only Miyamoto, but also his son Shōhei asked for

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<sup>8</sup> In the manga, Migiwa’s husband is also murdered for opposing the construction of a nuclear power plant, and after her apparent death, she turns into a mysterious powerful mermaid-like creature seeking revenge. However, the rest of the story is quite different; the manga’s prologue even takes place in an American Wild West setting.

the murder of her husband. After killing this informant, Migiwa seeks for revenge. She murders Miyamoto in his own swimming pool—on her own watery terms—but gets captured soon afterwards by Shohei, who continues his father’s business activities. His henchmen wrap her in a fishing net—treating her, significantly, as though she *is* a literal fish—and throw her in the ocean. Once again, it is unclear, whether she survives this deadly trap and returns as human, or as ghost. Migiwa then witnesses the opening speech for the nuclear power plant’s construction, which stirs her rage and determination to sabotage. She crashes the reception party and kills countless men including Shōhei. A sudden storm helps her escape from the police, and in a final scene we see her seem to become one with the ocean.

The *ama* diver’s profession in *Mermaid Legend* is from the start accurately depicted as physically exhausting and dangerous, in stark contrast to the leisurely diving in *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* or *Ghost of the Girl Diver*. In the diving scenes in *Mermaid Legend*’s beginning, the camera does not fetishistically linger on Migiwa, but instead follows the currents, focusing in on seaweed and the rocky ground. Almost documentary-like in tone, the harvest of abalone is depicted in detail, while the melancholic background music<sup>9</sup> does not obscure the sounds and efforts of her movements and breathing. When coming up to the surface, Migiwa complains between deep breaths that her husband on the boat did not help her on time with the safety rope. In the interview on the Japanese DVD version, actress Shirato Mari, who plays the heroine, remembers how hard she trained free-diving for her role, and that despite her efforts, real *ama* divers nonetheless still had to substitute as body doubles in many of the underwater scenes. It is evident that this movie attempts a much more realistic portrayal of *ama* diving than its predecessors, deliberately depicting authentic working practices—like co-working with a man/husband on the boat to assist—as well as the *ama* diver’s clothing covering the whole body and serving a practical purpose, beyond mere titillation.

The oceanic environment, where Migiwa dives, is shown as a blurry and sublime space, unwelcoming and potentially horrific. While in *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* and *Ghost of the Girl Diver*, the oceanic space appears as domesticated Nature under human control, in *Mermaid Legend*

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<sup>9</sup> The soundtrack by Honda Toshiyuki intensely supports the dark atmosphere with its one reoccurring signature melody played on different instruments.

the Nature is far more akin to its likeness in classic Gothic narratives: ‘hostile, untamed and threatening’ (Botting, 2014: p. 4). When Migiwa’s husband is murdered, the dead body suddenly falls into the water and floats before her eyes. She struggles for minutes to survive, as the safety rope to heave her up is wrapped around the corpse, which pulls her down to the depths (see *Figure 3*). The horror of drowning is captured in her rapid movements and panicked facial expressions, desperately looking at the sinking corpse and the surface far above her. The movie leaves it open to interpretation, as to whether or when Migiwa drowns, but in any case the ocean turns out to be a deadly abyss that can even kill a professional *ama* diver like her. Alder describes such scenes of underwater horror as typical ‘nautical Gothic’: ‘the sea and its weather provide [...] locales for sublime and terrifying experiences; deep water is a useful metaphor for the interiority of the self; the ocean’s precarious surface interfaces between life and death, chaos and order, self and other’ (p. 1).



*Figure 3*: Migiwa struggles to survive underwater (*Mermaid Legend*, 1984: 00:19:55).

Later in the movie, when Migiwa is wrapped in a fishing net and thrown into the water by the henchmen, there seems to be no escape from drowning. In dim dark blue colours, she once more struggles against sinking into the aquatic abyss, as her shaking movements and rising air bubbles

express her tremendous fear. In this moment, only a *deus ex machina* can save Migiwa: her husband's corpse floats above her and by catching the safety rope still wrapped around his body, she manages to release herself from the net. In an interesting, if gruesome coincidence, in December 2010, the corpse of the movie's director Ikeda Toshiharu would be found in the ocean at Shima, Mie Prefecture, where *Mermaid Legend* was filmed. The police investigation concluded suicide was the most likely cause of death.

Migiwa and her husband are shown as the innocent victims of the local business mogul Miyamoto and his son, who represent an oppressive and exploitative image of manhood, using mafia attitude and methods to conquer and violate the coastal landscape as well as Migiwa's body. Miyamoto's first building of the amusement park, already constructed at the beginning of the movie, is an offshore observation tower. This phallic architecture erected in the middle of the ocean crudely demonstrates his domination of Nature and those who 'belong' to it, including the local fisherfolk and *ama* divers. In a quite symbolic moment one-third of the way into the movie, Migiwa vomits after seeing an offshore construction platform. Miyamoto's later project of the nuclear power plant is heading in the same direction, harshly taming and transforming the landscape in order to maximise profits, while ignoring the consequences for the region's natural and human stakeholders. The provocative public speech by a representative of the electric power company illustrates this dominating viewpoint:

'The other day, I drank a glass of the water from a nuclear reactor. I couldn't believe how tasty it was! [Laughing] I was just joking. People tend to equate nuclear power plants with nuclear weapons. I frequently hear, 'The radiation, isn't it dangerous?' But these are the fears of the uninformed' (01:26:53-01:27:23).

In this scene, we observe the discrepancy between male-gendered reason/technology and female-gendered Nature, echoing Plumwood's (1993) sentiments. Male oppression results not only from the risky nuclear technology itself, that will be nonchalantly placed into the coastal environment, but also from the way such a venture is communicated, arguing from a seemingly naturalised superior position and discrediting critical voices as lacking knowledge.

*Mermaid Legend* touches on a controversial topic of its time. The construction of nuclear power plants in rural areas during the 1980s brought hopes of revitalisation for economically declining municipalities, although local anti-nuclear movements opposed and warned of the risks of radiation for humans and the environment (Dusinberre, 2012). Moreover, between the 1950s and 1970s, Japan experienced four major pollution diseases resulting from industrial sewage water and emissions; among these, the two outbreaks of Minamata disease affected fisherfolk in particular, polluted their coastal fishing grounds, and raised the public awareness for environmental issues caused by rapid industrialisation and irresponsible companies (Ui, 1994).

The second half of the movie centres on Migiwa's revenge. First, she sneaks into the garden of Miyamoto's residence and attacks him. Though the man initially appears stronger than the woman, they eventually fall into his swimming pool where Migiwa wins the upper hand: she pulls him underwater until he drowns. The poetic justice is striking: the corrupt businessman, who considered the ocean his playground to be exploited, is drowned in his own artificial swimming pool by the hands of an *ama* diver. The vengeful alliance of the oppressed—Migiwa as well as the violated nature—turned the man-made water reservoir into a deadly trap. This scene offers an ecofeminist take on the classic Gothic trope that one's own home/garden, the apparently safest location, becomes the place, where the 'monster' will find you (Halberstam, 1995: p. 13).

In the bloody finale, Migiwa wreaks havoc at the reception party for the nuclear power plant's construction. After coming out of the water clad in her white *ama* diving clothes, she sneaks into the party's location, Miyamoto's phallic observation tower. Armed with a fishing spear,<sup>10</sup> Migiwa first encounters Shōhei. After stabbing him, she throws his dying body into the water, and the camera shows his dead face underwater. Like in the case of Miyamoto, his father, Migiwa and Nature have apparently collaborated in his killing and so both gained retaliation. She continues her rampage, assassinating the representatives of the electric company and other men in business suits by the dozens (and also at least one woman), while a large banner with the slogan 'Congratulation: Hama<sup>11</sup> Town's Nuclear Power Plant' is prominently captured several times. The blood of her

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<sup>10</sup> Besides the ecofeminist reading, Migiwa and her husband can also be interpreted as proxies for the marginalised fisherfolk struggling to continue their work as their fishing grounds are menaced by urbanisation projects and environmental pollution.

<sup>11</sup> This place name is fictional, but alludes to the filming location Shima and to the word *hama* (beach, shore).

victims not only dyes Migiwa's clothes and face completely red, even the signs of the nuclear power plant become blood-smeared (see *Figure 4*). Raped and enraged Nature, embodied by Migiwa, has struck back in explicit ecohorror—and importantly, we are on side. The heroine here does not feel like a chaotic, random 'monster'; her madness is reasoned and her victims are mostly deserving of their ecofeminist punishment.



*Figure 4:* Migiwa after her rampage; the blood-smeared sign in the background says 'nuclear power plant construction' (*Mermaid Legend*, 1984: 01:14:12).

After about ten minutes of excessive slaughter, police units arrive. In that very moment, a typhoon approaches from the sea, blowing away the heavily armoured policemen. Here again, Migiwa's alliance with Nature is obvious, which helps Migiwa escape from human justice. In some shots, a red filter makes the rising ocean waves look like blood. Migiwa triumphantly stands in the middle of the storm, watching its devastation, which also makes the signs of the nuclear power plant's construction on the shore collapse. Just before her rampage at the party, Migiwa had prayed to a Jizō<sup>12</sup> Buddha statue for this storm in advance to ensure her escape; this statue also appears in one

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<sup>12</sup> Jizō Buddha statues can fulfil different spiritual purposes; the one depicted here is a guardian of the ocean, whom fisherfolk pray to for protection (Clark, 2007).



shot during the storm. As shown at the beginning of the movie, she always used to pray to this ocean-related deity before going to dive, but the statue had been displaced for the nuclear power plant's construction. She, moreover, performs several mourning rituals for her husband throughout the movie. Her strong spiritual connection to the supernatural further hints at the interpretation that Migiwa either is or became something more than human.



Figure 5: Migiwa ostensibly becoming a mermaid (*Mermaid Legend*, 1984: 01:47:07).

At the end of the movie, when the typhoon is over, Migiwa smilingly jumps back into the ocean, ostensibly her new or true home. In a dream-like sequence, she dives once again for abalone with her husband's help, like they used to do in the past. When she then turns around in the ocean's depths to rise up again, her body suddenly shapes into another form and she is naked. Taken by surprise, the viewer is likely captivated—in a moment perhaps deliberately derivative of the voyeuristic gazing in the *ama* movies of the 1950s. Migiwa rises up and fades away in the reflection of the sun on the surface. In one shot, just when her clothes disappear, her lower body blurs with the water, making it look like a mermaid's fishtail for a short moment (see *Figure 5*),

though she recovers a fully human body again afterwards.<sup>13</sup> The movie closes with impressions of a fish swarm and the rocky ocean ground covered in seaweed during the ending credits. Migiwa has become one with Nature and finally, we are left not her female body to be gazed at, but the natural environment.

In contrast to *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* and *Ghost of the Girl Diver*, where the supernatural was faked by humans and considered the relic of an archaic past, it is here rediscovered and re-established in *Mermaid Legend*. Likewise, the movie's title sounds magical and folkloric, although it depicts a modern story, largely rooted in a realistic world, referring to actual environmental concerns. In a contemporaneous review, Japanese film critic Satō Tadao (1984) discussed the movie's versatile play with coincidence and the supernatural, which he considers one of its major strengths: as the story proceeds, fantastic coincidences occur that save Migiwa from death, support her vengeance, and transform her into a mermaid. These events, however, do not seem out of place, because they slowly build until the movie's resolution, which somehow still feels realistic, despite its fantastic nature.

## Conclusion

The Japanese folklore tradition lacks a supernatural aquatic female figure similar to the Western mermaid. In this essay I have argued that this 'absence' was at least in part filled by the image of *ama* divers, which similarly blended ideas of primeval women bound to the sea and served as objects of fantasy for the male gaze. In post-war Japan, this image was strongly influenced by the West's reception of *ama* divers. Horror movies from the late 1950s exemplify the sexualised view of *ama* divers, whose portrayal primarily served to provide exoticism and eroticism, in imagined nostalgic reminiscence of a lost archaic and 'wild' type of femininity living in harmony with the ocean.

In the 1980s *Mermaid Legend* shows a very different approach to this motif. The movie, for most parts, avoids male voyeurism and instead shows *ama* diving for what it is: a challenging,

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<sup>13</sup> This shot is also a reference to the original manga, where similar images of the naked heroine with her lower body as a fishtail frequently appear.

dangerous, and highly-skilled profession. A male-gendered environmental destruction is the central offence that elicits horror and revenge, as the heroine rages not only against her own violators but more importantly against the menace of a nuclear power plant for Nature's sake. Migiwa is indeed a 'she-devil in the ocean', an embodiment of female and natural rage. In some ways, the image of the original Japanese folklore creature *ningyo*, the grotesque and scary human-fish-hybrid that is sometimes conflated with the Western mermaid in popular media (Hayward, 2018), might be seen to have influenced the subversion of the dark mermaid trope seen in *Mermaid Legend*. Oscillating between realism and fantasy, the movie avoids the kitsch inherited by many modern mermaid narratives. Here, the *ama* diver is a solitary ecoterrorist who uses her supernatural abilities solely for vengeance. For the 1980s, the discussion of environmental concerns from the perspective of an *ama* diver as seen in *Mermaid Legend* is unique in its context and astoundingly ahead of its time.

In the new millennium, researchers began to link *ama* diving with environmental issues like climate change, which promises a threat to their sustainable diving practices and natural resources (Thelen, 2017). A similar interpretation for mermaids also evolved in the West in recent times, where 'real mermaids' (people posing or swimming with an artificial mermaid tail) like Hannah Mermaid or Raina the Halifax Mermaid have advocated eco-activism (Mellins, 2018). Taking into account the increasing consciousness worldwide for both environmental issues and women's rights, one can expect that more ecofeminist re-imaginings of mermaids—and maybe also *ama* divers—will be seen in media texts. As we, as a species, collectively fail to heed the warnings of eco-crisis—and continue to dangerously fill the sea with our chemicals and waste—it seems likely that ever darker 'mermaids' will emerge from the depths of our fears and our oceans.

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## REVIEWS

### BOOK REVIEWS: CRITICAL

**Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson (eds),**

*Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*

(Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

Jimmy Packham

A menagerie of nonhuman animals haunt the pages of Gothic prose and poetry: ravens and black cats, wolves and bats, rats and flies, octopuses and squid—and snails. As this new collection of essays persuasively argues, we are, it seems, never more than six feet away from the uncanny and abject others against which we—the human animal—have regularly defined ourselves. In *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*, Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson, and their contributors, have produced an expansive and compelling account of both the role of the nonhuman animal in Gothic fiction and, at the same time, of the frequently Gothic relationships that have long existed between humans and nonhumans.

This volume, as Heholt and Edmundson suggest in their introduction, addresses the contention that there are ‘an infinite variety of alien worlds here, within touching distance of ourselves, embodied in the presence of the creatures that we share space with—even if we do not always share understanding’ (p. 9). It is the job of the Gothic, we discover, to reflect on ways we might work towards some form of greater understanding, or, if this is ultimately impossible, to critically examine (and unsettle) the issues and inequalities that originate in this inability to understand—for as several chapters in this collection remind us, we are likely always to be constrained by the limits of human thought and anthropocentrism. In exploring these ideas, the eighteen chapters included here chart a history of the Gothic animal from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English pamphlets on devilish dogs, through the classic Gothic of Ann

Radcliffe, to twenty-first century reimaginings and reinventions of the Gothic animal in young adult fantasy fiction and contemporary Scottish women's Gothic. A number of chapters also touch on what may be yet to come in our disturbing relationship with the animal: both Michael Fuchs's chapter on *faux* documentaries concerning the return of the megalodon and Franciska Cettl's study of the biopolitics of robobees imagine the ways in which scientific and technological developments might notionally reverse animal extinctions. The digital presence of the megalodon and the robotic simulacrum of the bee remain haunted by the real animals they imitate: 'the ghost[s] in the machine of Gothic science fiction' (p. 188). Such work also raises the question 'of who can possibly control these uncannimedia and for what purposes exactly' (p. 196).

Robobees notwithstanding, one of the greatest strengths of this volume is its dedication to what we might, for better or worse, term the 'real' animal. In this regard, *Gothic Animals* is well placed to contribute considerably to animal studies, ecocritical studies, and, above all, ecoGothic studies. It is easy to imagine a conspectus of the animal in the ecoGothic that never quite arrives at 'the animal-for-itself' (p. 279); we might gesture, for instance, to the animals associated with (or contained within) Frankenstein's creature, Dracula, and the Wolf Man, or to the human-animal hybrids of more recent fare like *Splice* (2009) and *Annihilation* (2014). While a number of these creatures inevitably put in an appearance in *Gothic Animals*, by and large this volume takes a refreshingly noncanonical approach to its uncanny creatures and the texts in which they appear. Edgar Allan Poe is the most familiar Gothic figure to make repeated appearances—most substantially in Kirstin A. Mills's magnificent reading of monstrously masculine horsemanship and Gothic pastiche in tales by Poe and Washington Irving.

'Real', of course, does not suggest these animals are any less horrifying than more fantastic beasts: a number of essays here explore cultural imaginaries haunted by prehistoric and/or extinct creatures (Fuchs's megalodon and Alex Philp's thylacine), or by animals otherwise beyond humanity's ken (such as Natalie Deam's astute analysis of the devilish octopus in Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea* [1866]). Moreover, in its extensive consideration of uncanny encounters with domestic(ated) or more commonplace animals—notably dogs, spiders, and rats—*Gothic Animals* aptly registers the enduring centrality of the *unheimlich* to the *heimlich*, and thereby of the uncanny to the Gothic. Such work is at its most exciting when it uses the animal to reinvigorate this basic

tenet of Gothic theory: Timothy C. Baker's concluding chapter, for instance, explores how, in recent Scottish women's Gothic, 'women and non-human animals are united in their peripheral status' to show how concepts including the uncanny are 'underpinned by patriarchal and speciesist perspectives' (p. 294).

Baker's is one of several chapters emphasising how, in the vein of Donna Haraway, Gothic fiction imagines the good that might stem from entering into companionship with animals in order to disrupt longstanding anthropocentric and masculinist ideologies and power structures: establishing 'a kinship bond in a time of trouble', and opportunity for inclusivity 'where the stories of all creatures, in life and death, are taken seriously' (pp. 301, 303). As this might suggest, *Gothic Animals* demonstrates the difficulty with which Gothic writing—and, implicitly, all human cultural production—grapples in apprehending the animal-as-animal. Even as we celebrate the political work the animal helps the human to undertake—that is, how they help 'in exposing, not causing, the horrors' of our own making (p. 129)—the animal within is as significant here as 'the animal with-out'. The contributors are clearly attuned to the idea that the more energetically we pursue the animal itself, the more we find it will continually slip from our grasp, eluding finally being known.

It is difficult to overstate quite how appropriate for the current climate *Gothic Animals* is. Animal studies and ecocritical studies are currently enjoying a period of rich discussion; and *Gothic Animals* speaks productively to other recent Gothic and ecoGothic scholarship on (often more overtly supernatural) human-animal relationships, including Robert McKay and John Miller's edited volume, *Werewolves, Wolves and the Gothic* (2017), and Carys Crossen's monograph on this topic, *The Nature of the Beast* (2019). More to the point, however, *Gothic Animals* arrives in the midst of a global pandemic, the origins of which have been traced back, considerately and otherwise, to a human world that has routinely and extensively mistreated and exploited the animal. *Gothic Animals* may indeed help us to further understand not just this long history of abuse—whether literal or ideological—but the ecoGothic narratives that coalesce around disruptive animal presences and unsettling encounters between human and nonhuman. For example, sinophobic responses towards Covid-19's emergence in human populations (Wong, 2020)—most evidently the 'bat soup' conspiracy—implicitly stress the apparent horror invested

by humans in certain creatures, and the cultural contingency of notions of proper ways to ‘encounter’ (or consume) the animal. Even reports in popular media that sought to mitigate such narratives reiterated a perspective in which the human is distinct from and superior to the animal: ‘Viruses that circulate in animals keep jumping over to infect humans’, writes one (Resnick, 2020). Across its eighteen chapters, *Gothic Animals* grapples with human-animal entanglement and can help readers see the long historical and cultural contexts of this ‘alienation of the “human” from the “animal”’ (p. 2). Further, as mentioned above, this volume suggests the ways in which the Gothic, as a literature of protest, might proffer imaginative alternatives to the violences of the norm.

*Gothic Animals* is deliberately positioning itself as a catalyst for further conversation; as a result, there are inevitably some suggestive threads throughout the collection that it would be interesting to see developed in more detail. The focus here is largely on Euro-American (eco)Gothic, and those chapters which do venture beyond these territories (notably Philp’s and Shuhita Bhattacharjee’s) generally follow a colonial presence. Following recent work in indigenous Gothics, Asian Gothic, and the tropical Gothic, it would be fascinating to explore, via the varied critical frameworks presented by *Gothic Animals*, the role of the animal in these traditions—exploring, for instance, the work performed by the animal in Japanese ghost and supernatural tales. As understandings of what has been termed the ‘globalgothic’ develop alongside a much broader awareness of the perilous place of the animal in the networks of globalisation, these are undoubtedly conversations to be having, and which *Gothic Animals* is well placed to help foster.

Heholt and Edmundson have curated a volume that will surely find a wide and enthusiastic readership. In its totality, *Gothic Animals* demonstrates how, across a multitude of contexts, the animal is continually participating (unwillingly, unconsciously...) in the construction and deconstruction of the human and its cultures. Nor, indeed, is it the most outlandish, exotic, or apparently monstrous of real creatures that undertake such work. As Fiona Peters makes clear in her chapter on Patricia Highsmith, we would do well to be mindful even of the humble snail, threatening us by its gradual and slimy approach since at least the middle ages, ‘borderless and

alien to social order' (p. 163), in whose viscous maw we may well be swallowed up—figuratively, if not (one hopes) literally.

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**Emelia Quinn and Benjamin Westwood (eds.),**  
*Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory*  
(Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Noelle Mann

Veganism is possibly at the highest level of visibility and popularity in West European and American culture that it has ever been. Vegans do not eat meat, fish, eggs, or dairy products, and also avoid any goods which are produced from animals, such as leather or wool. Where once it was impossible to buy non-dairy milk from anywhere except specialist health food shops, all of the major supermarkets now strain under the range of new products launched in time for Veganuary, where consumers adopt a vegan diet for the first month of the year. The biggest names in fast food now promote their vegan burgers and chicken substitutes, seemingly championing choice and the opportunity for a kind of speculative veganism. A movement which was initially driven by concern over animal welfare and the increasingly mechanised and large-scale production methods of modern farming, veganism has recently been strengthened by a growing concern with the environment, especially among young people. The Extinction Rebellion movement has politicised Europe's youth against many industries which are seen as being harmful to the planet as it enters the age of the Anthropocene: where human activity becomes the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

*Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture* is then a welcome and timely publication, as it collects essays on the influence, ethics and wider complications of veganism in the academic sphere and beyond. Arranged in four sections, the book focuses on politics and theory, with references to film, art, literature, and the intricacies of personal vegan beliefs. Beginning with a useful introduction 'Thinking Through Veganism,' the editors trace the development of academic vegan theory from the initial foundation of critical animal studies (CAS) to the definition of veganism as a 'queer' way of existing within and seeing the world. As a way of viewing humankind through an alternative lens, the application of queer theory to moral choices in consumption is a novel and enticing idea. The collection of papers contained in the book are all valuable and

interesting in their own sphere of focus, but there are a few contributions which also lean towards horror and the Gothic.

Animal rights activists have frequently used striking (and disturbing) visual graphics to uncover the horrific scenes which are necessary points in the process of our meat consumption. Jason Edwards, in 'The Vegan Viewer in the Circum-Polar Worlds' explores J.H. Wheldon's painting *The Diana and Chase in the Arctic* (1857) in a similar way, opening up a discussion on the European industries of whaling and seal-skin production as represented in art. These practises are now considered horrific relics of the Victorian age, but at the time they were deemed to be somehow natural, and an expression of the spirit of the Enlightenment. This was despite what Edwards calls the *humanimal* tragedy of not only the slaughter of whales and other animals, but also the fatalities suffered by the men working in these hazardous industries.

Anat Picks's 'Vegan Cinema' explores film and its capacity to consume and preserve the subject of its gaze. Instead of 'eating up' big screen narratives, the idea of 'vegan cinema' envisioned by Pick enables cameras, audiences or critics to construct a kind of non-devouring gaze on film content. Where films, or moments in films, invite 'the complicity between the desire to look and to eat' they enact a vegan mindset. For Pick, this applies to all films, not simply those with the emphasis on promoting veganism, and her concept draws on the writings of Simone Weil and the Realist movements in film theory. The films she chooses to explore have an unmistakable animal element, including *Noah* (Aronofsky, 2014) but also include the theme of eating in Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987). Furthermore, she touches on the horror trope of being eaten in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), *Grizzly Man* (Herzog, 2005), and cannibalism in *Raw* (Ducournau, 2017).

Hybrid human and animal monsters have appeared in Anglophone Literature for over two hundred years, Emelia Quinn points out in her essay 'Monstrous Vegan Narratives: Margaret Atwood's Hideous Progeny,' but surprisingly, she continues, the vast majority of critics have overlooked the fact that these creatures do not eat animals. Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy of novels (2003-2013) present a possible future where humans struggle to survive in an environmentally decimated world of their own making. Two monsters, the Crakers and God's Gardeners, are depicted as opposite sides of the same vegan coin: the messy embodiment of lived



veganism versus the impossibly perfect and spiritually pure vegan. In this way, Quinn discusses the complexities of veganism in literature, resisting stereotypical representations of veganism, whilst also touching on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1819) and H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896).

Benjamin Westwood takes on the myth of the physically weak or disappearing vegan in his essay, 'On Refusal.' A discussion of the protagonist's polite denial of any food apart from ginger nut biscuits (and later, even those) in Herman Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' (1853), leads into an examination of the latent political resistance contained in the simple expression: 'I would prefer not to.' Further narratives contained in Franz Kafka's 'A Hunger Artist' (1922) and Han Kang's 'The Vegetarian' (2015) serve to impress upon Westwood that veganism needs a new model which is not composed entirely of 'tragic, individualist iconoclasm' but is flexible enough to represent the ideals of moral choice without rejecting the inherent inconsistencies and compromises.

I highly recommend this book to anyone wanting a more nuanced understanding of veganism and how it exists as not just an ethical stance, but also an emerging theoretical discourse. Insofar as the fields of ecohorror and the ecoGothic are concerned, vegan theory stands to provide a unique reading on a large number of available texts, from the classic literature of Shelley to the extreme, feminist visual feast of *Raw*. There is much we can learn about ourselves, both as humans and academics, from the power of nature and the cultural complexities of consumption.

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**Bridgitte Barclay and Christy Tidwell (eds.), *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction***  
(Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2019)

Andrew Todd

Bridgitte Barclay and Christy Tidwell's *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* (2019) offers ten insightful readings clustered around the intersection of gender, ecocriticism, and the science fiction genre, in an attempt to 'address this gap in scholarship between feminist sf scholarship and environmental sf scholarship' (p. xvi). The collection is certainly well worth reading for any science fiction scholar. Similarly, scholars specialising in ecocriticism or gender studies, as well as those interested specifically in ecohorror, will also find compelling essays here to interest them. However, as many of the essays focus on *either* ecocriticism *or* gender studies, rather than both, such scholars will likely have less interest in the volume as a collective whole. The final impression is a collection of individually satisfying and insightful essays, but a less convincing sense of purpose underlying their compilation.

The introduction justifies the interconnection between the three areas of study through science fiction's posing of speculative, but scientifically based, questions of '*what if*' (p. xi). The intended overall vision of the book is that it:

'addresses the spectrum of human and nonhuman (animal and technological) subjectivities, the implications of race and colonialism, impacts of masculinities and femininities on historical approaches to "nature," and how those align with or subvert normative notions of gender and sexual orientation' (p. xi).

Already, this sets out a broad field of study, and the variety of media and styles covered adds to this breadth, creating difficulties for cohesion. The primary exigence or academic hole that this book seeks to fill is a perceived dearth of scholarship that combines science fiction, material gender studies, and material ecocriticism simultaneously and—as mentioned—there is little combinative analysis beyond the introduction. Potentially compelling are the moments where the editors make claims about what science fiction is specifically able to do politically, as they posit that 'sf may

offer special emphasis on the materiality of bodies and natures because of its scientific underpinnings’ (p. xi), and cite Eric C. Otto’s (2012) claim that ‘environmental science fiction has the ability to point the way toward “thinking and building a new way forward”’ (p. xvi). More consistent attention to sf’s generative capacity and perhaps a greater presence of it in the collection’s organisation would have been welcome. The introduction is rather short as well, and since there’s no theoretical or historical essay to start the collection, more from the introduction would be valuable, particularly for readers new to the field.

The collection is divided into four parts. The first, ‘Performing Humanity, Animality, and Gender’, focuses on the performance of humans becoming animal, and of humans becoming AI. The human-animal dimension is studied through camp, in Barclay’s ‘Wom-Animal Creature Features’, and through the character Anyanwu from Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, analysed by Amelia Z. Greene. Barclay shows how the campiness of monsters from 1950s era B movies works as resistance to dominant discourses, turning the monstrous body into a site of possibility. Greene’s analysis of *Wild Seed* is one of the standouts of the collection, seeking to use Anyanwu’s ability in the novel to become other animals and read ‘flesh-messages’—that is, read a supernatural awareness of one’s body state—as a way to consider, in Tom Bristow’s (2015) terms, a ‘duty of care’ (p. 47). Greene reaches the conclusion that ‘by providing at least partial opportunities for such reconfigurations [of kinship and relationality], troubled and temporary as they may be, Butler’s protagonist promotes a position of caring-for-the-world’ (p. 60). The human-AI dimension is covered in Tidwell’s contribution to the volume, which considers the interrelationship between gender, nature, and technology in the films *Her* and *Ex Machina*. She effectively shows how the gendered nature of the technology in each film and their displays of human control over nature complicate the representation of the posthuman, showing the need to see the object as other than simply the next site of control.

Part II, ‘Gendering the Natural World’ has the two essays that are most likely of interest to readers of ecoGothic texts. In the first, Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Juan Juvé study plant monsters in ‘Tendrils, Tentacles, and Flower Power: Speciesism in *Womaneater* (1958) and *The Gardener* (1974)’. While the selection of relatively unknown films in this essay might alienate some readers, the authors offer an interesting perspective on plants as rich sites of disturbance in

horror, due to their ambiguous position between ‘total passivity and full life’, and their sexuality occurring in a less visible way to an untrained human eye. This ambiguous vitality and less visible sexuality make plants frequently alien to human experience (p. 68). In the second, Steve Asselin’s “‘So Very Natural an Occurrence’”: Engendering Nature’s Antagonism in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*’, the analysis centres on an early example of the science fictional postapocalyptic in literature, showing how the text anthropomorphises and sexualises nature.

The next section, ‘Contemporary Queering’, begins with Tyler Harper’s ‘Engineered Nature, (En)gendered Nature in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *2312*’. Harper gives a strong synthesis of ecofiction and gender studies, showing Robinson’s work as an affirmation of humanity’s place within nature. Harper argues that Robinson expands the meaning of both ‘humanity’ and ‘nature’, thus continuing the previous section’s emphasis on work that queers the human-nature boundary. Similarly, the second essay of the section, Stina Attebery’s ‘Ecologies of Sound: Queer Intimacy, Trans-Corporeality, and Reproduction in *Upstream Color*’ analyses a film of seeming body horror for its complication of the notion of family. With the similarities between this and the previous section, it’s unclear what the collection gets from separating them. The collection has many examples of both ‘contemporary’ and ‘queering’, so separating these two with just that title will likely create some confusion about their purpose in the larger collection.

The final section, “‘We Don’t Need Another Hero’”, includes three thoroughly engaging essays, though these are probably of least interest to readers coming to the text with interests in ecohorror and the ecoGothic. Here Jill E. Anderson discusses Atomic Age comics for hybrid figures of environmental stewardship; Michelle Yates offers readings of the Edenic and environmental nostalgia in *Soylent Green* and *WALL-E*; and Carter Soles looks at the trajectory of the Mad Max films in relation to petroleum. Finally, Tidwell writes a short closing epilogue. Here, the book returns to the political, which is a welcome and valuable conclusion, though it is unclear why the closing discussion is limited to examples solely from U.S. politics.

More attention to the collection’s organisation would have helped, particularly more purposiveness behind the essay groupings and order. A more extensive theoretical history would have been especially useful, either as an expansion of the introduction’s literature review, or as the

first essay of the collection. Ultimately, *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* is an engaging set of essays, but a stronger through line would have made it a more compelling and cohesive contribution to the larger discourse surrounding the potential intersections between gender, environment, and science fiction.

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**Giovanni Aloï, *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces and Art in the Anthropocene***  
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2018)

Josh Grant-Young

Can the seemingly inert—all that lacks agency and is relegated to the closed spaces of galleries, museums and dioramas—aid us in reimagining or articulating human/animal relations? How might the very material of taxidermy—rendered immobile in the eyes of spectators and cast (in some cases) to represent a ‘realistic’ picture of Nature—*move* in a manner which begets bold new debates and conceptions of relations between human, animal, and environment? In reappraising and reimagining taxidermy’s past and present, Giovanni Aloï’s *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces and Art in the Anthropocene* (2018) draws on such questions to examine the role of speculative engagement within material culture and artistic practice. Aloï’s goal, in parsing a form of ‘speculative taxidermy’, is to provide ‘an ontological mobility’ and ‘awareness’ that can open the eyes of artist and viewer alike to seek ‘different and more sustainable futures’ (p. 255).

Of what use is taxidermy, a craft predicated on the harvesting and re-working of dead animals, to positing new futures? Are not the pieces of taxidermy we often see in natural history museums but static representations of what once lived or is now extinct? Readers already skeptical of the philosophical or ethical value of taxidermy might heed Ron Broglio, who asserts that artistic practice ‘has a particular investment with surfaces that are useful in unhinging philosophical concepts and moving them in new directions’ (Broglio, 2011: p. xvii). For Aloï (who regularly cites Broglio), the Western philosophical canon’s past engagement with animals has often reduced them (like the stretching of animal skin over fabricated non-living artistic forms) to mere surface, flattening their existence by claims that they have no internal life (consciousness or thought) or value and making their exploitation and destruction justifiable. While taxidermy aided this picture of flattened animal life in the past, Aloï posits a ‘speculative taxidermy’, which he argues provides the novel movement and directions Broglio suggests in his own critical scholarship in animal studies, often acting as critique of representation rather than mere representation itself.

There is considerable horror and a chilling sense of the eco-gothic in such practices of taxidermy. Aloi cites Jeffrey Niesel's 'The Horror of Everyday Life: Taxidermy, Aesthetics and Consumption in Horror Films', an essay in which it is argued that taxidermic practice is motivated by the twisted and fetishistic desire of serial killers. Niesel notes:

'[...] taxidermy, because it takes the fetish to its logical end (murder), exposes connections between consumerism, aesthetics, and patriarchy and shows these systems contribute to creating relationships of violence particularly in the effort to render feminine subjectivity silent [...]' (1994: p. 61).

Such an interpretation of taxidermic practice pairs well with the horrific implications of 'flattening' proposed by Broglio, where the very life and existence of a living thing can be effectively stripped and crafted into a lifeless, fetish object for mere voyeurism. If taxidermy is to provide something beyond the revulsion of horror itself, if it is to expose instead the horror of ecological devastation and species death, a more speculative mode in taxidermy is needed to confront and address this challenge. This mode is exactly what Aloi, drawing on Broglio, in this work sets out to achieve.

In chapters 1, 2, and 3 Aloi confronts the scientific and political visions of taxidermic practice (prior to its contemporary movement into the world of art). Both of these analytic lenses present historical problems for this revitalisation of the practice as a critical means for reshaping our relations with the animal. On one hand, the scientific objects which taxidermy produced in the Early Modern and Victorian ages were ones to be taxonomised: contained, restricted by type, bound to certain epistemic spaces for viewing, and designed to convey a certain conception of 'realism' via static pictures of nature (pp. 118-123). On the other, in a political sense, taxidermic pieces of the Renaissance stood in as symbols of white colonial masculinity, theological power (pp. 60-64), discipline and the conquering of nature—what Pauline Wakeham (2008) refers to as 'spectres' of the fantasies of 'white male supremacy' and 'colonial mastery over nature' (pp. 5-6). In short, any mode of 'alternative' taxidermy must reckon with preconceived conceptions of the trade as one that not only strips animals of life and agency, but through scientific/political use of these pieces propagates constraint and violent fantasies of humankind's dominance.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 see Aloi operationalise post-structuralist philosophy (chiefly, speculative realism and new materialism) to move past problems of the trade and introduce mobility to the static objects of taxidermy. In an effort to avoid historical efforts to reduce animals to objects of rational study and collection and as symbolic representations of various ideologies, Aloi employs speculative realism's ontological decentring of the human subject as the rational mode of being par excellence through critical interrogations of Kant (who ascribed animals no reason and little ethical import in themselves) and Descartes (who viewed animals as mere automata and material resource). The object-oriented scope of certain veins of speculative realism opens up the practice of taxidermy, rejecting reductive visions of objects, to create 'contentious objects'. Contentious objects problematise notions of realism in representation as well as ontologically blur the lines between materials and explore the depth of objects—not merely their surfaces (p. 139).

Engaging with contemporary art's political critiques through taxidermic practice, Aloi's work is influenced by new materialism's conception of nonhumans as 'actants' to express alternative modes of nonhuman ontological movement/agency<sup>1</sup> and speculative realism's object-oriented conception of realism.<sup>2</sup> Here, like Stephanie Turner (2019), I am concerned that even with some recognition of tensions, Aloi moves all too easily between new materialism and speculative realism (Aloi, pp. 198-199).<sup>3</sup> With these two schools of the object-turn growing in popularity as modes of thought for thinking and making-with in the art world, it seems worthwhile to acknowledge crucial differences between the fields, despite all their shared commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Actants' is a term that new materialism borrows from *actor-network-theory*, a form of social theory which proposes that everything in the world (the social or natural) is bound up in constantly evolving relations to produce knowledge, decisions or action. Objects, animals, ideas, and processes are all understood to be as equally important within said networks as humans. In this sense, ontologically speaking, all actants are treated equally in terms of their importance to and participation in the network – suggesting a non-anthropocentric set of relations and ethics.

<sup>2</sup> Speculative Realism, particularly in terms of object-oriented ontology/philosophy, challenges the privileged position of human existence (which speculative realists claim is a product of Kantian thought—the 'Copernican Revolution') over that of nonhumans on metaphysical and ontological grounds. Treating all entities as objects, speculative realism posits that all objects exist equally in terms of reality.

<sup>3</sup> For example, per the *New Materialist Almanac*, new materialists claim that speculative realism aims to 'partly do away with the tradition of critical theory' and maintain the independent reality of objects while new materialism wishes to affirm critical theory in relation to questions of who accesses/connects to the 'real' of realism. Further, new materialists often invoke actants and actor-network-theory, which object-oriented ontology refers to as 'overmining'—an attack on social constructionism's claim that no independent reality exists outside of power, language, networks, or discourses. Such distinctions, while perhaps of little importance in the art world, hold considerable weight in philosophical discourse.

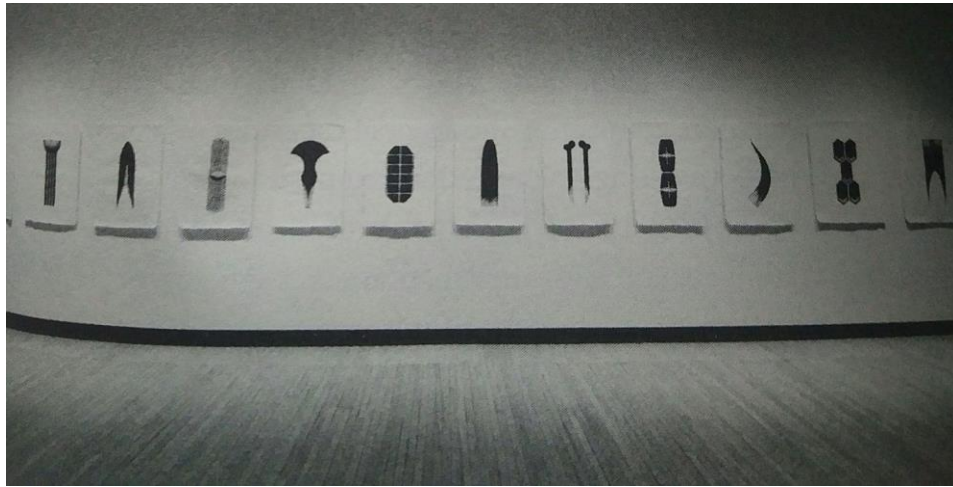


In a familiar vein with the ‘eco-Gothic’, *Speculative Taxidermy*’s blending of speculative realism and new materialism interrupts binary thinking and provides dark (perhaps, at times, even seemingly morbid) challenges for human desires to objectify Nature. Executed well, speculative taxidermy (on Aloi’s account) would encourage viewers to see even these objects fashioned from fur, skin and bone, as more than mere material.

An example of this dark, eco-gothic engagement might be found in the materialising of Timothy Morton’s ‘dark ecology’ in speculative taxidermy. On this account, those who fashion such eco-art take seriously Morton’s proposal to reinject environmental thought with ‘hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness’. Per Morton, the ‘honest’ gesture of environmental arts would be (rather than seeking purity in representation as a picture of pristine nature, or some ideological statement of dominance) ‘to linger in the shadowy world of irony and difference’ (Morton, 2012: p. 16)—a sentiment which maps well onto much of the art found within *Speculative Taxidermy* and one which opens significant terrain for eco-gothic interpretation.

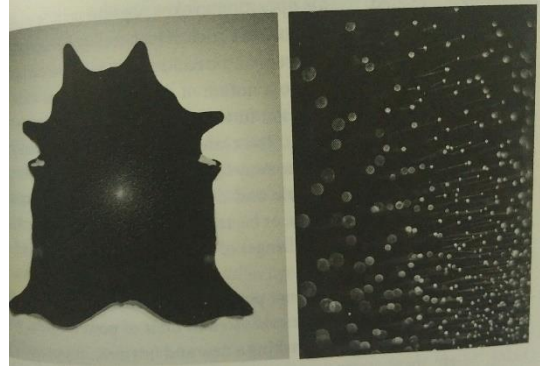
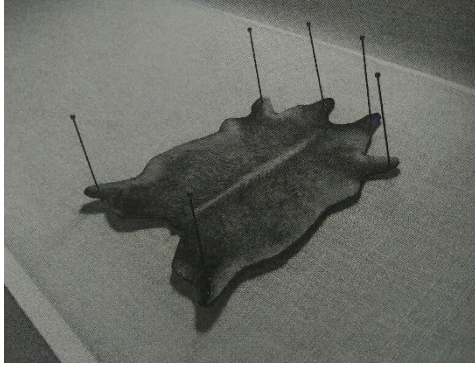
Yet, while many works within *Speculative Taxidermy* richly display various anxieties of environmental and species precarity, these works do not express an ecological pessimism. The inclusion of new materialism (Jane Bennett, for example) and Donna Haraway’s concept of *speculative fabulation* (SF)—in short, crafting new narratives and tales for survival in environmentally precarious times—helps turn this speculative effort away from merely tarrying in the shadows towards the fabulation of more affirmative visions. Such an effort is of interest in an alternative mode of ‘re-enchantment’ found in the *coda* of the book.

In the *coda* of the book, ‘Toward New Mythologies – the Ritual, the Sacrifice, the Interconnectedness’, the artwork of Cole Swanson is examined as one method of re-enchantment. Swanson’s *Out of the Strong, Something Sweet* (2015) exhibition displays various animal hides, horns, burned remains, and sounds to challenge those who walk the floor of the exhibition to rethink the human’s complicated relation to the animal. Further, various symbols familiar to the Gothic emerge in Swanson’s pieces, moving through darkness into re-enchantment, confronting violence but offering the possibility to move beyond it.



*Bone Black*. Taken by Cole Swanson at the Art Gallery of Guelph (2016). Sourced from *Speculative Taxidermy*.

Key highlights for Swanson's work include *Bone Black* (2015), evoking industrial chemical process, animal slaughter and waste in the re-enchanting of this sacrificial, cast-aside material. *Bone Black*, a piece with various small tapestries bearing symbols of animal bodies painted with bone char against stark white, presents these industrial processes as 'haunted', echoing within the images a material engagement of the systematic destruction of animal life in the animal industrial complex and its 'seemingly endless ability to unravel capital gain from different forms of rendering' (pp. 249-251). *Specimen Hides* (2015) and *Star Swarm* (2015) further pushes gallery-goers into dark ecological territory through a confrontation with the tiny fastened hides of animals set in a seemingly scientific taxonomy (*Specimen Hides*) or with heterodoxically (counter to taxonomic practice) placed pins forced through hide (*Star Swarm*). These pins symbolise the 'impossibility of an empathetic relationship' as the very epistemic 'tools of power, order, determination and identification' are employed in all manner of violence, shoved deeply and carelessly through flesh (pp. 253-255).



From left: *Specimen Hides* and *Star Swarm*. Taken by Cole Swanson at the Art Gallery of Guelph (2016). Sourced from *Speculative Taxidermy*.

Eager scholars might examine contemporary works, found in Aloi's text or beyond, to flesh out new discourses in Gothic aesthetics. Replete with explorations of liminality, the uncanny, transgression, and the challenge to the stability of the body, Gothic corporeality and perception might yield interesting dialogues with epistemic and ontological dimensions of the speculative project of Aloi. Finally, in terms of haunting and re-enchantment, I suspect various dark ecologies may be born from reckoning with speculative taxidermy in a Gothic vein. *Speculative Taxidermy*, a rich and winding account of past and future approaches to the craft, will entice readers to explore taxidermy beyond the skin-deep.

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**Jon Hackett and Seán Harrington (eds.),**  
***Beasts of the Forest: Denizens of the Dark Woods***  
(East Barnet: John Libbey Ltd, 2019)

Marc Ricard

Running the gamut from Jan Brueghel the Elder's *Belebte Waldstraße* (1605) to *American Horror Story* (2011-present), *Beasts of the Forest* (2019) takes in the full range of “threatening” forest apparitions’ that haunt our popular media (p. 2). As outlined in Jon Hackett and Seán Harrington’s introduction, the collection aims to reassess the state of the wildwood as a site of monstrosity, danger and horror—questioning how and why forests and the creatures that dwell within them continue to be used to instil fear, when they are ‘essentially one of the most threatened ecological contexts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ (p. 2). The aforementioned breadth of source material does not prevent the collection from building concise and coherent thematic points, such as the attribution of forests as primordial spaces, or the forest as a site for rebellion or anarchy. And while representing distinct disciplines and subjects, the essays fit together in a pleasantly harmonious manner, combining to build an eclectic and wide-ranging survey of how the forest has and continues to be re-imagined as a place of peril for humans.

The nine essays are divided into three groups of three, the first of which, ‘Ferocious Forests’, focuses especially on the ‘forest as context and subject’ and sets the scene for the collection as a whole (p. 3). The section begins with Richard Mills’ dissection of both cult and occult forest iconography in Wolf People’s *Night Witch* video, which suggests the homages to past forest horror films be read as a forewarning of the kind of environmental catastrophe that awaits in a near future. This anticipatory ecological message is evoked once more in the following essay by Elizabeth Parker, exploring the persistence of ecoGothic and ecophobic conventions that lie at the heart of western modernity’s depictions of forests. Drawing attention to the often overlooked arboreal elements from otherwise renowned works of television and film (*Stranger Things*, *Twin Peaks* and VonTrier’s *Antichrist*, to name a few), Parker further develops the contention first highlighted in the collection’s introduction that we use ‘fiction to immerse ourselves in forests of the mind as we lose forests of the land’ (p. 33). The section is rounded off with András Fodor’s

examination of the first of Brian Catling's *Vorrh Trilogy*, appropriating a theological lens to unpick the monstrous and sacred forces that paradoxically coexist in the anomalous space of the woods.

The propensity for forests to imaginatively sustain contested, anomalous, or even impossible forms is developed further in the following triad of chapters titled 'Denizens of the Woods'. Alexander Sergeant's foray into 'The "Good" and "Bad" Forests of Modern Fantasy Cinema' confronts head-on the Janus-faced image of the forest in contemporary fantasy by way of Melanie Klein's object relations theory. Sergeant's conclusion that 'fantasy forests' represent sites of 'psychic [...] emotional and pre-logical attachments' resonates with the queer utopian view of the woods in the preceding essay, 'Cruising the Queer Forest With Alain Guiraudie' by Benjamin Dalton (p. 105). In the films by the acclaimed French director and novelist, the wild green spaces of the forest provide a fertile landscape in which queer connections can be forged away from the scrutiny of modern built environments. In Dalton's reading of the forest space, the animated, living environment of trees and plants combines with the ambiguous forms of attachment and desire that typify the queer sexual politics of cruising to express 'biology's own plea for metamorphosis and mutation' (p. 89). By highlighting this shared impulse of wild ecologies and queer sensibilities to drift away from contained homogenous monocultures towards expanding degrees of plurality, variety and possibility, the essay makes legible the forms of resistance that can take place at the fringes of landscapes and human sexuality.

The final section is devoted to the subject of forests in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. Encompassing *The Lord of the Rings* as well as Tolkien's work on myth and legend, the three essays put forward a case for the centrality of trees to the lore that underscores Tolkien's literary imagination. Opening the section, Brad Eden offers 'a quick overview of the importance of trees, forests, and woods in both ancient and medieval societies' (p. 117) by contrasting the reverence, even worship, of trees by Anglo-Saxon and Germanic medieval cultures with the tales of Tolkien—particularly through his evocation of Mirkwood, or 'Myrkviðr' in Old Norse (p. 113). In Leticia Cortina Aracil's chapter, we are treated to a whistle-stop tour of the forests of Middle Earth. She offers each woodland as a case study and provides a list of eleven key features of forests in *The Lord of the Rings*, ultimately emphasising the forest space as one that discloses 'something else that is not seen' (p. 131). This threatening element of the unknown carries perfectly to the

final essay of the collection, Damian O'Byrne's 'Fiendish Forests of Middle-earth: Tolkien's Trees as Ominous Adversaries'. The sentient trees and Ents of *LOTR* are well known, and the especial focus on some of the more marginal examples from the series, particularly Old Man Willow, is timely and much appreciated. The closing anecdote of the real-life violence of the crumbling of Tolkien's Tree in the Oxford University Botanical Garden (pp. 144-146) is especially effective at reconnecting readers with the very real and imminent ecological threat outlined in the collection's introduction.

As suggested by the title, *Beasts of the Forest: Denizens of the Dark Woods* would be of use to any readers with an interest in the intersection of literary studies and green environments. The prominence of contemporary and popular media makes it especially suited to scholars of works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The mediums of television, film and even music are well represented here. With the exception of the contribution from *Gothic Nature's* own Elizabeth Parker, there is scant direct allusion to the ecoGothic in the collected essays; however, a poisoned rose by any other name is still as deadly, and with its multi-faceted and wide-ranging studies of how forest spaces threaten, disorientate and avenge themselves on modern readers, there is plenty here for scholars of the ecoGothic to sink their teeth (or roots) into.

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## BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

**Gary Budden and Marian Womack (eds.),**  
*An Invite to Eternity: Tales of Nature Disrupted*  
(Madrid: Calque Press, 2019)

Michael Wheatley

*An Invite to Eternity: Tales of Nature Disrupted* (2019) begins with a plea: ‘we need, more than ever, stories that recover the future we have lost for ourselves by imagining it, filling it with plausible solutions’ (p. 19). The hyperobject of climate change, an issue so all-encompassing that it exceeds human comprehension, has been unfortunately exacerbated by the alienating effects of scientific analyses. As co-editors Gary Budden and Marian Womack stress, ‘communicating climate change, the *idea* of climate change, is no longer simply a question of transmitting data’ (p. 16). Instead, they suggest the value of fiction in translating this abstract issue. They favour the speculative mode, arguing that within a suspension of disbelief lies a personal vulnerability to absorbing ‘the realities of climate change’ (p. 17). From the implicit to the explicit, the everyday to the apocalyptic, the eighteen tales collected thus each engage with Anthropocene-related crisis and uncertainty.

Meticulously structured, the collection shifts from an initial realist approach to increasingly outré experimentation. Naomi Booth’s ‘WARNING: Localised Quicksand’ proves the perfect introduction, telling an evocative tale as much concerning the trauma of fractured relationships as the inability to understand one’s position in an increasingly unstable world. Claire Dean’s ‘Lichen Storey’ and Tiina Raevaara’s ‘The Birds Always Return’ then develop and usurp this realism, shifting familiar environments into grotesque landscapes where the air becomes toxic and the sea levels rise.

Eased into the collection, the tales then adopt an increasingly fantastic approach. Although perhaps imbibing too heavily from the well of horror writing clichés, D.P. Watt’s ‘We are the Clay’ echoes H.P. Lovecraft in its catastrophic tale of a collapsing coastal community. Meanwhile,



Aliya Whiteley's 'Star in the Spire' imagines a world where 'all that once shrank back and was buried, [rises] up anew,' with strange new lifeforms emerging from the ground, while Kristen Roupenian's 'The Rainbow' concerns a curious cruise ship which seems to cycle through staff, expressing a paranoia of identity alongside its peripheral engagement with the harmful impacts of tourism (p. 150).

One of my personal favourites of this style, 'My Uncle Eff' by Malcolm Devlin masterfully explores the divide between the rural and urban, hyperobjects, and the notion that landscapes are entwined with their stories. The narrative centres around the suggestion that on the right night, at the cliffs of Hunstanton, one can ascend above the clouds and see 'the corpse of Britain, lain out there as though she'd just been murdered' (p. 78). Deftly combining folk horror, nature writing and weird fiction, Devlin's work proves an early highlight of the anthology.

*An Invite to Eternity* is then further buoyed by the inclusion of international authors, broadening its scope and challenging the often-Eurocentric conception of climate crisis. These stories demonstrate not only how different cultures evoke the issue, but the global impact of pollution and changing weather patterns. Usman T. Malik's haunting 'Laal Andhi' takes place in Pakistan, reflecting on terrorism as a crimson storm descends following innocent death; 'The Parasite' by Anna Starobinets is a gruesome take on the limits of human evolution which also critiques Russian Orthodoxy; and a second standout, Vida Cruz's 'In the Shadow of the Typhoon, Humans and Mahiwaga Cooperate for Survival', draws upon the author's own journalistic background in order to construct a magical realist report of the aftermath of Typhoon Yolonda.

The likes of 'Body' by Alberto Chimal and Regina Kanyu Wang's 'The Story of Dǎo' similarly expand the collection's diversity of narrative perspectives. The former evokes Jeff VanderMeer in its queer tale of human/nonhuman hybridity, while the latter adopts a uniquely techno-ecological slant. Timothy J. Jarvis's 'Brother Burgholt's Charm' then adds its own humorous personality to the mix, continuing the anthology's excellent shifting of tones and approaches.

Yet, some of the most stirring pieces are those which eschew the paraphernalia of the speculative almost entirely. Gareth E. Rees's 'Tyrranosaurus Bask in the Warmth of the Asteroid' concerns a father, scared for his daughter's future, as they visit a local zoo. A fire starts to spread from the adjoining fields, with the patrons seemingly paying no attention. Critiquing our own capacity to sleepwalk towards disaster, Rees's work demonstrates that the horror of climate crisis can be intimate and insidious.

Unfortunately, there are a few stories which fail to fully resonate. 'Snow, Wind and Diesel' by Kathleen Rani Hagen struggles to justify its length, with little narrative movement beyond its narrator's ruminations on their Arctic environment. Additionally, Camilla Grudova's 'Jackfruit' intrigues with its reflections on waste culture, though proves somewhat unfocused, while Alexandra Manglis's 'What Planets Are These, Conjured from the Depths of our Imagination?' closes the collection on a slightly anticlimactic note, constructing a curious narrative about a planet undergoing rapid shifts in climate that ultimately feels rushed.

It would also be remiss to overlook the overall production quality of the collection. Typographical errors abound, ranging from the harmless—'sea does that sort of things to a person'; 'to the east the it gives way'—to an unfortunate instance where a character swaps sex mid-sentence (pp. 55, 74). None of these lapses spoil the collection, but they do frequently distract.

In her introduction, Womack highlights that 'all the stories are 'tainted'—or perhaps 'covered' is a better word—with a sense of hope' (p. 19). Standing in contrast to this statement, one or two do demonstrate strains of anti-humanist thought. 'The Apprentice' by Sofia Rhei is a comedic fable where animal species petition the Pied Piper to kill the human race. Yet, with its language of humanity as 'an infestation. A blight' (p. 156), the tale ultimately sits rather uncomfortably.

By embracing the speculative in its broadest sense, both Budden and Womack have opened the door to a diverse range of approaches and writing styles which sing in harmony with one another. Rather than falling into the frequent trap of anthologies in which repetition sets in and stories stagnate, these tales continue to find fresh and innovative angles throughout. Budden

concludes his own introduction by stating that ‘we have been handed our invite to eternity, it’s not too late to hand it back’ (p. 23). Knowing that authors such as these are leading the conversation, *An Invite to Eternity* does indeed provide room for optimism.

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**Daisy Butcher (ed.), *Evil Roots: Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic***

(London: The British Library, 2019)

Teresa Fitzpatrick

Haunted forests, bleak moors, and dark dangers of the wilderness have long been familiar settings for Gothic tales, but with the recent ecocritical turn in Gothic studies, Nature has become a focus for closer scrutiny (Del Principe, 2014). As this new mode of ecoGothic emerges (Smith and Hughes, 2013), so too, the grossly overlooked monstrous plant steps out of the shadows. A popular trope of the late nineteenth century, tales of dangerous exotics, devil flowers, and man-eating plants are being re-visited, as Daisy Butcher's edited collection, *Evil Roots: Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic* (2019) clearly demonstrates.

Published as a part of the British Library's *Tales of the Weird* series, *Evil Roots* compiles fourteen short stories from 1844 to 1935, including better-known as well as less familiar tales/writers. Beginning with the poison plants of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter' (1844), Butcher has selected those she feels best represent a sub-genre of 'predatory plant' which she dubs 'Botanical Gothic'. Botanical Gothic includes a carefully thought-out range of plant beasts thriving in jungles, gardens, forests, and a hothouse, depicted as (super)natural phenomena rather than those of alien origin (Butcher, p. 10). Readers will find animalistic killer plants in Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The American's Tale' (1880), Lucy H. Hooper's 'Carnivorine' (1889), and H.C. McNeile's 'The Green Death' (1920), while H. G. Wells' 'Flowering of the Strange Orchid' (1894), Howard R. Garis' 'Professor Jonkin's Cannibal Plant' (1905), and Emma Vane's 'The Moaning Lily' (1935) illustrate the association of nature with femininity through *femme fatale* plant monsters (p. 8). The chronological ordering demonstrates the persistence of the plant monster trope, supporting Butcher's category of sub-genre. Although Butcher emphasises that her selection of tales focus on Gothic notions of hybridity and the liminal (p. 9), she makes only passing reference to ecoGothic concepts such as, for instance, 'an interconnectedness between femininity, flowers and death' (p. 11). Nevertheless, the above and other tales may interest those studying new materialism and, in particular, a Gothic trans-corporeality can be read in eco-horror tales like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Giant Wistaria' (1891), M. R. James' 'The Ash Tree' and

Ambrose Pierce's 'A Vine on a House' (1905). Whether murdering, consuming, or merging, this plant monster collection offers a variety of Gothic tales worthy of an ecoGothic lens and certainly provides some key texts for exploring Simon Estok's concept of ecophobia (2009)—based on Victorian 'distrust of the natural world' (p. 8).

There are no newly discovered tales here. All of the tales have individually appeared in other Gothic anthologies and there are also other more complete collections available, such as Chad Arment's three volumes from Coachwhip Publishing, dedicated to cryptobotany.<sup>1</sup> However, Butcher's compilation offers a more focused rationale for claiming the plant monster fiction as 'its own genre of eco-horror' (Butcher, p. 10). What separates Butcher's from these other edited collections is her contextualisation in her introduction of each tale. Alongside relevant authorial information, Butcher synopsis the key feature of the narrative that deems it worthy of inclusion in her collection, evoking references to research ideas, such as interconnectedness, hybridity, sentience, femininity, cannibalism, and body horror. Her decision to organise these tales chronologically rather than attempting to categorise them by their liminal monsters allows Butcher to demonstrate this fiction is worthy of 'recognition of its own subgenre of gothic/horror' (p. 1) that she suggests inspires the modern day 'predatory plants' of videogames, film, and TV (pp. 9-10).

The surprise inclusion within this plant horror collection is William Hope Hodgson's 'The Voice in the Night' (1906) as the story centres around a fungal monster rather than a plant or flower. This seems anomalous but Butcher argues, and I would agree, that while 'fungi are classified in their own kingdom [...] they are part of the same conversation' (p. 9). This singular tale still seems out of place though. She includes 'The Voice in the Night' as it illustrates 'the hybridity and the blurring of the lines between animal and plant' (p. 9) that feature significantly within Botanical Gothic. Butcher's inclusion of this 'all-consuming fungus' (p. 161) narrative invokes ecoGothic themes inverting the human/nonhuman predator/prey dynamic 'as the food sources become the hunters', reflecting modern 'fear[s] of contagion and infection' with its 'cannibalistic elements' (p. 161). However, this lone story of teratological fungus does little by

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<sup>1</sup> Arment, C. *Botanica Delira* (2010), *Flora Curiosa* (2013) and *Arboris Mysterius* (2014). Pennsylvania, Coachwhip Publishing

itself to confirm Butcher's assertion and there seems to be a missed opportunity in not including at least a second fungal eco-horror tale—and there are quite a few.

In her introduction, Butcher focuses on Charles Darwin's botanical research and Victorian imperialist interest in exotic plants as the cultural and historical influences for nineteenth-century plant horror. She argues 'this specific strain of gothic short story creates fear through the concept of devolution or degeneration' (p. 8), presented through these plant monsters in their reflection of Victorian 'deep-rooted fear of foreign environments' (p. 9)—a colonial 'ecophobia' (p. 8). Butcher further suggests the 'interconnectedness of femininity, flowers and death' (p. 11) are key elements for consideration throughout this collection, alongside the depiction of nature as the monstrous female. Indeed, many of the tales underline the transgression of gender boundaries and human/nonhuman dichotomies during a time of significant social change and scientific advancement. A particularly clear thread through all the stories, sentient nature is depicted as a monstrous feminine that victimises the often unwitting male.

Overall, her choice of 'botanical-themed gothic fiction highlights fears of hybridity and liminal figures' that have 'developed into the monster we know it as today' (p. 9). As Butcher suggests, it is worth re-visiting these tales with today's awareness of deforestation and environmental devastation, as they clearly 'provide a sense of repercussion when nature fights back' (p. 10). Providing a precursor to more recent eco-disaster movies, this collection potentially offers a chronological development of ecophobia, from fear of nature towards fear of the consequences of natural devastation, and how this fear is entangled with forms of social oppression and otherness.

The Victorian age of imperialism and exploration, their fascination with the bizarre, and the hothouse as status symbol—together with fears of modernity and degeneration—paved the way for terrifying tales of man-eating plants and vengeful feminised nature (Jane Desmarais, 2018). The tales in Butcher's *Botanical Gothic* selection reflect these nineteenth-century obsessions and anxieties, situating *Evil Roots* as a compact compilation of tales for Victorian ecoGothic scholars keen to revitalise debates on gender, colonialism, and identity, amongst others, as well as a compact selection of weird uncanny plant narratives.

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**Algernon Blackwood, *Roarings From Further Out* (ed. Xavier Aldana Reyes)**

(London: The British Library, 2019)

Daniel Pietersen

With their Tales of the Weird series, the British Library has been quietly building an outstanding library of thematic anthologies, often featuring lesser-known authors of strange tales. The nautical horrors of *From The Depths* or the sinister vegetation of *Evil Roots*, for example, are both excellent showcases of largely ignored short, weird fiction. Yet there is also room for single-author collections, offering new editions of authors both obscure and relatively well-known. *Roarings From Further Out* is one of these collections. It features four of Algernon Blackwood's novellas and a thankfully spoiler-free introduction from Xavier Aldana Reyes, Reader in English Literature in Film at Manchester Metropolitan University and the editor of this volume.

Born in 1869, Blackwood was a prolific author of fourteen novels and a large number of shorter works. He was also a great lover of both the outdoors and the inner, spiritual life of humanity. These apparently conflicting interests can be seen in his writing and, indeed, their friction lends the weirdness to much of his work. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (2011) describe how, in Blackwood's tales, 'unease is generated by ambiguity that mixes the weird with a talent for writing about wild or rural places—a break with the past and the classic haunted house' (p. 27). This break with the past's concerns led Blackwood to, they continue, 'usher in the modern era of weird fiction' (p. 27). Aldana Reyes, in his introduction to this collection, appears to agree: 'What distinguishes Blackwood from other weird writers is not just his interest in the occult and his intrinsic style, but his outlook on life and its spiritual links to nature' (p. 10). In fact, Blackwood 'blurs the distinctions between the human world and a wider natural and spiritual ecology' (Smith and Hughes, 2013: p. 6).

Two of Blackwood's most famous tales, 'The Willows' and 'The Wendigo', make up half of this collection, and it is these two which, perhaps, most clearly demonstrate this blurring in Blackwood's work. Both feature attempts by 'civilised' men (and it is always men) to colonise the wild places of the world and both show how the mental landscapes of the colonisers are themselves



colonised by the terrors they find there.

‘The Willows’ tells the story of two unnamed protagonists, canoeing between Vienna and Budapest, and their experiences amongst the shifting sandbars of the Danube. Blackwood near-effortlessly builds tension from the initial sight of ‘an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud our efforts’ (p. 19) to the over-powering resonance of a ‘nonhuman sound’ (p. 59) that seems to emanate from some space beyond the willows, beyond even the reality in which the willows exist. Blackwood imbues the natural elements with such a sense of life and sinister intent— ‘How [the river] stood up and shouted when the rains fell flat on its face! And how its laughter roared out when the wind blew upstream and tried to stop its growing speed!’ (p. 21)— that every facet of the environment in which the two canoeists find themselves takes on a malevolent, preternatural aura. ‘The Willows’ is genuinely terrifying and, without doubt, one of the finest works of weird fiction. Like MR James’ ‘Oh Whistle And I’ll Come To You My Lad’, it manages to prick the hubris of human belief in our mastery, even our base understanding, of the non-human world.

While the protagonists of ‘The Willows’ blundered unwittingly into ‘a kingdom that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers for those who had the imagination to discover them’, (p. 19), the hunting party of ‘The Wendigo’ have the explicit intention of trespassing into the Canadian wilds and taking its resources for their own. It’s not surprising, then, that they encounter—and, in some cases, are consumed by—the wendigo. A part of Algonquin-speaking people’s folklore, the wendigo is an avatar of greed and hunger in both physical and spiritual senses. It is a being that consumes, not so much to sustain itself but in order to starve others, and there is a clear parallel here between the wendigo’s famine-related actions and those of colonising powers. Yet ‘The Wendigo’ is not just a polemic, but also a finely-written story of weird horror; Simpson’s terrified pursuit of the tracker Défago, who has been snatched up (or perhaps possessed) by the wendigo itself, left me as breathless as if I’d run the long miles myself.

Sandwiched between these two complementary tales is ‘Ancient Sorceries’, a story from

Blackwood's John Silence series. In it, the meek Arthur Vezin stumbles into a mysterious French town that seems to exist outside the normal flow of time and is populated by not-entirely-human citizens. Eventually, he comes to understand the meaning of the warning he is offered on his arrival; cryptically, he is cautioned to be on his guard 'because of the sleep and because of the cats' (p. 85). I found myself thinking more than once of Clark Ashton Smith's 'A Night In Malnéant' when reading 'Ancient Sorceries'. Although Smith's tale was published over twenty years after Blackwood's, the same sense of temporal repetition and intertwined lineages persists between the two. In some ways, this makes 'Ancient Sorceries' feel more generic in its narrative, although not unpleasantly so, than the previous two tales. There is certainly less here of an ecohorror persuasion.

The final entry in this collection, 'The Man Whom the Trees Loved', works almost as a counterpoint to 'The Willows' and 'The Wendigo' and returns more blatantly to ideas of the ecoGothic. In it, however, the one-time ranger and woodsman David Bittacy is not terrorised by the natural world but beckoned back to it, slowly shedding his humanity as he returns to the woods. Despite this different take on colonial concerns, I found Bittacy's fate, unlike either 'The Willows' or 'The Wendigo', a bit of a slog to work through. There is a kind of tedious presumption of superiority here; some people are simply more deeply attuned to the world than others. This is borne out by the condescending representation of Bittacy's wife, Sophia, as someone who 'like many women, never really thought at all but merely reflected the images of others' thinking' (p. 212). In a more subtle telling, Sophia's concern for her husband and the superstitious fear the woods hold for her Christianity could have been an interesting contrast to the atavistic, sublime joy they generate in David. That this grown woman, in her late middle age, is instead repeatedly rendered as foolish and almost lacking in agency gives 'The Man Whom the Trees Loved' an unpleasant feeling of smugness, if not outright misogyny.

In some ways, though, these issues throw the astonishing accomplishment of 'The Willows' into sharp relief. Contrast is, after all, the purpose of collections like this, and I can see that, despite its flaws, 'The Man Whom the Trees Loved' is an interesting inclusion purely because of how it subverts the way that the wilderness is often depicted as threatening—indeed, how Blackwood himself depicts it—and makes Nature into a more complex entity: a sublime combination that is both terrifying and enticing.

With *Roarings From Further Out*, the British Library and Aldana Reyes, along with impeccable design by Mauricio Villamayor and cover artwork from Enrique Bernadou, have fashioned another excellent entry in the Tales of the Weird series, one that I am pleased to add to my slowly increasing collection.

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(Iqaluit: Inhabit Media, 2019)

Nicole Emanuel

Abundant darkness, intense isolation, deadly cold, the largest carnivores currently stalking the Earth, and a rapidly-shifting climate that is growing ever more unstable. There are plenty of reasons why Northern latitudes offer unique material for tales tinged with terror. This is confirmed by the body of literature engaged in mapping the polar Gothic and the Arctic sublime, and it is wonderfully illustrated by *Taaqtumi: An Anthology of Arctic Horror Stories* (2019).

*Taaqtumi* was published by Inhabit Media, an Inuit-owned publishing company based in Nunavut. By highlighting the work of Indigenous authors, this collection presents an important view of how Gothic and horror themes intersect with Arctic settings. The nine stories collected here are wide-ranging in subject and style, yet all draw upon fears deeply rooted in the cultures and environments of the North. Both the history and current-day realities of life in this region are explored here from a variety of perspectives. Although *Taaqtumi* leans into tropes of polar literature that paint the landscape as harsh and deadly, it does so in a way that manages to hold lots of surprises for the reader. Furthermore, it avoids the exoticism that mars so much fiction written by authors who have simply passed through polar areas and cannot claim experience of daily life in these extreme environs.

Some of the contributors to *Taaqtumi* are already recognised authors with awards and well-loved works to their name. Aviaq Johnston's young adult novel *Those Who Run in the Sky* (2017) won an Indigenous Voices Award and was a finalist for a Governor General's Award and Burt Award. Richard Van Camp is another prize-winning author, whose novel *The Lesser Blessed* (1996) was adapted into a film by Anita Doran in 2012. However, *Taaqtumi* shines a light on less established writers, too, as well as artists who have worked in other media; Anguti Johnston, K.C. Carthew, and Jay Bulckaert are all known primarily as filmmakers, though their work here proves that they are also adept writers of fiction.

In addition to the range of writing backgrounds represented by these authors, *Taaqtumi* offers an array of genre experiments. Although all contributions fit comfortably under the ‘horror’ label, they range from spooky to gory, supernatural to realist, playful to serious, and many points in between. There are elements of fantasy, science fiction, apocalyptic adventure, climate fiction, and classic ‘creature feature’ at play. Indeed, not least among *Taaqtumi*’s pleasures is its reminder of what a rich and varied world is encompassed within horror literature. However, while these writers employ a variety of tones, storytelling techniques, and nods to diverse horror subgenres, they all offer material particularly suited to analysis through an ecoGothic lens. Though the stories collected in *Taaqtumi* differ markedly, all are engaged with Arctic creatures, weather, terrain, and ecosystems. Each in its own way examines humans reckoning with foreboding nonhuman forces.

The collection begins with Aviaq Johnston’s ‘*Iqsinaqtutalik Piqtuq: The Haunted Blizzard*’, a story centred on a young heroine sent home from school in a winter storm. Johnston’s understated suspense is reminiscent of Ray Bradbury’s ‘The Wind’ (1942), another piece of fiction that renders weather much more frightening than we usually give it credit for. It exemplifies the unsettling agency of nonhuman actors, which has been both a frequent source of fright in ecohorror and a consistent focus of ecoGothic theory. Similar themes also come up in ‘The Door’ by Ann R. Loverock, which makes great use of seeming mundanity rendered unsettling by context. In this case, a doorway to nowhere is placed eerily in the tundra—‘standing alone, unfixed to the landscape’ (p. 16). The collision of this constructed artefact with an environment otherwise (apparently) devoid of humans creates powerful, uncanny imagery. The door is mysterious and we never learn who fashioned it or for what purpose, so its symbolic potential is uncertain. However, for readers interested in ecohorror, this story may conjure unsettling questions about the agency and power of objects, especially human-made ones.

Richard Van Camp’s ‘Wheetago War II: Summoners’ is not set in our reality, but rather in a post-apocalyptic future. Nevertheless, it clearly has relevance for today. In Van Camp’s story, survivors in the high Arctic band together to fend off evil humanoids called Wheetago; these beings are reminiscent of zombies, but Van Camp also summons suggestions of climate horror:

‘Earth had seven billion humans before the Wheetago returned, right? I think that was the magic number. I think they warmed the world and unthawed themselves from whatever Hell they came from. I think seven billion was the magic number for the food they’d need to make the world maggoty with them and their kind’ (p. 30).

As this passage suggests, Van Camp keeps his commentary on climate open to interpretation. His narrator evokes rising temperatures as a threat linked to a burgeoning human population, but how exactly humans, Wheetago, and global warming are linked through causality is ambiguous. Meanwhile, K. C. Carthew demonstrates a different approach to cli-fi. Her story ‘Sila’ features no magic or monsters, but instead depicts a family going out for a day of ice-fishing. All seems innocently pleasant, until the appearance of an Arctic predator hunting outside its expected range. The effects of melting ice are thus responsible for the element of horror in her narrative—a dangerous situation which could occur in reality any day now. One commonality between Van Camp’s and Carthew’s stories is their matter-of-fact treatment of the warming Arctic. Neither author attempts to persuade climate change deniers, or to graphically depict ecological shifts. Rather, they take the reality of climate change as a jumping off point to begin imagining their frightening stories.

‘Utiqtuq’ by Gayle Kabloona engages neither a dystopic future nor alarming current events, but instead looks to the past for its source of darkness. Although it is a zombie story, the most frightening peril Kabloona explores turns out to be a revival of government practices that are all too reminiscent of the colonial history that forced countless Indigenous children into assimilationist boarding schools. As scholars such as Alanna F. Bondar (2013) have demonstrated, the legacy of colonisation which continues to impact Indigenous peoples is a potent illustration of how social and environmental justice intersect. Kabloona’s story is one of several in this anthology that focuses on Indigenous characters living off the land, relying on traditional ecological knowledge and subsistence practices (which were nearly lost through assimilationist policies) in order to forge relationships with an ecosystem that has the potential to either furnish or destroy human life.

*Taaqtumi* offers an exciting entry to the movement of Indigenous futurism. Indigenous artists creating alternative pasts, presents, and futures have been building this body of art across genres and media. Canada in particular has seen a surge of work by Indigenous creators drawing on science fiction and horror; Jeff Barnaby's zombie film *Blood Quantum* (2019) and Cherie Dimaline's post-apocalyptic YA novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) are two examples among many.<sup>1</sup> *Taaqtumi* sits comfortably alongside such texts, and it collects a varied assortment of approaches to how sinister fiction might be used to explore topics with a pressing relevance across the Arctic. What's more, these are topics which continue to grow more urgent, as polar ecosystems shift, species migrate north, Indigenous knowledge and languages are lost, diseases and blights spread, and other dangers which might seem to belong to fantastic horror narratives become lived realities for already vulnerable communities. *Taaqtumi* presents a critical approach to ecohorror and ecoGothic. As so many writers have before, it explores the frightening potential of interactions between humans and the ecosystems they inhabit, but in doing so through the eyes of Indigenous artists, it radically challenges our assumptions. Many of the authors most associated with the Arctic have been outsiders. *Taaqtumi* proves that if there are any writers capable of capturing the threats of Northern ecosystems—and capable of using them to tell unique stories and probe pressing issues—it will be the people who actually live in those cold, dark regions.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Barnaby is interviewed by Tiffany Hearsey in this issue of *Gothic Nature* and Jennifer Schell reviewed *The Marrow Thieves* in the first issue of the journal.

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**Kira Jane Buxton, *Hollow Kingdom***  
(New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019)

Annie Wenstrup

If all of humanity was destroyed, who would narrate the apocalypse? In *Hollow Kingdom*, Kira Buxton's debut novel, the last human story belongs to Shit Turd, a foul-mouthed domesticated crow, called S.T. for short. As he tells us, he is 'the rare bird who loves [our] kind, the ones who walk on two legs and built the things [we] dreamt of, including the Cheeto' (p. 4). S.T.'s love for humans, or as he calls us, MoFos, extends to his own domestication. S.T. considers himself an 'honorary MoFo', and it is through his consciously anthropomorphised perspective that we witness the world without us (p. 4).

S.T. suspects something's wrong when Big Jim, his human companion, loses an eye. Then, Big Jim stops drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and misses the Monster Truck Show, and S.T. fears Big Jim is sicker than he first realised. He sets off with Dennis, a bloodhound, for help. The pair quickly realise that Big Jim is not the only one who is sick: all of humanity has transformed into 'a pulsing mass of MoFos [that] swayed and lumbered' (p. 56). At this point, S.T. turns to the nonhuman world, first for help and then for answers. S.T. begins listening to *Aura*, one of the nonhuman's communication systems and, through *Aura*, he reconnects with the nonhuman world he had hoped to leave behind. As S.T. begins to grasp the scope of humankind's destruction, he sets off with Dennis on a quest to preserve humanity's legacy. Their journey takes them on a picaresque adventure through Seattle's most recognisable locations, including the Space Needle, Pike Place Market, and the Woodland Park Zoo. Throughout their journey, they encounter other animals, wild and domestic, and through them we learn how humans were destroyed. Additionally, they share how the nonhuman world is changing in response to our absence.

The story's episodic form poses a particular challenge, one that is familiar to anyone who has ever loved a long-running television series. What is at stake for the characters in the story changes with each new iteration of the overall quest. The story's initial premise, that it is a story about witnessing humankind's disappearance, is set aside once S.T. encounters a murder of crows.

He reluctantly befriends them, and the story shifts to an interrogation of S.T.'s identity as a domesticated crow. As S.T.—and his new murder—move through Seattle, what is at stake for S.T. changes based on which animals he interacts with. The episodic format allows Buxton to introduce multiple conflicts into the text, but at the expense of the overall narrative arc. The story's climax and resolution, another quest—this time to rural Alaska—falters because no quest can resolve S.T.'s existential dilemma or provide an answer to what happens when humanity disappears.

Speculative novels about pandemics and environmental change are rarely humorous or hopeful. Buxton's novel, on the other hand, is both. Deadpool fans will feel at home with S.T.'s irreverent narration full of profanity and pop-culture references. The novel also offers a fresh take on a worn genre. Instead of focusing on a small band of human survivors whose experiences ultimately dehumanise them, *Hollow Kingdom*'s crow asks what it means to live in a world without humans. As an anthropomorphised crow, S.T. acts as a scaffold for extending theory of mind to the nonhuman. His narration provides the reader with a bird's-eye view of apocalypse. Although S.T. is preoccupied by human events, his main concern is how those events affect him. As a result, S.T.'s narration works towards decentering the human experience. Buxton does her best writing when she takes advantage of S.T.'s perspective by describing a human-oriented opinion and then offering a counter-thought. Scenes like this, where S.T. considers how humans have altered nonhuman landscapes suggest how a nonhuman-worldview could be integrated into commercial fiction:

‘All this long, tangled turf and greedy green devouring buildings made me nervous and also made an excellent case for the Homeowners Association’s stringent rules. Moss, especially the Spanish kind, is a deadly conquistador, dampening the sounds and edges of the city right before my eyes. MoFos kept a tight order to things, the world cupped in their hand, squeezing when necessary. I had thought of the Green Mountain again, about how Big Jim had to trim it yearly to stop it from taking over the yard and so one day it didn’t ‘fucking fall over and crush our house like a can of Coors Light.’ Our house belonged to Green Mountain now. Maybe that wasn’t so bad. Maybe Green Mountain deserved it the most’. (pp. 73-74)

*Hollow Kingdom* is less successful in how it approaches ontology and biology. It is unclear what Buxton's overarching vision for the book is. The book alternates between celebrating humanity, particularly its crassness and excesses, to scolding humans for upsetting the balance of nature and insisting that they must be punished. Buxton is similarly ambivalent in her approach to the nonhuman; animals are alternately portrayed as bundles of dumb instinct and resilient, autonomous beings. The more abstract *nature* is a vengeful force, but also benevolently indifferent. Buxton does not address how these binary representations can coexist in her post-apocalyptic world, and the competing descriptions obscure her meaning rather than reveal complexity. Much of the text's confused characterisation stems from Buxton's casual approach to scientific terminology. Principles from evolutionary theory, adaptation and natural selection are applied to non-evolutionary actions that speak to individual resilience. The mantra 'adapt or die' reoccurs throughout the text as individual characters consciously make choices that go against their instincts. At the same time, the colloquial *nature* is ascribed intent when ecological collapse occurs. These misattributions are pervasive and messy. What could have been an engaging commentary on the limitations of individual agency and the unpredictability of biology instead becomes an unclear denouncement of screen time (yes, once again technology is our downfall). It might seem pedantic and unfair to criticise a fictional text for getting the science wrong, but in this case there is too much at stake not to. Everything compelling about Buxton's work—its humour, creativity, and hope—becomes compromised. By the novel's end, it is unclear if she is imagining a world where human and corvid agency can avert disaster, or if she has consigned us as victims of our own instinctual behaviour.

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## TV AND FILM REVIEWS

**Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, *Swiss Army Man***

(San Pedro, California: Tadmor, 2016)

Ashley Kniss

The first time I saw Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's (2016) *Swiss Army Man*, it was hard to tell what I was watching. It is a film about a farting corpse, which makes it hilarious, but it is also about human connection, loneliness, and the shame associated with having a body. Even more fascinating to me, the film seems unintentionally to include narrative features commonly associated with ecohorror, features that highlight the materiality of the body. The film ultimately vitalises the connection between human bodies and the more-than-human. Linking the body to other forms of material waste—from trash to poop to corpses—the film emphasises that human waste in all its forms both defines material existence and highlights our resistance and disgust towards our own materiality, which, ironically, also defines what it means to be human.

The initial scene puts one toe firmly in the genre of ecohorror by featuring a lone man stranded on a beach in what would be a seemingly pristine wilderness but for the abundance of trash that seems to infiltrate every shot. Add to this a decomposing and increasingly animate corpse, and the film, at first glance, appears to function entirely within the realm of ecohorror. The first wide shot of the sea with trash floating across its surface sets the stage for when the camera shifts to Hank (Paul Dano), a man stranded on a desolate beach somewhere in the Pacific and preparing to commit suicide. Hank is also surrounded by trash, which has somehow made its way to the beach, seemingly beyond the reach of human communities. Just as Hank is about to step off a discarded lunch cooler and hang himself, a corpse (Daniel Radcliffe) washes ashore, not unlike the pieces of trash that already litter the beach. In a scene that is equal parts ridiculous, hilarious, and gross, Hank postpones his suicide to check on the corpse, whose name we later find out is Manny, and the farting begins. At first this is legitimately horrifying as Hank puts an ear to Manny's stomach and listens to what can only be active decomposition taking place in the corpse's gut, but it is also funny and weird.

While the humour and outright joy featured throughout the film make clear that *Swiss Army Man* is not fully ecohorror, it nevertheless co-opts conventions of the genre. In addition to common ecohorror tropes, such as being stranded in the desolate wilderness, wild animal attacks, and human/nature blending, disgust is perhaps the most conspicuous facet of ecohorror throughout the film. From the mid-fart, bare-butt shots of Manny being ridden like a jet ski to fresh water pouring out of Manny's mouth like a torrent of puke to his phallic compass, he truly is a Swiss Army Man, with a solution for every problem, each one more revolting than the last. In a Q&A with Filmmakers included on the Blue Ray release of the film, Kwan and Scheinert address how they intentionally apply the concept of semantic satiation—when a word loses all meaning as a result of repetition—to farts, making them a matter of fact, something the body does that is not attached to humour or disgust. This attempt to neutralise disgust draws attention to the ways that the human body and other forms of waste are entangled in the more-than-human world. We react to evidence of our materiality—farting—in the same way we react to so many facets of the more-than-human as evidenced by our aversion to mold, slime, carrion animals, creepy crawlers of all kinds, and other shudder-inducing eco-others. Disgust is ultimately one of the many ways we distance ourselves from the more-than-human and deny this entanglement.

The film's hyper-saturation with trash, body emissions, and a corpse generates a space where we can reconsider our hard-wired reaction to these objects. Furthermore, the film's emphasis on disgust highlights the correlation between the disgust we feel toward bodies and the disgust we feel toward the more-than-human, a reaction that separates the self from the body and thus from the biotic communities in which the body is intermeshed. At one point, Manny, newly conscious, asks 'what is trash?' and Hank responds, it is 'everything people don't want so we hide it.' This exchange is followed by a series of further questions about material existence:

Manny: Why don't people want [trash] anymore?

Hank: Well, that's broken. That's empty. This is useless. Smelly. Old. . . .

Manny: What is life? . . .

Hank: This is you. This is your body, and . . . and that's where your brain is, and that's where you're going to remember something . . .

Manny: What's that?

Hank: That's poop. Poop is when your body takes everything it doesn't want and squeezes it out of your butt. Everything poops...People poop every day. Or extra when they're scared or sick or right when they die, because, uh, you shit your pants when you die...People die every day.

Manny: What do they do with all the dead people? Do they hide them?

Hank: Yeah.

Manny: So I'm like trash?

Hank: No. You're different.

Hank is right. Manny is not broken, empty, or useless though he might be smelly, considering that corpses start farting 10-20 days after death when gasses, a byproduct of decomposition, start to build up within the body. However, despite the film's insistence that Manny is not just 'different' but also useful, it also draws attention to the fact that society treats corpses the same way it treats trash and other forms of waste.

As the film progresses, it does more than simply neutralise disgust by rendering these objects as beautiful and useful. The material body becomes an essential link between the human and the more-than-human world. If allowed to decay naturally, the body will ultimately become the environment. At one point, Manny wishes he were dead(er?), and the scene immediately changes to a vision of his body decaying in fast-forward, reducing to bones and returning to the earth. Rather than being disgusting or even disturbing, the scene, like so much of the film's juxtaposition of nature littered with trash, is strangely beautiful. Our typical disgust at natural objects—things like poop, viscera, spit, farts, and yes, rotting corpses—suddenly disappears, losing significance in the constant onslaught of these objects of horror throughout the film, and leaves something entirely different in its wake.

Rather than reinforcing the idea that waste is lifeless and useless, the film recognises the vitality of all matter, but especially that which we throw away. Throughout the film, poop, trash, and corpses all share a similar agency, one that highlights the life of objects usually considered not only dead and useless, but offensive and disgusting. Trash is hidden away in landfills, or far-away

pockets of uninhabited space where we do not have to see it. Poop is flushed down the toilet where we neither have to look at it nor think about it. And corpses are filled with harmful chemicals and sequestered from any kind of ecological contact that would allow them to transform into something useful—food for plants and countless other living organisms. Manny’s super-corpse powers may be as ridiculous as they are funny, but they also make the point that corpses, like other forms of waste, have agency—and that life is powerfully demonstrated in how the film allows matter to matter. The elaborate creations that Hank builds to help Manny remember his life are all made of trash, objects that have been thrown away but prove useful in the world of the film. In the end, the film makes this final point: instead of trying to distance ourselves from the realities of material existence that bind us to the more-than-human world, perhaps, like Manny in the film’s final scene, we should seek a return, or more aptly, a recognition of our kinship with the material environment. Our materiality is what makes us human after all.

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**Black Radical Impulse, Self-Reflexivity, and Gothic Landscapes of Nature  
and Difference in Jordan Peele's *Us***

(United States: Universal Pictures, 2019)

Kim D. Hester Williams

Jordan Peele's film *Us* (2019) begins by informing the audience that there are 'thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States'. It is the year 1986, signified by the image of a vintage television console that is playing a local news broadcast warning of a storm that is headed directly toward the Santa Cruz, California (United States) area, 'a storm causing all kinds of trouble around the Bay' [a reference to the greater Bay Area in Northern California]. The voiceover of the 'Cal 11' (California) News reporter announces: 'we'll show you what would happen to the Bay if some scientists' predictions come true'. Peele inserts this trope of warnings about climate change as a foreshadowing of the ecohorror and Gothic landscapes in *Us*.

The advertisement that follows the weather warning displays a disconcerting cluster of squares containing different shades of fragmented faces and eyes that are both closed and open simultaneously. Next, we see more clusters of squares with different colored noses, lips, and more fragmented body parts. Finally, a collection of various sets of white teeth populates, all smiling as the ebullient narrator asks:

'What has 12 million eyes, 192 million teeth, and stretches from the Golden Gate Bridge all the way to the Twin Towers? It's Hands Across America. A 4000-mile long chain of good Samaritans standing hand in hand [...] This summer 6 million people will tether themselves together to fight hunger in the United States'.

While the voiceover continues, images of 'different' people with notably no faces showing are coupled together—tethered—reaching out to hold hands in a demonstration of the aspiration to stretch their diverse bodies, in unity, across the contiguous United States. The disembodied hands and arms are superimposed on pristine natural landscapes of fruit trees, oceans, grain fields, a herd of buffalo, and notably, Mount Rushmore in South Dakota which is carved with the likeness of



past American Presidents, as well as images of the coastal landscapes of San Francisco and New York.

To emphasise the dissonance Peele is setting up, one of the final images we glimpse is the sight of a singular homeless male figure presumably digging in the garbage for food, wearing tattered clothing with his back toward the camera. Below the surface, simultaneously mirroring the red cut-out of human figures that is the 'Hands Across America' logo and the homeless man, are the unknown, tethered doppelgängers who are harnessing a different purpose. They are waiting to unleash the self-reflexive haunting that will disrupt the imposed harmonious union between humans staged on the natural landscape. Instead, what will be revealed is the American gothic landscapes of difference.

What is distinctive about the ecohorror of *Us* is Peele's centering of the Black female maternal figure in relation to gothic natural and unnatural landscapes which further represent difference and its self-reflexive disaffection. We discover at the beginning of the film that the invisible viewer watching television in the first scene is a young Black girl named Adelaide (Madison Curry). When we meet her, Adelaide is spending the evening with her parents visiting the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk—the same Santa Cruz referenced in the television weather report. In her mother's absence, and against the insistence that she 'stay close' to her preoccupied father, Adelaide wanders from the arcade space. She ends up in the natural landscape of the beach—below—where she stares into the ocean with seemingly deep curiosity. After a few intense moments of watching the waves and listening to thunder roll, Adelaide turns and walks away from the sight and sounds of the ocean waves toward a fun house of mirrors where she eventually gets lost and meets Red (also played by Madison Curry)—her tethered doppelgänger.

The premise of *Us* is that each person has a doppelgänger living below ground in the tunnels who is unwillingly connected to someone above. The doppelgängers, however, lack the material benefits and luxuries of the people living above them. While the audience is not aware of this until the end of the film, Red manages to grab Adelaide through the mirror and switches places with her. Red therefore grows up as Adelaide while Adelaide remains entrapped with the 'Other' doppelgängers in the tunnels. In a Gothic twist of fate, the disaffected doubles, including the

entrapped Adelaide, eventually manage to make their way above ground to wreak havoc on their privileged doubles.

In the initial beach scene, before Adelaide is captured and forced to switch places with her double Red, Peele emphasises the anxiety represented by the otherwise desirable coastal space of the beaches of Santa Cruz. Adelaide seems confused by a space that, in the dark, is both mysterious and potentially ominous. This is certainly the case if we consider the historical relationship African Americans have to the sea as a space of both capture and erasure. In her poem, ‘Beaches. Why I Don’t Care for Them’, Wanda Coleman (2009) laments, ‘the only time / i like the beach is when it’s cold hostile and gray. / i feel kin to it then. / or at night. / when it speaks a somber tongue / only the enlightened perceive’” (p. 303). Both Red and Adelaide are ‘kin to’ the ocean which reflects their enlightened perception of and relationship to difference. The uncertainty and power of the ocean is also analogous to Red’s ability to escape the tunnels and inhabit Adelaide’s privileged status above ground.

Peele uses Black female radical impulses and ecohorror—the perceived and real dangers of nature—to animate the Gothicism of U.S. historical memory. The racial, economic, and ecological trauma which is disproportionately and violently displaced onto the unsuspecting Black female body is signified most forcefully by Adelaide and Red’s tethering. We might think here of the BlackLivesMatter movement and, as one example, the horrific murder of Breonna Taylor—in her sleep. In ‘saying her name’, a common BlackLivesMatter rallying cry during the ‘defund the police’ and social justice protests, many of *us* (the pun here shouldn’t be ignored) have been confronted with the realities of what has been ‘hidden in plain sight’, that is, the horrors of antiblackness and the intersection of racial, gender, and ecological violence.

Perhaps the most conspicuous and anxiety-producing marker of difference being made undeniably visible by the current global public health crisis is homelessness—a salient issue that directly speaks to the presence and representation of precarious populations living literally underground in Jordan Peele’s film, *Us*. To use Eve Shockley’s (2006) term, Peele evokes a ‘gothic homelessness’ wherein ‘the frightening uncertainty of the domestic boundaries that are supposed to safeguard those within its walls’ (444) or aboveground in the safely distanced vacation homes

superimposed on the natural landscapes in *Us* and in many other American Gothic tales, instead become sites of horror and psychological terror. In other words, nowhere is safe, especially for Black women.

The shocking and unnerving ending of *Us* gestures toward this idea when we discover that Red is the one who has survived the death battle and has emerged, alive and triumphant, yet a second time, from the sewers. When Red subtly and warily looks at and smiles to her son, Jason (Evan Alex), as they drive on their inverse road trip back to the presumed safety of 'home' and away from the terror of their failed Santa Cruz family beach trip, he realises that his mother has perhaps all along been the 'Other' mother, Red. Peele uses the signifying, dual function of Adelaide/Red as, in Toni Morrison's (1992) words, 'evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self' (p. 59).

In Jordan Peele's Gothic landscapes of difference, each and every individual has a doppelgänger lying in wait. Peele's discursive landscapes of horror inculcate black radical impulses in order to carve a space for the disinherited to resist and to rise up from beneath the depths of invisibility. Their presence is not only felt in *Us*. It is inescapable. Adelaide/Red's erasure becomes no longer tenable. We will always be tethered to and by the 'other' and by the natural and unnatural landscapes of our Gothic past and present. We are inextricably linked. Like the ocean, we are 'kin to it'. No matter how many of our sympathetic hands reach out to clasp and stretch across the landscapes of difference, we will not unloose this tethering until we end the horrors of the oppressive violence of erasure. They are coming for us.

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**Michael Dougherty, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters***  
(Qindao, China: Legendary Pictures, 2019)

Carter Soles

Misha Kavka (2002) contends that Gothic cinema ‘captures the fear associated with the unstable boundaries of our subjectivity, usually cast onto an imagined or imaginary past’ (p. 211). For Kavka, the Gothic traffics in ‘paranoia’—a ‘blurring of boundaries between self and other, to the extent that the other becomes a version of the self returned, with interest, in the form of hostility’ (p. 210). *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019), which frames its battling monsters as avenging giants hailing from the Earth’s ancient past, has great potential to deliver effective ecohorror. However, it fails to engage with those key Gothic notions. Rather than evoking paranoid fear about the planet’s perceived hostility toward humans, it instead lapses into predictable Hollywood blockbuster conventions, reducing the horrific power of its narrative and creatures.

Gareth Edwards’ *Godzilla* (2014) uses the term MUTO to refer to its giant creatures, evoking science and atomic mutation. By contrast, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* uses the word Titan, invoking Greek mythology, romance, and the roots of Western culture. Yet the (lengthy) film is mainly a paternal melodrama centered upon the nuclear family of Mark (Kyle Chandler), the film’s ‘manly’ wildlife photographer protagonist. Mark spends most of his screen time in *King of the Monsters* shouting about how he intends to get his daughter Madison (Millie Bobby Brown) back from the vile clutches of his environmentally radicalised ex-wife Emma (Vera Farmiga). This is family melodrama first, monster movie second. The mode of human-centered melodrama so drives this film that even its scientists suffer melodramatic fates, e.g. Serizawa (Ken Watanabe), whose sacrifice is the most noble and story-relevant: he dies to save Godzilla.

Film scholar Linda Williams (1998) describes the melodramatic mode as one in which suffering victim-heroes, beset by foes far more powerful than they, make noble sacrifices so that viewers may see their purity, innocence, and moral goodness (pp. 58, 62). Melodrama exists chiefly to tap into viewer emotions and to make a clearly defined moral universe—one that *feels* right—legible to the viewer. *King of the Monsters* so indulges its anthropocentric, melodramatic

instincts that it unwittingly—despite a few visually dazzling monster fights, especially the first Rodan sequence—short-changes the Titans as characters. The monsters' sketchy back stories are explained to us in rapid-fire expositional snippets from the human characters. The movie, to its detriment I think, is not fundamentally *about* the Titans: it is about the people watching them.

Which is a shame because *KotM*'s concept of Godzilla as one of many Titans, a gigantic and elder species of beings against which humanity seems puny and powerless, is a potent one for ecocritics. A shared world of 'peaceful coexistence' as Serizawa puts it, can help us vicariously experience ourselves as within the food chain rather than comfortably atop or outside it. This kind of onscreen narrative, if fully explored, can get us into the head space Val Plumwood (2000) describes as 'a test of our acceptance of our ecological identity' in which non-human apex predators 'indicate our preparedness to coexist with the otherness of the earth, and to recognise ourselves in mutual, ecological terms, as part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater'. But *KotM* is a big-budget Hollywood blockbuster, chock full of internal contradictions, steadfastly patriarchal and Eurocentric.

Indeed, in *King of the Monsters*, the central struggle is between Godzilla and alien, three-headed dragon King Ghidora for ultimate dominion over the monsters (Titans) of Earth, of which there are many. King Ghidora's identity as an invading extraterrestrial alien, plus the colossal size of the monsters themselves, suggests cosmic horror, a mode Jason Colavito (2008) contends 'removes humans from the center of creation toward a peripheral place in the universal order' (p. 161). However, rather than generate horrifying and mysterious ambiguities around its Titans by centering its narrative around them, the film moves these monsters around like chess pieces, with little regard for their back stories or motivations. For example, upon arriving on Earth, King Ghidora generates a tropical storm that envelops him as he flies across the Atlantic Ocean toward Brazil. This aligns the film's ostensible villain with a real-world extreme weather phenomenon, generating ecohorrific fear of the Titans' ability to affect Earth's environment and climate. Yet, this monster-as-weather/weather-as-monster concept is never developed nor does Ghidora generate a storm again in the film. Indeed, much of the time, the Titans are manipulated by Emma's sonic emulator device, which she uses to subdue Ghidora at one point, and which Madison uses to lure all the monsters to Boston for the movie's climactic battle. This onscreen contrivance serves

as a metaphor for how the monsters are mainly used in this film: as pawns in big action set pieces. The film gestures toward pathos for Godzilla and especially Mothra, who gets a featured moment of self-sacrifice near the film's end, but most of its attention goes to its human protagonists.

This is a missed opportunity given the crucial importance of monsters to horror and the Gothic. As Robin Wood (2004) writes, cinematic monsters are deeply ambivalent figures who are almost always presented (at least somewhat) sympathetically: many are the 'emotional center' of their films, much more relatable than the human 'cardboard representatives of normality' (p. 119). Thus such films can encourage viewers to develop an environmental ethos by sympathizing with nonhuman creatures who show up to wreak vengeance upon humankind. Indeed, Wood suggests that a horror movie is ideologically progressive precisely to the extent that it generates sympathy for its monster(s) (p. 134). By that measure, *King of the Monsters* is a conservative monster movie with little disruptive power or Gothic ambivalence.

To the limited extent that the film pays attention to its monsters, the visuals and plot of *KotM* inscribe a clear, legible moral universe in which Godzilla is an underdog hero and King Ghidora is a demonic, hellish invader. Like the human plotlines, this is a Manichean struggle of good vs. evil, so whatever ecocritical notions the film might raise (like Ghidora's ability to synergize with storms) are subordinated to those conventions. For example, a provocative cut from a shot of King Ghidora perched demonically atop a distant, flaming mountain, wooden Christian cross in the foreground, to an image of pumping oil derricks in the Sedona desert, suggests some sinister connection between petroleum dependence and the rise of this destructive, fire-bringing (and clearly Satanic) dragon monster. But whatever association this editing creates, it is quickly buried in the film's onrush of human-scale tear-jerking and monster-scale fight sequences. Like the previous American *Godzilla* film and many other contemporary eco-blockbusters, *KotM* seems to have little idea exactly what it wants to say, except that the heteropatriarchal nuclear family—or at least its steadfast and reliable father—is doing great.

Meanwhile, the central mother figure must suffer most of all. Emma, the film's main human advocate for a globe dominated by the Titans, is shown to be out of her depth and playing with forces she does not fully comprehend. She is the classic 'overreacher' figure in horror

narratives who, by engaging with mad science and grasping for forbidden knowledge, provokes or awakens the horror. Her radical stance against human self-imposed dominion over the Earth is quickly discredited when she is shown to be woefully naïve about the extent of King Ghidora's powers and to have endangered her own daughter, the worst crime imaginable under the film's melodramatic logic. We learn that her activism itself is born out of her maternal rage at losing a son. And despite her final, noble act of self-sacrifice allowing Maddie and Mark to escape, Emma is portrayed throughout the movie as impulsive and unreliable, a bad mother whose ultimate choice to leave Madison with her father makes sense in the film's misogynistic worldview.

Whereas *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* could have more intimately explored what it would be like for humans to really (in Donna Haraway's phrase) 'become with' titanic creatures like those it depicts (p. 19), as Gareth Edwards' excellent, artsy 2010 film *Monsters* does, this film instead bombastically reinstates a rigid social hierarchy built around traditionally masculine father figures like Mark and Godzilla. Furthermore, *KotM* ends as so many other eco-blockbusters do: with the surviving protagonists (now rid of their crazy, pesky ex-wife and mother) sailing above it all in a helicopter. As with similar scenes concluding *Jurassic Park* and *The Day After Tomorrow*, these helicopter shots position the human characters—and viewers—safely above the implications of the Titans' battle. Rather than confront viewers with a troubling, uncanny embodiment of a society's deepest repressed fears—as the original *Gojira* (1954) so hauntingly does with atomic-age terror—this big-budget actioner dulls the edges of its own promising premise by instead re-centering its 'cardboard' human heroes and their anthropocentric family entanglements.

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**Folktale Failure: *Gretel & Hansel***

(United States: Orion Pictures, United Artists Releasing, 2020)

Shelby Carr

Oz Perkins' *Gretel & Hansel* attempts to reimagine the folktale 'Hansel & Gretel' as an empowering coming of age story for its titular female heroine, complete with an ecoGothic stylistic flare. However, the film is just that: style over substance. While it seeks to, on the one hand, prioritise the feminist development of Gretel and, on the other, foreground its moody natural environment, it ultimately falls short on both counts. The overall result is a rather overwritten and poorly executed 'girl power' film which fails to unnerve or excite us with its ecoGothic aesthetic.

*Gretel & Hansel*, fittingly, is set in a time of extreme famine. The film opens with Gretel (Sophia Lillis) attempting to feed her family by finding work in the home of a wealthy man, but the work in question—advertised as general housework—turns out to be prostitution. After Gretel returns home emptyhanded with her brother, Hansel (Sam Leakey), the siblings' mother (Fiona O'Shaughnessy) turns them out of the house quite violently, refusing to continue feeding them. Sister and brother wander aimlessly, hoping to find food or work. A huntsman (Charles Babalola) points them in the direction of some foresters, telling them that here they will be able to find food, work, and shelter, but warns them, ominously, to keep their wits about them in the woods—highlighting from the outset the dangers of this landscape. In line with the well-known fairy tale, the two soon encounter a witch's house in the woods, which is filled with as much food as they could ever want. The witch, Holda (Alice Krige), takes them in and puts them to work, taking a particularly keen interest in Gretel. Breaking with the original tale, this witch teaches Gretel her witchcraft and eventually tries to turn her against her younger brother. Gretel and Holda's relationship comes to a head when Holda takes Hansel to the basement of the house, hoping to turn him into more food, but Gretel kills Holda, and the film ends with Gretel sending Hansel back to civilisation, while she—in perhaps the film's most interesting twist—stays in the woods to grow her powers.

The film is incredibly visually appealing. Throughout, it plays heavily with warm and cool tones, often contrasting them to great effect. Additionally, *Gretel & Hansel* experiments freely with its architecture, creating spaces littered with ornate and eye-catching windows and dwellings that seem impossible in their layout—Holda’s house among them. While the exterior of her house looks like it wouldn’t be out of place as an Airbnb Plus listing, the interior adheres to the Gothic edifice’s labyrinthine insides. As viewers, we never get a clear sense of where rooms are in relation to each other—especially Holda’s stark white basement, where she turns human flesh and refuse into food. While this spatial disorientation could have been effectively utilised to provoke terror, it instead reads almost as an oversight, as the sets and set designs are not realised to their fullest potential. Perhaps if the spatial confusion of Holda’s house was more clearly portrayed as frightening to the siblings, it would have read less like the film was clumsily sampling such Gothic conventions just for the sake of it. Up until the final showdown between Holda and Gretel, the two siblings are apparently very comfortable in this strange place, with Hansel more than happy to stay.

This unfulfilled potential spills too into the woods that surround Holda’s house. From the moment that Gretel and Hansel enter the treeline, the film seeks to make it abundantly clear that it’s a supernatural space, yet the seemingly unbothered attitudes of the characters within it and then the further plot inconsistencies put a dampener on its supposed dangers. As the siblings journey through it, Gretel, who seems to have the gift of psychical ‘sight’, sees shadowy figures in the distance, unmoving and shrouded in mist. These are never fully explored, but seem somehow to relate to Holda’s origin story, which Gretel knows before she even meets her. The source of these ghosts in the landscape becomes clearer the longer Gretel and Hansel stay with Holda. Surrounding the house are small reminders of the children she has lured, over the years, to their demise. As the two siblings become more comfortable in the woods around Holda’s home, they begin to see evidence of these children—but neither appear to be very worried about it. At one point in the film, Hansel stands wonderingly beneath a tree strung up with hundreds of children’s shoes, simply curious rather than scared. He’s not the brightest boy, but the film fails to capitalise on the significance of this discovery. Later, Gretel finds herself by a stream. On the opposite bank, crammed into the crevices in the rocks, are an assortment of children’s dolls. These objects, which signify a seeming profusion of people in a place so ostensibly devoid of humanity should stand as

a stark warning to the siblings—but both of them are unquestioningly content to ignore them if it means a roof over their heads. Yet, this is not to say that Perkins' depictions of the forest are without merit. Despite this landscape's lonesome quality, there is no denying that it is a beautiful setting: looking over the environment proves more entrancing than paying attention to the plot of the film. It seems difficult to see just how the film manages to fail to sell the terrifying past and its ghosts inscribed into the forest, but with the help of flat and ineffective character development, it unfortunately does just that. If audiences are supposed to identify with the actors on the screen, the identification here is one that produces utter indifference to environments and events that should be horrifying.

A lack of follow-through is also apparent in the film's 'feminist' message that is at some points embarrassingly heavy-handed and at others disappointingly vague. From the cutesy reversal of the folktale's original name to privilege Gretel to the rather unneeded internal monologue of the film's heroine, *Gretel & Hansel* tries so hard to position itself as feminist that we're uncomfortably aware of this 'branding' at every stage. Its early scenes appear to comment that famine and ecological disasters affect women most heavily, and that motherhood is fraught and restrictive for women—ideas perhaps with potential, but they do not play out. As the film progresses, 'mother' figures are unendingly punished for their transgressions and cast as monstrous, especially if they appear to be too powerful, like Holda. At the end of the film, the now dead Holda stands as a stark reminder of what Gretel could become. The film makes it clear that women with power must wield it with the care and good intentions of an ideal mother, not the terrifying 'selfishness' of the solitary older woman. Additionally, the ending of *Gretel & Hansel* reaffirms the oft-troubling alignments of woman with Nature and man with civilisation, as Gretel stays in the woods and sends her brother back to town. However, in the end, clad in an all-white dress, Gretel does not seem too sure about her decisions and, for once, looks scared. If we are to understand Nature in the ecoGothic as a space just as fraught with complexity and crisis as the classic Gothic castle, the final scene is one of the few places we see it. Left to her own devices in the woods, perhaps Gretel has an inkling that her newfound power is indeed terrifying, as is the prospect of trying to manage it alone. Like Holda before her, perhaps she is destined to grow her power at the expense of those she was supposed to care for. Here, it seems the non-nurturing mother—the *bad* 'Mother Nature'—may

thrive. An interesting, provocative image, but one that seems too ‘tacked on’ by this stage to encourage deeper consideration.

While visually gorgeous, *Gretel & Hansel* offers little in the way of terror or a cohesive empowering message. Scenes of lush forest landscape and beautiful set design, lighting, and costuming really shine in this film, as does Alice Krige’s performance as the witch. However, the film doesn’t unearth its potentially ecoGothic and feminist undertones to any great effect. Ultimately, *Gretel & Hansel* probably won’t be remembered as a quintessential ecoGothic *or* feminist film: a pretty picture, but a waste of one of our greatest folk stories.

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**Bong Joon-ho, *Parasite*:**

**A Review Cluster**

(South Korea: CJ Entertainment, 2019)

*A special collaborative collection from Sara L. Crosby, Shelby Brewster, and Valeria Meiller*

**Has *Parasite* Finally Made Ecohorror Serious?**

Sara L. Crosby

My husband and I have a deal. I can drag him to trashy ecohorror flicks like *Birdemic* (2010) or *Crawl* (2019), if he can alternate with high-falutin ‘serious’ films. And so, when Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* won the Oscar for Best Picture, I realised I had wasted a turn I should have reserved for *Platypossum* (2017).

Bong Joon-ho *is* an ecohorror filmmaker. He forces us to look straight at the abuse that humanity—particularly the wealthy and privileged—inflict upon the planet and how that horror may turn back upon us. This can be traced in his films to date: his 2006 monster movie, *The Host*, revolves around a murderous mutant creature spawned in toxic waste. *Snowpiercer* (2013) deals with the ugly aftermath of climate disaster. *Okja* (2017) tackles the horrors of factory farming.

*Parasite*—the full plot of which is neatly summarised in the first review below—works with similar anthropogenic environmental issues, coming to a bloody crisis through the agency of a climate-change-induced flood, but with this difference: while Bong’s earlier films presented as ecohorror movies with a submerged class critique, *Parasite* is a class thriller with a submerged ecohorror critique. This ingenious play with genre enabled the film to do something no other ecohorror film before it has accomplished: take ecohorror/ecoGothic and its critical environmental focus into mainstream ‘serious’ filmmaking.

The problem with environmental problems, as Amitav Ghosh points out, is that modernity and its respectable and acceptable works of ‘high culture’ are predicated upon transforming the nonhuman into a passive backdrop for human agency (p. 11). Thus, even though anthropogenic environmental disasters, such as climate change or pandemics like the one we’re living through now, pose a far more monumental and existential threat to human existence than any other challenges modern society has ever faced, the ‘serious’ art of that civilisation has consistently failed to grapple with such issues—or even acknowledge them—in any meaningful way.

So, the fact that *Parasite* won the Oscar (in addition to the Palme d’Or) last year is profoundly significant, and not just because it is the first non-English-language film to do so. It is profound because it is the first *ecohorror* film to win the Oscar (and also the Palme d’Or). Bong has thus done what Ghosh thought nearly impossible, and yet film critics have still been a little slow to understand this significance. The following reviews endeavour to rectify this oversight and bring to the surface the film’s crucial *ecohorror*/*ecoGothic* components.

*Parasite* may portend a new impactful and ‘artful’ future for *ecohorror* and the *ecoGothic*, in which they become vehicles for the ‘serious’ cultural consideration of environmental issues. Given that possibility, I suppose I don’t really regret not holding out for *Platypossum*.

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## **‘They Smell the Same’: Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite***

Shelby Brewster

One of the many indelible images in Bong Joon-Ho’s film *Parasite* borders on the ridiculous. Three members of the Kim family—father Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho), daughter Ki-jung (Park So-dam), and son Ki-woo (Choi Woo-shik)—flee the home of the wealthy Park family, where they are all employed as part of an elaborate scheme. The Kims run through a torrential storm down the streets of Seoul to their own home, a semi-basement apartment. Rainwater and sewage have flooded their street; they have to wade through chest-high water to rescue some of their belongings. Ki-jung climbs up to the overflowing toilet in the family’s small bathroom and reaches up to pull a packet of cigarettes from a hiding place above a ceiling tile. Sitting on the lid of the toilet as dark liquid spurts from beneath it, the surrounding flood rising, she calmly lights a cigarette, taking a brief moment of pleasure as the world falls down around her.

*Parasite*, a meticulous and incisive commentary on class difference, burst onto the international film scene after its 2019 release. The film collected accolades and landmark prizes throughout the awards season: the 2019 Cannes Palm d’Or; the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture; the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film; and the Academy Award for Best Picture, among others. Stunning direction by Bong, a tightly crafted screenplay by Bong and Han Jin-won, and masterful performances by the ensemble together create a cutting analysis of global capitalism.

The film follows the struggling Kim family: Ki-taek, his wife Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin), and their children Ki-jung and Ki-woo. None of them can find or keep steady employment. Instead, they each earn money wherever and whenever they can. At one point early in the film, they all fold dozens of pizza boxes for a local restaurant. Opportunity comes knocking when Ki-jung’s school friend Min-hyuk (Park Seo-joon) invites him to take over his ‘cushy’ job as an English tutor for the teenage daughter of a wealthy family. Ki-woo forges his university credentials, and after an interview with Mrs. Park (Cho Yeo-jeong), Ki-woo, or ‘Kevin’, lands the job. The Kim family quickly takes advantage of Mrs. Park’s naïveté and desire for domestic and social security and



variously infiltrate her household. Ki-jung, or ‘Jessica’, poses as a friend of a cousin of Kevin’s with an Art Therapy degree; Mrs. Park hires her to teach and counsel her young son. Then, after discovering a pair of cheap underwear under the backseat of their town car—planted by Jessica—the Parks fire their chauffeur and hire Mr. Kim (posing as an experienced driver). Finally, the Kims displace the Parks’ longtime housekeeper (Lee Jung-eun) and install Mrs. Kim in her place. When the Parks take a camping trip to celebrate their son’s birthday, the Kims take advantage of the empty home. They frolic in the yard, soak in a bubble bath, and sample the extensive liquor cabinet. But when the former housekeeper returns to retrieve something she has left behind and the Parks return early due to the torrential downpour that has foiled their camping plans, the Kims’ carefully constructed scam quickly devolves into shame, pain, and violence.

The film’s commentary on wealth and class manifests in the stark contrast between the families’ homes. The Parks’ modern gated home, designed by a famous architect, features clean lines, smooth surfaces, and minimalist aesthetics. The Kims’ semi-basement apartment, on the other hand, is crowded, dingy, and close. But, as Jason W. Moore (2015) argues, capitalism is more than an economic relation: it is also a way of *organising nature*. In *Parasite*, the gradual deterioration of social relations is accompanied by an increasingly unmanageable natural world.

When Ki-woo first arrives at the Parks’ for his initial interview, the housekeeper buzzes him in through the gate. He transitions from the city’s concrete and asphalt to a lush, quiet, verdant space. The Parks maintain a meticulously manicured, deep green lawn. This is nature anesthetised: carefully controlled and maintained for the pleasure of the wealthy. The wall-spanning picture window overlooking the lawn further underscores the compartmentalisation of nature, as it is literally framed for the Parks’ use. When the Kims take over the home during the Parks’ absence, they revel in the respite such a greenspace provides.

The mucky, odorous brown of the storm-generated flood that damages the Kims’ home emerges in contrast to this picture-perfect green. The brown of the sewage-rainwater mixture overflows the meagre municipal infrastructure designed to control it, flooding streets and buildings, erupting from drains and sewers. The pervasive scent of the semi-basement, which clings to the Kims even as they move through the Parks’ ‘pure’ milieu, marks the Kims as *other*—

as targets for the disgust and revulsion of those who happen to be better off. The odour is inescapable, and only becomes more so following the rainstorm and ensuing flood. The basement smell and the sewage-tainted floodwaters both embody what Gay Hawkins (2002) calls disturbance: ‘what happens when the fantasy of absolute elimination and purity is abandoned, or when a smell makes your stomach turn, or when we imagine different ways of living with shit’ (p. 54). The smell repeatedly ruptures the illusion of the Parks’ pristine world, not only as they go about their days with the Kims waiting on them, but also in the violence of the film’s climax, when the secret harboured in the Parks’ own basement erupts. The economic underclasses and nonhuman nature, both subjugated by capital, assert their agencies which, for structures of power, are ‘terrifyingly unpredictable’ (Estok, 2020: p. 29).

Though not as obvious as in his previous film *The Host* (2006), the (natural) world in *Parasite* reveals how capital seeks to control waste—both ‘surplus humans and material remnants’ (Dini, 2018: p. 4)—and how that ‘waste’ exceeds, overflows, or otherwise takes agency. In the world of *Parasite*, as Timothy Morton (2016) reminds us, there is no ‘away’ (p. 46). Just as the Parks’ ridiculous level of comfort depends upon the abasement of the Kims (and others), so too does the precarious urban milieu which they all inhabit depend upon the control of nature, and especially of waste. Losing that control is, as Simon C. Estok (2020) describes, ‘a frightening prospect’ (p. 29). The worlds which we inhabit under global capitalism are built on oceans of waste with the potential to revolt at any time.

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### **No Storm Can Last Forever, Can it? Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* from an Eco-horror Perspective**

Valeria Meiller

From an eco-horror perspective, it is difficult not to extrapolate the plot of *Parasite* to the reality of the current health crisis. Whether it is a threatening storm that results in a flood in Seoul—as it happens in the film—or a deadly virus, it is clear that those who will be most affected will be the most vulnerable. It feels somehow eerie, though particularly relevant, to be reflecting upon this film from New York City's lockdown where the COVID-19 virus seems to be spreading more rapidly than anywhere else. Big metropolitan junctures like this—or Seoul—are spaces where

environmental disasters and global pandemics manifest the most brutally. There have been many questions raised about environmental responsibility in the Anthropocene, with the leading question being who is—or which classes and societies are—the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene. Representations such as *Parasite* stand as almost structural graphics of agents, agencies, and positions built around the questions of natural disaster and class, whether it is an unforeseen sudden natural event like the rainstorm of Bong Joo-ho's fiction, a sanitary emergency like the coronavirus crisis, or the gradual environmental deterioration of climate change.

At first, the plot of *Parasite* seems to suggest that the members of the Kim family will simply become devious parasites within the Park household, but a deeper reading raises further questions about class relationships to the environment. Who are the *real* parasites in the film? What are the class entanglements to ecology that these two families make evident? Beyond the ingenious story twists designed by director Bong Joon-ho and his co-screenwriter Han Jin-won, what the film first identifies is that the 'upper class' live in a parasitic relationship to the labour of the 'lower class'. Such parasitism in the film is embedded in a critique of capitalism, but that critique takes on different dimensions when, at the turning point of the film, an intense rainstorm falls over Seoul and reveals complex violence inside of these two families' relationships to their surroundings. What, up until now, has been worked from the biological metaphor of the parasite—exploring the manifold combinations of class and parasitism and tapping into the varied feelings and horrors of thinking about the abject parasite—is now shown from the standpoint of the environment and environmental disaster. It is a shift in scale: if the parasite and its metaphors work on the level of the micro—the biological body—the storm and its disastrous aftermath will show inequality on the level of the macro: the environment.

For the Parks, the storm cuts short a camping trip, but when they return home after the rain ruins their weekend plans, they comfortably settle back into their luxury. The trip was supposed to be the birthday celebration of their son, Da-song, who is fond of camping because of his love of 'American Indians', and the biggest drama the family faces is that, frustrated after the cancelation, Da-song decides to camp in his 'Indian' tent in the garden despite the storm. 'Is that tent going to leak?' Mr. Park asks his wife. 'We ordered it from the U.S., it'll be fine', she responds. There is something placid and ideal in this young beautiful couple looking at their son in his temporary

refuge outside, being watched and protected from all emergencies by his parents and their considerable privilege. But here the tent functions as Bong Joon-ho's most mischievous twist on subalternity: embodied by the Native American bow and the tent that his mother has had shipped from the U.S., it is actually Western culture products that feeds into Da-song's distorted fantasy of the Native American. What Da-song's problematic understanding of Native Americans—referenced as 'American Indians' and stirring up colonialist implications—actually reveals is the Parks' idealisation of America as the embodiment of a reliable nation. It is also hard not to think about the irony of Da-song's fantasy of 'sleeping outside' when the space where his tent lies is in the garden of his parents' opulent house and sleeping 'rough' is very much a *choice* made purely for entertainment.

In sharp contrast with this idealised and distorted fantasy of the subaltern in nature, the Kims, after the impromptu arrival of the Parks, must escape the house in the middle of the storm and head back home to their *banjiha* in a low-income neighborhood of Seoul. The contrast between the Kims' and the Parks' neighborhoods is radical, and so are the consequences of the rain in one and the other. Far removed from the idyllic view of the Parks' illuminated tent in the garden, the rain is threatening and apocalyptic in the area of town where the Kims live. 'This is all sewage water', says Mr. Kim as he walks down the alley that leads to their *banjiha*, past neighbors emerging from their own underground homes, crying for help, trying to rescue some of their now floating possessions. The reality of these fictional poor families does not differ much from the reality of thousands of real-life Koreans who live in similar conditions, as well as from the realities of many others around the world whose lives are affected by how urban infrastructure fails to contain overpopulated urban centers, especially in low-income areas that seem to have been forgotten by the State. The flood works as a straightforward commentary on the relationship of class and climate change: it is always the poor who will suffer the most when natural disaster hits the hardest.

The rainstorm thus presents us with completely different scenarios in the Kim and the Park residences. All that seemed idyllic and even exciting for the Parks—let's remember Mr. and Ms. Kim have sex in the living room and fantasise about Ms. Kim as a working-class prostitute while ostensibly watching over their son camping in the yard outside—is disastrous for the Kims. The

poor parts of the city are flooded; people are losing everything they own as they move through a *literal* river of shit. The contrast between the two families, however, is thrown into starkest relief when, inside their basement apartment, the Kims try to rescue some of their personal effects, and Ki-woo clutches the scholar's rock his friend Min-hyuk gave him at the beginning of the film: a rock said to bring wealth. While marginality only enters the Park's life in the shape of a fantasy—something foreign enough to be arousing—wealth only touches the Kims as a symbol of an unfulfilled promise. Furthermore, the rock becomes a metaphor of extractivism: in the most literal of ways, extractivist economies produce wealth by exploiting the environment usually implicating poor nations giving away their resources to richer ones in the same way in which the Kims offer their labour to the Parks.

The Kim family spends the night at a gym together with others who have also lost their homes to the storm. Bong Joon-ho recreates a scene that we have many times seen after a natural disaster: dozens if not hundreds of people sleeping on the floor forming an aerial patchwork of patterns with their blankets. In the dark, Ki-woo asks his father: 'What was your plan?' 'No plan at all. You know why? If you make a plan, life never works out that way', his father responds. For people in their position, it's not even worth planning. Things don't care, in the same way that people like them seem not to count for society. This scene recalls Giorgio Agamben's (1995) fundamental biopolitical question about what lives are to be protected and what lives are to be abandoned to die. In the midst of the current global crisis, it seems a little late to think about *Parasite* as a cautionary tale; nonetheless, it is still possible to look at it as a counterexample for our modes of being in the world—asking us to create solidarities and reevaluate our environmental impact. Echoing the banner we have seen appear in social media in the wake of enforced lockdown, claiming 'I stay home for you. Please stay home for me', *Parasite*'s moral can be imagined as the recognition of our divergent positions and duties within the current environmental crisis where being 'inside' and 'outside' have manifold implications, and urgently call to be reimagined. It is for those in more vulnerable situations, for those whose locations and general conditions are more precarious than ours that we need to advocate for a clearer path towards environmental justice.

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## INTERVIEWS

### *Blood Quantum*

#### **Review and Exclusive Interview with Writer/Director Jeff Barnaby**

(Prospector Films: Canada, 2020)

*Tiffany Hearsey*

*'I don't do sad Indians; I do angry ones. I don't do defeated Indians; I do vengeful ones'.*

'The earth is an animal' proclaims Jeff Barnaby. Speaking to me via video stream from his home in Montreal, this statement is terrifyingly apt. Our feral blue planet is at its breaking point as a dire climate crisis causes extreme weather changes,<sup>1</sup> rising sea levels,<sup>2</sup> and the disappearance of alarming volumes of insects.<sup>3</sup> Retribution it seems has currently taken the form of the present pandemic, believed to be spread by a bat,<sup>4</sup> served up with a suitably horrifying side of murder hornets<sup>5</sup> and cannibalistic rats.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore extremely fitting that the First Nation Mi'gmaq writer-director's film *Blood Quantum* (2020) is an earth-ravaged zombie-contagion fever dream. In Barnaby's plague nightmare, Indigenous peoples are immune to a virus that causes the rest of humanity to become flesh-eating walking dead. Hordes of ravenous zombies, their white skin stained with blood, decimate humans, flora, and fauna indiscriminately. With this turn of events, Native survivors have become sentinels in the newly scorched landscape, a patchwork of burned-out buildings and scattered body parts. '*Blood Quantum* in its essence is an environmental catastrophe film, a social protest film', Barnaby tells me. 'It's speaking about one incident in a long narrative of crazy shit involving every Native tribe in the Americas'.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/03/18/climate-change-means-extreme-weather-predict>

<sup>2</sup> [https://climate.nasa.gov/climate\\_resources/199/rising-tides-understanding-sea-level-rise/](https://climate.nasa.gov/climate_resources/199/rising-tides-understanding-sea-level-rise/)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/study-shows-global-insect-populations-have-crashed-last-decade-180971474/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://time.com/5834097/coronavirus-origin-bats-infect-cats-who/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/us/asian-giant-hornet-washington.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/starving-angry-cannibalistic-america-s-rats-are-getting-desperate-amid-n1180611>



*Blood Quantum* opens in 1981 on the shores of the fictional Red Crow Reserve. A Mi'gmaq fisherman (played by Stonehorse Lone Goeman) is gutting his daily harvest of salmon, extracting a bouquet of intestines and blood. A chorus of dead fish suddenly whip their tails back and forth in a violent *Danse Macabre*, a portent of horrors to come. The scene then abruptly cuts to an animated interlude. Here, against a post-apocalyptic backdrop of fires, barren trees, and industrial factories spouting a dark haze, a woman sits atop a lush green hill. Long black hair flowing in the polluted air, she cradles her swollen belly. Her umbilical cord reaches down into the soil, a fetus floating in the womb of the earth. The expectant mother's vitality in this animated sequence contrasts vividly with the 'unnaturalness' in the film's opening scene. Contaminated zombie fish and factories polluting the land are symbiotic, connoting a history of Indigenous bodies, land and waterways exploited by capitalist enterprise. 'The image that you see at the beginning of *Blood Quantum* isn't some fuckin' British guy with a musket', Barnaby explains, 'it's a factory polluting the rivers and the people'.

The zombie contagion quickly jumps from nonhuman animals to humans—emphasising the closeness of the two—and the dead rise-up and attack the living in ritualistic bloodletting. Carnage plays on repeat as the walking dead feast on body parts. An infestation, they transform the terrain into a soiled nightmare. The members of the Red Crow Nation take up arms against the creeping flesh and their reserve becomes a fortified refuge for survivors. Among them are Traylor (Michael Greyeyes), his ex-wife Joss (Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers), and half-brothers Joseph (Forrest Goodluck) and Lysol (Kiowa Gordon), who navigate their way through buckets of blood and guts and family dynamics.

The battered reinforced walls of the compound are replete with dumpster fires and a legless chained-up zombie dressed in mocking military fatigue, bloody mouth snapping at the air. The scene looks like a macabre diorama of a world entirely made of heavy metal and flesh, a reflection of an industrialised and dying planet. Arriving at the entrance, two teenagers, Joseph and his pregnant white girlfriend Charlie (Olivia Scriven) are accompanied by two survivors they found, a white man and his child who is wrapped in a blanket. It quickly becomes apparent that the child is infected. Joseph's half-brother Lysol, who is standing guard at the gates, chastises his younger

half-brother. ‘How do you know that this fucking townie didn’t come here with this refugee Pollyanna act and plant this infected bitch right on our doorstep?’ He speaks to past historical traumas; the land they’re standing on holds the bones of ancestors infected by ghosts-of-contagions-past.

The earth has unleashed virulent diseases for millions of years,<sup>7</sup> but in the eighteenth century European colonisers to the Americas weaponised viruses. During this time, Indigenous peoples lacked immunity to foreign diseases, most notably smallpox. British colonisers wrapped the speckled monster in blankets, gifting them to Indigenous peoples in order to ‘reduce’ their populations.<sup>8</sup> Prior to these acts of genocide by biological warfare, it is estimated that after the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century, foreign diseases killed off up to 90% of Natives in the Americas,<sup>9</sup> allowing for European invaders to loot and exploit the land. ‘The story of viruses in North America and South America is the story of capitalism’, Barnaby elucidates.

*Blood Quantum* is not a retelling of historical *Grand Guignols*. The film bridges a history of violent assaults on the land and Indigenous peoples with the present day. ‘It’s all cyclical’, Barnaby explains, ‘I don’t really look at the film *Blood Quantum* as being prescient because it’s all talking about stuff that has happened before and continues to happen. And I think when you’re talking about colonialism, you’re not talking about something that’s ancient history’. He goes on to say, ‘You’re talking about something that’s continuous and on-going. When you’re talking about the North Dakota pipelines<sup>10</sup> or the Keystone pipeline,<sup>11</sup> you’re talking about an extension of that very same idea of earth is here for our personal gain and the people that have been here before are here for our exploitation’. The film explores a kaleidoscope of post-colonial experiences from Native perspectives, from defending the reserve by hunting down white meat-puppets, to internalising prejudice and hatred.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/16015-oldest-viruses-insects.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/jeffery-amherst-history-complex-1.4089019>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/gunsgermssteel/variables/smallpox.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/appeals-court-allows-dakota-access-pipeline-to-continue-operating-11596662661>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/07/keystone-xl-stalls-again-along-with-other-pipelines/>

As the contagion nightmare spreads, Lysol's anger and distrust, witnessed at the gates of the reserve, intensifies into murderous acts committed against Native and non-Native survivors. He carries a makeshift scythe, but instead of reaping the land for sustenance, he sows the earth with blood. He cuts down a fellow Mi'gmaq who stands in his way of harming the living. 'And then there was one', he says mockingly, extracting the long blade from the man's body. It's a macabre reference alluding to a nineteenth-century American children's rhyme *Ten Little Indians*<sup>12</sup> which, in counting order, jauntily describes the deaths of Native children. Lysol, Barnaby explains, is a 'post-colonial assimilated Native person who's been taught anger' and 'who accentuates differences'. Lysol becomes a caricature of colonial and neo-liberal dominance, trying to control the land and people through violence and exploitation.

Barnaby's characters personalise the Native experience whilst pushing back against static representations. 'I don't do sad Indians; I do angry ones. I don't do defeated Indians; I do vengeful ones. I don't do victimised Indians; I do, typically, the ones victimising themselves or somebody else'. He goes on to say, 'you can't just show these sugary light takes on what this culture is and call it like "oh look they survived so well" without showing what it is they survived in the first place'.

Growing up on the blue-collar Listuguj Reserve in Quebec, the same year *Blood Quantum* takes place, Barnaby experienced an invasion not of walking dead, but militarised police. It was a government-sanctioned bloodletting of waterways and the sustenance that existed within it. The Mi'gmaq's were fighting for their ancestral fishing rights, a food source as well as income for the Nation.<sup>13</sup> In full riot gear, the Quebec Provincial Police raided the tiny reserve, shooting off rubber bullets as helicopters circled above. Barnaby, a child at the time of the incident, recalls wearing his superman pajamas with an iron burn mark on one sleeve as a police officer hit him in the face with a gun barrel—either by accident or deliberately—as they were chasing down his uncle. He recalls of that day, 'All these guys came there to do was to bust up some Indians'. The raid was depicted in the 1983 documentary *Incident at Restigouche*.<sup>14</sup> 40 years later, Barnaby would film

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<sup>12</sup> <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/the-history-of-ten-little-indians-q1WdVbswNEu5Hat3KCQoAA>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.csmonitor.com/1981/0803/080366.html>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.nfb.ca/film/incident\\_at\\_restigouche/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/incident_at_restigouche/)

*Blood Quantum* on the reserve, deliberately paralleling scenes of resistance in the film with the documentary.

This resistance is explored in Barnaby's characters who have endured struggle way before the dead came back to life. In Barnaby's post-apocalyptic vision, five hundred years' worth of ecocide and genocide horror-shows have literally erupted into flesh eating ghouls. Indigenous survivors wear the scars of violent acts inflicted by the walking dead. A seminal scene in the film shows the aftermath of battle, one amongst countless others. Traylor is seated inside the reserve infirmary after an encounter with the infected. His ex-wife Joss is applying stiches to a wound on his shoulder. As the camera pans across his back and chest, we see skin punctured with multiple bite mark scars. It's a modern-day Columbian exchange; a pound of flesh for a machete chop to the brain of the dead-eyed zombie. Joss and Traylor look over at their son Joseph who is seated across the room with his pregnant girlfriend. Joss says of him, 'he's loyal and he's smart. He's a fighter'. She pauses and speaks softly to Traylor in their Indigenous tongue, 'You're your father's son, so is Joseph'.

*Blood Quantum* is a tale that encapsulates the horrors of a world broken apart by corporeal and environmental massacre. At its core, it's a story about Indigenous people's legacy of survival against outside forces hellbent on destroying their land and obliterating them from the face of the Earth. Transcending the celluloid curtain, Barnaby's film in many ways mirrors our current pandemic and abuse of mother nature. It shows us that if the Mi'gmaq peoples of the Red Crow Reserve can survive the worst the world has to offer whilst slicing and dicing their way through a zombie apocalypse, then perhaps there's a bit of hope for our battered animal-earth.

*Blood Quantum* is available to stream on Shudder in the UK, Ireland, and US.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Tiffany Hearsey** is a Freelance Journalist. She covers death, health, and murdered and missing cases. She has a background in human rights work that is reflected in her stories spanning across

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## ***Vivarium* (2019): Interview with Director Lorcan Finnegan**

*Interview by Elizabeth Parker, with questions from the Gothic Nature community*

*'It's just nature. It's the way things are.'*

*Vivarium*, written by Garret Shanley and directed by Lorcan Finnegan, is an eerie story of isolation and entrapment—and one which premiered to UK audiences, all too fittingly, in the midst of the first lockdown. Though perhaps not obviously or conventionally an ecohorror film, *Vivarium* is nonetheless a rich and delightfully complex exploration into contemporary tensions between 'human' and 'more-than-human' worlds. It is a story more than likely to leave its viewers in something of an existential crisis about what is 'natural'—and about our own places within 'Nature'. We were absolutely honoured to have Lorcan Finnegan—director of *Foxes* (2011), *Without Name* (2016), and now *Vivarium* (2019)—answer some questions for us...

**When you hear the terms 'ecohorror' and 'ecoGothic', what comes to mind and what connections do you draw with your own work?**

To me, Eco Gothic and Ecohorror conjure up themes around our place in nature and our conflicting relationship with the natural world. The ancient consciousness of nature clashing with modernity. The idea that there are liminal forces and things in the universe that are beyond human understanding has always interested me, it ignites my imagination and makes the world a wondrous and mysterious place. So I suppose that this interest has ended up influencing the types of films I make.

***Foxes*, *Without Name*, and *Vivarium* are all extremely rich in atmosphere and environment—can you tell us a bit about your relationship to settings and how this has evolved through your films?**

I grew up on a peninsula in Dublin, surrounded by the sea and with forests and fields in-between. Both my parents are from more rural parts of Ireland, so I also spent quite a bit of my childhood fishing, hunting, foraging for wild mushrooms and just generally exploring. My Dad used to tell me stories of faeries in Monaghan and we would visit faery forts around that area. So I always had a love of nature and the natural world. In college I studied graphic design but I was drawn towards narrative structures so I started getting into animation and motion graphics. The first few short films I made were animated because I didn't need lots of equipment or people, I could just make everything myself or get a couple of friends to help out. With animation you have to create the world for your story to take place within, so when I started making live action projects the same principal carried across. With *Foxes* I had to create a very specific place and strange atmosphere for the story to take place within because if the place wasn't right the story wouldn't translate. The same applied to *Vivarium*, but on a more complex scale.

**The timing of the film's release over here coinciding with lockdown was a little bit spooky to say the least. Has this coincidence significantly affected how you see the film?**

Yeah it was pretty strange alright! I'll never get to see the film like an audience because I know all the technical mechanisms too well but I'm sure it adds another layer of strangeness when watching it during a lockdown. There were lots of strange coincidences that we became aware of, like the strange illness that affects Jesse's character, being stuck in a house, the book showing a virus-like symbol, food packages arriving and the loss of taste. Watching while stuck at home must have been pretty intense!

***Vivarium* is a film with an extraordinary atmosphere of dread. There's just so much to be frightened of, from the literally alien threat, to the societal pressures of adulthood, to the inevitability (and sort of insulting mundanity) of death. Of all the arguably 'Gothic' elements in the film, which do you find the most unsettling and why?**

We wanted to create a world that was all veneer but no substance, tangible but fake, to mirror the ideals that are sold to us as a society. Yonder is like a brochure come to life. We wanted to amplify the strangeness of the social contract to show the absurdity of it all. People striving to own a home

just to spend their lives working to repay the mortgage before they die. To me the synthetic atmosphere and complete lack of nature in Yonder is what is most terrifying.

*'To me the synthetic atmosphere and complete lack of nature in Yonder is what is most terrifying'.*

**Watching *Vivarium*, I couldn't stop thinking about Bernice M. Murphy's *Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009)—and in particular this book's discussion of how aggressively 'environmental' it is to build suburbs. (To lift a few quotes that she uses: suburbs are 'a damaging waste of natural resources', 'a threat to the ecology of all living things', and 'built on the destruction of Nature'). Is this element something that influenced the conception or creation of the film?**

Yes. Although I've never read the book, it rings true to what I've seen happening, particularly in Ireland. Vast swathes of land are often cleared to build uninspired suburban housing with no real infrastructure and detached from community and nature.

**The very title of the film announces from the outset a tension between the 'natural' and 'unnatural', which of course resonates heavily throughout the whole film. We see seemingly 'natural', or at least normalised, behaviours in the human protagonists (buying a house, having a child, playing out gender norms, etc.), but everything unfolds in this stiflingly synthetic prison. Is *Vivarium* a depiction of a world in which we have annihilated, or at least severed our connections to, Nature?**

That was the idea really. What if the suburb just went on and on forever? A completely homogenous world without any nature or individuality. The food arrives processed and vacuum packed in plastic. Children spending all day looking at screens. It's not a million miles away from reality. The antagonists provide what it would appear that we want—a house with a garden, warmth, shelter, entertainment and food—but they don't get it quite right. They are not human so they don't understand deeper human needs.





*Figure one: the Gothic suburbia of Vivarium (2019)*

**Following on from this, the fact that this is a decidedly green world is especially interesting, evoking for me the extremes of both the plastic world of Monopoly and the archetypal Deep Dark Woods. Can you comment on this?**

I chose that colour quite early on after doing a variety of tests. I'm really interested in the psychological impact of colour on an audience and green is quite fascinating. In nature green gives the feeling of verdancy and freedom, but taken out of nature entirely and given an unnatural shift in hue, it takes on very different characteristics. It becomes anxiety inducing, like toxic waste or poison. It also feels institutional. I was also inspired by *The Wizard of Oz*. The soil is yellow as Tom starts to dig downward and the houses are like the witch's skin or poisonous potion. The surreal puffy clouds and dreamlike interaction with light was inspired by René Magritte's painting *Empire of Light*.

*'In nature green gives the feeling of verdancy and freedom, but taken out of nature entirely and given an unnatural shift in hue, it takes on very different characteristics. It becomes anxiety inducing, like toxic waste or poison'.*

**The central conceit of the parasitic cuckoo (a perfect example of Gothic Nature!) was fascinating throughout. Can you tell us a bit more about the inspiration behind this?**

After we made *Foxes Garret* and I started working on an idea for a feature film, imagining a strange suburb that went on forever and had odd quantum properties. Like a blister universe on earth. While we were thinking about it I was watching a BBC Wildlife show with David Attenborough talking about Cuckoos. I thought there was something really interesting about it in relation to this new project, so I sent it to Garret. As we developed it further, brood parasitism and life cycles became an interesting way into the story.



*Figure two: the ‘parasitic’ cuckoo in the opening scenes of Vivarium (2019)*

**In some ways, this leads us nicely onto my next question, as I was particularly struck by the bird-like features of The Boy’s throat movements when he mimics the mysterious alien creatures that are never shown onscreen. These creatures, or mysterious presences, or whatever we want to call them, seemed to me to take the idea of ‘alien Nature’ to the logical extreme, where Nature is literally extraterrestrial. Can you tell us a bit more about how you imagine these mysterious entities?**

Birds ended up inspiring some of the character design and sound for the film, obviously cuckoos but also magpies. The black and white uniform of The Boy and the Estate Agent (with no colour

to their character or emotions) and the sound The Boy makes came from magpies. The swollen goitre is a bit like a neck wattle of a hornbill too. To me the creatures have a symbiotic relationship with humans and have been around for a long time, living in parallel with us. Much like the cuckoo, they need hosts. Cuckoos don't want to take over the world, they just want to breed. The indifference that nature has to humans terrifies some people, even though we're all a part of it. As Gemma says to the little girl who asks about the dead chick at the start of the film, 'It's just nature. It's the way things are'.

### **What fictional monster has disturbed you the most and why?**

When I was a kid I went to see a play called *The Spotty Grousler* written by Pat Inglesby. It was for children but they performed something terrifying on stage. The Spotty Grousler took somebody and put them into a tall cabinet type box and shut the door. When they opened the door a minute later the person flopped out as a small ragdoll. Totally inanimate. It bashed the floppy doll against the side of the cabinet for effect. Then the Grousler was looking for a volunteer from the audience to get into the box. A torch searched the audience and they chose me. One of the actors performing alongside the monster came to get me from my seat and I freaked the fuck out. I was going nowhere near that box. I suppose what was so terrifying was the mystery, the unseen. I still find the unseen more chilling than any visible monster. My Dad used to joke that the Spotty Grousler was in the woods every now and then to get a reaction from me, which was kind of funny in hindsight.

In Nicolas Roeg's version of Roald Dahl's *The Witches* there was a little girl who became trapped in a painting. She would be spotted in different parts of the painting, always inanimate, growing older and older until one day she was no longer there. I always thought that there was something quite nightmarish about that too. I think it somehow inspired *Vivarium* in that the characters are trapped in something that looks like a catalog with photoshopped skies. In that world there is nothing else, which is quite horrific to me.

**The Gothic is so often about 'what lies beneath' and in *Vivarium* this idea is literalised with the subterranean horrors of the film's finale. What do you think these final scenes importantly reveal, or suggest about this world?**

I'd be more interested to hear what you think they suggest about the world! The intention was to reflect an atomised society, many of us don't know our neighbours and have lost a sense of community, so it's like there are people living in all the houses, all going through their own horrors but unable to see each other. Like alternate dimensions, they are vibrating at different frequencies. So when Gemma falls through the rooms she is being pushed out of each house until she is put back in her box. It's quite abstract and can be interpreted differently depending on your own cultural background. In many ways I feel that films, and art in general, can be the manifestation of our collective consciousness. As though we send out tendrils to examine ourselves and our fears and they result in a film that we can watch. So I'm always more interested in how other people interpret the film than what I was intending, consciously or otherwise.

*'In many ways I feel that films, and art in general, can be the manifestation of our collective consciousness. As though we send out tendrils to examine ourselves and our fears and they result in a film that we can watch'.*

### **What projects are next for you and what should we look out for?**

I'm making a new film pretty soon called *Nocebo*. It's a supernatural thriller about a fashion designer suffering from a mysterious 'tick related' illness until help comes in the form of a Filipino nanny who uses traditional folk healing to reveal a horrifying truth. The film explores consumerism, human exploitation and the fast fashion industry as well as placebos/nocebos and the power of the mind to harm or cure the physical body. It's a return to the supernatural and set between Dublin and Manila, so I'm looking forward to getting stuck in to that.

## Creative Corner

### HEAVY WEATHER: A Creative Intervention

*Kevan Manwaring*

*'We are living in the Ecogothic: in a tailspinning world of geopolitical turmoil.*

*We exist in a state of perpetual pathetic fallacy...'*

#### **Introduction**

My work exists at the fault-line of the creative and critical—I believe this is the place of optimum creative tension, a hot zone of potentiality. As with the extremophiles that flourish amid the black fumers along the Pacific 'Ring of Fire', remarkable, tenacious forms of creation can be discovered in such contested territory—and, I believe, some of the most daringly original (as the many excellent examples of the so-called 'New Nature Writing' testify: hybrid work that blends memoir, travel, and nature writing in resonant ways). In truth, the creative/critical divide is a false dichotomy, although one that is often enforced by the ubiquitous and often unchallenged term for the emergent discipline of 'Creative Writing'. Of course, the best creative writing, academically-speaking, is self-reflexive and fully cogniscent of the tradition and its innovations—it has either an accompanying critical reflection, or a built-in criticality, in conversation with itself and its literary precedents and peers. I have attempted to achieve the latter in the following piece (which was especially written for the launch symposium of *Gothic Nature I*) by deploying intertextuality, and a shift of voice and register, from first to third, subjective to objective, past to present—multiple frames to encourage the reader to re-perceive and re-assess, in the hope of creating a kind of cognitive assonance, one in which the reader forges the links and creates the meaning. In these dozen vignettes, I have adopted what Margaret Atwood called the 'Way of the Jackdaw', shamelessly pilthering shiny things to line my literary nest with: fragments of biography, personal experiences, quotations, arresting images, ideas, theories, and terms. In some ways, I see this as a form of literary recycling, or rather *upcycling*—nothing is wasted, everything can be repurposed, and find an extended shelf (after) life. The imperative to create something 'new' is eroded into a

recalibration of what already *is*. Perhaps the selection and juxtaposition are the original elements here? Or the blending of the auto/biographical? I shall leave the reader to decide. Certainly, in an age of extreme weather, the meteorological Gothic is an area that warrants further enquiry.

### **Storm Clouds Gather**

It is early Spring in 1871, and after a hard day's toil in the City of Dreaming Spires, inflaming young minds with his brilliant, popular lectures (illustrated by his own scaled up drawings of natural wonders) John Ruskin, the first Slade Professor of Fine Art, walks back along the winding Isis to Abingdon, and as he does so he notices there is something wrong in the sky. An unnatural darkness has descended and a strong wind has set the budding foliage quivering on the bough. The heavens broiled with meteorological phenomenon the likes of which he had never beheld before, but over the coming months would see with increasing frequency: he deemed this effect a 'plague cloud'.

By his own constant and close observation, the pre-eminent art critic of his day, John Ruskin, witnessed over a period of forty years the dramatic shift in England's climate from the lucid skies and effulgent sunsets of his youth to an increasing prevalence of these 'plague clouds'—distinguished by their ability to abruptly blot out the sun: a thick pall carrying a 'wind of darkness', one that has a malignant, agitated quality, blowing from any and all directions, making the trees shake in intermittent bursts that can last for days, or be over in minutes. Describing one such effect in July 1871 while in Matlock Derbyshire, in 'the dimmest light I ever wrote', Ruskin noted how: 'It looks partly as if it were made of poisonous smoke; very possibly it may be: there are at least two hundred furnace chimneys in a square of two miles on every side of me'. But noting how it blows to and fro in unnatural fashion, he ruminates lugubriously that: 'It looks more to me as if were made of dead men's souls...' Reflecting on this in his lecture of 1884, 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century', he surmised he had in mind the human cost of the Franco-German campaign, then underway; a conflict that would, he feared, dig 'a moat flooded with the waters of death between the two nations for a century to come'. He broodily concluded that perhaps the ominous clouds were a sign of British imperial iniquity and a moral decay endemic to the age, citing the prophesy of Joel, 2: 10:

‘The light shall be darkened in the heavens thereof, and the stars shall withdraw their shining’.

He added, as a final gloss on this, the wry inversion of the famous epithet of the British Empire first published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* a fortnight prior to the 1884 lecture: ‘that the Empire of England, on which formerly the sun never set, has become one on which he [now] never rises’.

Without realising it, Ruskin had become one of the very first prophets of the Anthropocene. The evidence was written large in the sky, for all to see who had the acuity of vision.

Man was changing nature.

### **Breaking Bad Weather**

The fag-end of August, 2019, the Lake District, and we are struggling to pack away our tent in driving winds and lashing rain. The day before we had visited Brantwood, Ruskin’s handsome home overlooking the scalloped pewter of Coniston, and for the last week we had been camping at a site over Ullswater—but the vista of Wordsworthian grandeur was hard to appreciate that morning. While I had gone for a shower, the tent pole had snapped in the high winds, and my partner had reached personal saturation point, insisting we make a hasty retreat. We had planned to continue our holiday for a second week, travelling to the north west of Scotland, to stay in a remote croft, but severe weather warnings made us pull the plug. I had been on the trail of the Romantics, but bad weather follows them around like a Byronic reputation.

### **Dark and Stormy Nights**

A fractal Levin-brand split the sky above Mont Blanc massif as though a vengeful deity had shattered the looking glass of its own creation. From their villa Percy, Mary, Claire, and trembling Willmouse beheld storms of elemental savagery. Rivetted, they watched the thunder-heads approach from the opposite side of the restless lake, performing their intensely dramatic Götterdämmerungs amid the dark, jagged peaks—peaks lit up like some secret laboratory where hazardous experiments in galvanism took place. The naked arlight quickly subsumed a profound

darkness—punctuated by flashes of surreal sunlight amid the prevailing penumbra. This weather of extreme contrasts seemed to dramatize some ancient feud out of which a new order of being would emerge.

June 1816 and the as yet unwed Percy Shelley and Mary Godwin, with their friend Claire Clairmont—Mary's step-sister—had joined Lord Byron and his physician Doctor Polidori at a villa overlooking Lake Geneva. The Alpine setting was the very epitome of the Romantic Sublime—a scintillating lake set in a dramatic backdrop of precipitous peaks, landscape that needs not the hyperbolic fancy of the artist—yet the weather was far from idyllic. 'It proved a wet, ungenial summer', Mary Shelley wrote later in the 1831 introduction of *Frankenstein*, 'and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house'. The last fourteen months had indeed been exceptionally inclement—the skies were perpetually overcast, winter lingered far into May, crops had failed, and much hardship endured—all due to the eruption of Mount Tambora in the Dutch East Indies the previous year. This volcanic cataclysm had been so violent it caused the almost immediate death of more than seventy thousand people, and had thrown up a hundred cubic kilometres of ash, rock, and vitrified particles into the Earth's atmosphere, dramatically effecting global rainfall, temperatures, air quality, and vegetative growth. A newspaper article from July 20<sup>th</sup> reported on the 'most melancholy news' of the 'extra-ordinary weather which afflicts nearly the whole of Europe'. 'The excessive abundance of rain has caused disasters almost everywhere...' it reported, and 'there is no longer any hope for agriculture'. The suffering caused by such a catastrophic event was almost unprecedented in human recorded history: disease, famine, riots, and mass fatalities across the globe. It was truly apocalyptic, like one of John Martin's paintings brought to life. Yet it proved most conducive to creativity, the very air seemed charged with ions of inspiration that summer. Percy said of poetry: '[It] is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it'. And Mary, comparing the genius of Thackeray with Fielding, likened the 'mere lambent sheet-lightning playing under the edge of the summer-cloud', in Fielding's bright, witty work, with Thackeray's 'serious genius', distinguished by 'the electric death-spark hid in [its] womb'. The convergence of such mighty talents—Byron, Shelley, Godwin, Polidori—by the shores of Lake Geneva was a lightning-field of genius, the collective voltage of which still illuminates minds to this day.



### **The Skies are Closed**

Easter 2010 and Europe is in chaos. In March the Icelandic volcano of Eyjafjallajökull had erupted, sending up massive amounts of pyroclastic material into the jet-stream, which shut down European airspace for five days—resulting in the highest level of disruption since World War Two. I am in Pordenone, north-east Italy, and I am stuck. I had been teaching storytelling to English language students, watching in horror each day as the travel situation worsened. My Italian hostess had tried to help me cancel my flight and book a train instead, but the travel websites across the Continent were in meltdown. It was impossible to get through on the phone lines. There was no way of accessing clear information. The only way to book a ticket was to go down to the train station in person, which my hostess finally did, conducting the complicated negotiations on my behalf. As a guest overstaying his welcome I was starting to live up to the saying: *guests are like fish, they go off after three days*. Finally, my ticket was purchased. It was only to Paris—via a circuitous route—as it was nigh impossible to book anything all the way to Calais. As for ferries, forget it. I would just have to make my way there, by hook or by crook, and hope for the best—taking my chances with the masses attempting the same. The atmosphere at the travel interchanges I stopped at en route—Turin, Zurich, Paris—was like some kind of disaster movie: a panicked evacuation of mainland Europe. Was it so easy for civilisation to collapse? Passing through the Alps, tiny piedmont settlements only enduring under the special dispensation of vaster, older forces—surly, unpredictable gods of avalanche and sky—I realised what a house of cards it all was.

### **The Barometric Brontës**

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day—at least, that is what her sister would say. It was *wuthering* up on the moor, the rain coming in edgeways, soaking one whole side of her body, despite the thick woollen cloak and dress. Yet Emily did not mind—she delighted in the wild exhilaration of it all. It made her feel alive, it made her feel *free*. They were all weather-vanes—Charlotte, Anne, even Branwell (when he wasn't nine sheets to the wind). She suspected even her father was. They each denied or ridiculed it in their own way—though she often caught her older sister looking at the clouds. Wasn't that a form of divination once? *Nephelomancy*, that was the word—although no doubt Mr Brontë would have called it something else. Now all those old wives' tales, the kind that she loved hearing Tabby share, were meant to have been swept away by the new science of *meteorology*—basically, modern cloud-scriving. Yet these same Royal Society

types had ‘worked out’ (from their hermetic, neutered laboratories and clinics), that a female body was especially susceptible to the fluctuations of the weather, and that this explained the hysteria and unpredictable mood swings endemic to her sex! It would seem more plausible that men’s minds were susceptible to lunarism than a woman’s menses. What rot they came out with, projecting their mothers and wives onto wild nature, or nature onto their mothers (or perhaps, more to the truth of it, their own ‘feminine’ shadow). For was not nature just as violent, just as cruel, and just as forceful as any man? Had they not seen that in recent years—the devastating effect of the blight; crop failure across Europe. The terrible cost of the potato famine in Ireland, which they felt keenly, descended from Hibernian stock. But if a woman’s body was a barometer, what of it? All the better, so that she may be able to sense beyond herself, an omniscience that served well the hermaphrodite novelist. Beyond the false dichotomies of man and woman, mind and body, human and nature, the hybrid soul flourished, carrying its internal weather system along the way. The fallacy wasn’t the mirroring of emotional states and meteorological phenomena; but the *separation* of them. There is no division: *The more I am; the moor am I.*

### **A Night in a Storm**

It’s June, 2019, and I’m up by the Lion Inn on the wiley, windy North Yorkshire Moors—the fourth highest pub in Britain—and it’s blowing a hooley. Storm Miguel was wreaking havoc across the country, causing flooding and power outages. A town in Lincolnshire had had to be evacuated. And I had chosen this time to start Alfred Wainwright’s Coast to Coast walk, camping along the way. All I had was a tiny ‘coffin’ tent to protect me from the elements. Customers of the Lion Inn looked at me in amused bafflement as I struggled to put it up in a corner of the beer garden, a low wall affording me tokenistic shelter. It was going to be a dark and stormy night, alright. I had walked twenty miles that day, and had arrived soaked in spirit, if not in body (though my outer layers were as slick as a seal-skin). Like a bedraggled dog I entered the pub, drip-drying by the roaring fire. I nursed a pint of splendid Old Peculier all evening, struggling to stay awake in the fuggy warmth, especially after a hot meal lay heavy in my belly. While I girded my loins for my night in the storm, I wrote a ghost story—the weather, after all, was extremely conducive to it. Finally, I plucked up the courage and went for it—making a dash for my tent. Briskly I zipped myself in, but not brisk enough to avoid a swathe of rain pattering my sleeping bag. Fortunately, it had a bivvy cover over it, giving me an extra layer of warmth and keeping it waterproof. Finally

‘comfortable’, if you could call it that on a thin mat on a high ridge in a storm, I lay awake, listening to the sound of the wind and rain, which buffeted my tent like a ship in a squall. I felt incredibly vulnerable, and prayed that my flimsy shelter would withstand the tempest. I suspect it was only my presence inside it which stopped it from blowing away altogether. If I survived the night, at least it would make a good tale.

### **Buried Alive**

1845 and Edgar Allen Poe publishes his *Tales of Terror*: feverishly written, claustrophobic narratives, with their frequent use of dungeons, graves, and premature burial—a trope he returned to again and again, as in the poem, ‘Annabel Lee’ (*‘And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side / Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride, / In her sepulchre there by the sea— / In her tomb by the side of the sea*) to compound this unhealthy obsession, Poe pens a story entitled ‘The Premature Burial’, published in 1850. Could Poe’s opium habit have influenced their composition? The near-paralysis and death-like oblivion triggered by the dream of the poppy seems to be mirrored in these tales of ‘life-in-death’, and ‘death-in-life’, as indeed those fellow literary lotophagi Coleridge, De Quincey, and Beckford echo in their own work. Poe went on to write the first detective story: ‘The Murder at the Rue Morgue’. Again, interred bodies. Poe’s stories are like an ossuary made of words—innumerable memento mori line the bone-white pages. Could this smothering effect also be an aesthetic response to the heavily industrialised mid-to-late Nineteenth Century? The Piranesian cities and Bruegel-esque squalor? The belching fumes of the factories, the air sooty with the smoke from millions of hearths? A world being choked to death?

### **Saddleworth Moor is on Fire**

It is July 2018 and a heatwave is blasting England. I am walking the Pennine Way—a 268 mile long-distance footpath running from Edale in Derbyshire to Kirk Yetholm, in the Scottish Borders. The heat is so intense I am having to set off at 5am to avoid the worst of it. The Pennine Way was once notorious for its bogs—the writer Alfred Wainwright had to be rescued from one. But the peat hag is dried out and the moorland is bone dry. It is hot, thirsty walking and I have to ration my water carefully. Streams have dwindled to stagnant pools surrounded by slabs of baking naked rock; or run blood-red. In the distance the smoke of Saddleworth Moors can be seen—it gets closer every day, and, if the wind changes direction, it could completely cut off the national trail. It is a

race against time—will I make it passed before it consumes my path, and perhaps me along with it? Some believe the fires were deliberately started—but a plastic bottle, thrown out of a car window, or an abandoned bar-b-que could have done for the moors just the same. After weeks of arid heat the moors are a tinderbox. Unlike the heather burning, which is a traditional agricultural practice, this is on a new scale—a fresher hell—but nowhere near as catastrophic as the wild fires that rage in California, claiming lives and properties. Cats on a hot tin roof, all we can do is keep moving.

### **The Count from the Carpathians**

8<sup>th</sup> August, 1890: Bram Stoker takes a stroll down to the seafront at Whitby, where he is staying for a few days upon the recommendation of his friend, the actor Henry Irving. In a bookshop a tome from 1820 catches his eye, the memoirs of a chap called Wilkinson who describes the strange beliefs of the Wallachians—a sinister figure called Vlad Tepes, who was said to impale his enemies on wooden stakes, and was thought to have been a *vampire*. The local name for him is ‘Dracula’, meaning ‘son of the dragon’. He makes a note of the name and date. This was perfect—just what he was looking for, for the story he was working on ‘The Wampyre’. When his classic novel *Dracula* is published in 1897, Stoker sets the arrival of the Count to British soil as the 8<sup>th</sup> August—the day he discovered the book... In foul weather, the schooner Demeter, bringing the body of Dracula and several coffins of silver sand runs aground in Whitby bay, heralded by a fly-eating lunatic. A monstrous dog is seen to leap ashore and make its way inland.

20<sup>th</sup> January, 2017: After an election campaign heavily influenced by Steve Bannon’s Breitbart news and Russian fake news bots, bankrupt property tycoon, reality TV host, and self-confessed ‘pussy-grabber’ Donald Trump is inaugurated as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America. It rains heavily. The Count from the East is here, heralded by his servant.

### **The Heroine Emerges**

20<sup>th</sup> August, 2018: a 15-year-old school girl begins her Climate Strike outside the Swedish parliament: enter stage left our young heroine, Greta Thunberg, taking on the mad barons in their crumbling castles of Capitalism, the plague of economic vampirism that must be exorcised from the world. At first she sits alone, but her gesture goes viral and soon she is joined by dozens, then

hundreds, then thousands—countless fellow school children around the world. She must stand up to the Doctor Jekylls and Dorian Greys of the world stage—the politicians and business leaders who say one thing and do another. With her autistic clarity and intelligence she cuts through their spin-doctoring and greenwashing, and tells it like it is—pointing out that the Emperor is naked. This young heroine isn't going to be a passive victim.

### **There is No Planet B**

Summer, 2019: Huge swathes of the Arctic are on fire: in Greenland, Siberia, and Alaska, the boreal forest has been burning at a rate unseen for a thousand years. Between 1<sup>st</sup> June and 22<sup>nd</sup> July 100 mega-tonnes of Carbon Dioxide are released into the atmosphere, more than the annual carbon emissions of a small country, say Belgium. The unprecedented heatwave of June and July has migrated north—and caused innumerable wildfires, setting fire to the precious habitat of the peat, where a vast amount of methane is locked in. The melting taiga is releasing anthrax-ridden animal remains from the permafrost. Summer is coming to the frozen north and the White Walkers are waking up. The Greenland ice sheet loses 11 billion tonnes in a single day, and has shrunk more in the last month than the annual average from 2002 until the present. If the whole of the Greenland ice sheet was to melt, global sea levels would rise by approximately twenty-three feet, causing major coastal flooding and devastating millions of lives. The United Nations declared that we have only eleven years to prevent irreversible ecological damage to the Earth. Yet even now, there are Climate Deniers, some of whom parrot Trump who declares that it's all a 'Chinese hoax'—to sabotage economic progress in the West. Yet more and more are waking up to the new normal of Climate Chaos. Plastic, which has infiltrated every facet of the food-chain, including our own bodies, is now on everyone's radar. Dramatic wild cat protests using non-violent direct action by Extinction Rebellion gain a lot of media attention. In Easter they manage to close down five bridges in the centre of London. Then in June they take over Oxford Circus with a pink boat painted with the legend: Tell the Truth. And the eerie street theatre of the Red Rebel Brigade creates many photo opportunities, drawing upon the striking iconography of the Gothic—the sublime terror becoming the actualised horror of our current environmental crisis. We are living in the Ecoготhic: in a tailspinning world of geopolitical turmoil. We exist in a state of perpetual pathetic fallacy...

### **After the Storm**

After holing up for a couple of days until Storm Miguel passes, the skies start to clear, and I resume my long Coast to Coast walk, heading west to St Bees. By now I am in the Yorkshire Dales. The millstone grit turns to limestone, and the dry-stone walls glint in the sun, shards like shears cutting the grey fleece of the clouds. Swaledale unfolds before me, a winding river valley buttressed by meadows lozenged with ancient enclosures. In the distance the Cumbrian mountains can be glimpsed—enticing me with their promise of the Sublime. I look forward to the Lakes, to walking in Wordsworth country, but for now I hitch up my heavy pack and focus on one step at a time.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

**Dr Kevan Manwaring** (University of Winchester) is a writer, editor, and lecturer in creative writing. His research focuses on the intersection between Fantasy, folklore, and place. He is a guest editor for *Revenant: critical and creative studies of the supernatural*. His articles have appeared in *Writing in Practice*, *New Writing*, *Axon*, and *TEXT*. His books include *The Long Woman* (2004); *The Bardic Handbook* (2006); *Oxfordshire Folk Tales* (2012); *Northamptonshire Folk Tales* (2013); *Desiring Dragons: creative, imagination and the writer's quest* (2014); *Ballad Tales* (2017); *The Knowing* (2020); and *Heavy Weather: tempestuous tales for stranger climes* (2021). He is a Fellow of Hawthornden, The Eccles Centre (British Library) and the Higher Education Academy. He blogs and tweets as the Bardic Academic.

## Half-Angry

*Geralyn Pinto*

In the half-angry light of a tropical forest at sundown it was hard to distinguish tortured creepers from snakes or a man-shape from a man. Besides, Richard McMaster wasn't really alive to his surroundings. He only knew that he was climbing a mountain road, far away from anywhere and that Jack Ellis shouldn't have done what he had.

Ever since the Mutiny, seventy-five years before, offending native sentiment was strictly prohibited in any form or practice. But there would *always* be the Jack Ellises of the British Raj. It was he who had decided that they must go hunting, and that it *had to be* in the kan, the sacred groves of the Shimoga Hills. 'Shimoga': face of Lord Shiva, the Destroyer; three-eyed Hindu God of the trident and the tiger skin. Then Richard McMaster went down with a fever and Jack Ellis proceeded on his own. When he didn't turn up at the Government office on the following Monday, Richard was faintly puzzled; when Jack's orderly presented himself at the McMaster bungalow to say that his ayya had vanished without a trace, Richard was downright worried.

That's why he was climbing the Ghats, the mountains of the west coast of India, alone in a battered, old sedan, taking the route that Jack must have on his way through the hallowed forests.

That's also why he didn't notice the man at first, half-concealed by bush and tree, waving down his car. Richard almost drove on—the man was a local probably wanting a lift to the nearest mountain village. It would be pointless, even inadvisable, to confide in the native that he was searching for a colleague, Jack Ellis, who stubbed out cigars on the statues of Gods and Goddesses, and hunted animals in the kan.

But it went against his old Public School code of chivalry to ignore someone obviously in need. So he halted his car and reversed. The man climbed in, raising a hand to his forehead in greeting. It was hard to tell what he looked like in the resentful light of dusk. But it was safe to say that he was one of the thickset, muscular kinds of mountain folk you saw on official tours and that he

wore a little more than a yellowing loincloth that concealed just enough of a body the colour of mud.

‘Where to?’ Richard summoned up as much as he could of his store of the local lingo.

‘Two miles down this road, ayya’. The man’s replies were adequate, no more.

‘Two miles? Where would that take you? Not to a Dak Bungalow, a Government Rest House, would it?’

The man shook his head, ‘There are no Dak Bungalows in these parts, ayya’. The light, such as it was, dappled the man’s skin through the car window: dark-light, dark-light.

Mosquitoes sensing the promise of a blood meal hurled themselves at the windscreen. Richard McMaster halted and rolled up the window glasses. In the distance, hyenas cackled in early moonlight. On the branch of a tree a vulture, neck sunk between bird shoulders, bided its time.

There must be carrion somewhere.

‘These *are* the kan, the woods sacred to the Hindus, aren’t they?’

‘Yes, that they are, ayya’.

‘And they say that the God Shiva himself, with a cobra coiled about his neck, strides these mountain copses?’

His companion said nothing.

Richard took him in with a side-wise glance. Surely those eyes were brighter and lighter than he had at first noticed? Most Indian eyes were the colour of burnt cinnamon. He became conscious of other things too—the strange tangle of odours—the fragrance of wild jasmine and kadamba



flowers which stole in from the outside; and the sharp reek of the man next to him in the confined space of the car.

A lopsided road stone indicated another mile.

‘Thank you, ayya. I will get down here’.

‘*Here?*’ Richard was incredulous. ‘But there’s nothing for miles around...’

‘My duty is accomplished. I must return’.

The man alighted and salaamed his way into the shadows. Richard revved up the engine and resumed his journey.

Strange thoughts flitted through his mind: Wasn’t it Jim Corbett, the legendary hunter turned conservationist of north India who said, ‘A man-eating tiger does not break the laws of Nature, only the laws of Men’?

But wait now! Wait! What was that again? His eye fell upon a rusted signboard which announced ‘*Proceed with Caution. Salt Lick of the Panthera tigris two furlongs ahead*’.

His heart took a quick, cold leap downwards, ‘The man...I let him wander off by himself into tiger country! Was he mistaken about where he should alight? I must turn back! I must!!’

He turned back.

When Richard McMaster reached the spot between the rain-sodden dirt track and the jungle where he and the native had parted, he noticed nothing remarkable till the headlights of his sedan picked out the fresh impress of pug marks.

He had the slightest feeling that many eyes were watching him.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Geralyn Pinto** served as Associate Professor in the Post-Graduate Department of English at St Agnes College, Mangalore.

She won the *Desi Writers Lounge* Short Story Prizes (2013 & 2014); the First Prize in the *Save as Writers* International Creative Writing Contest, Canterbury (2016); and the Second Prize in the US-based 'Writer Advice Flash Fiction Contest 2020'. Among her other literary achievements were the publication of her story 'Seven Steps from Irula Country' in the American journal *Tahoma Literary Review*.

Her poems have been featured in the journals of the Universities of Leeds and London and Mahidol University, Thailand. Another poem, 'From August to September' appeared in *The Tiger Moth Review*, Singapore, while 'The Nowhere People' has been included in an anthology of lockdown poetry published by *Poetry Space*, Dorset, England.

Geralyn is an overseas member of *Alibi*, a British online writers group.

## Developing with Death

*Micaela Edelson*

Two dead bugs. One on the wall, the other on the floor. Concealed by a stack of old newspaper and a single Birkenstock. They lay as trophies of my triumph; strong enough to do the deed but too weak-stomached to dispose of the refuse. Brave enough to make the attack but too cowardly to confront the consequences. Their remains haunt my half-developed independence, while the spill of blood anchors an aura of mortality that seeps under my skin, aging my blood like an old Pinot. Legs splayed and bodies flat. Brownish goo spreads in the final trail of its existence. Their souls leave behind battered bodies exposing life in its physicality. The one certainty. How many simple beings have been lost to a shoe or cleaning spray? How many bug families wait for their loved ones to never return? How many come across the corpses of their brethren on their own journey towards the promises of prosperity? How many can face their fears?

When I was a child, I wanted to be an orthodontist receptionist, then an optometrist. My early desires to make the most money with the perceived least amount of work carried me through the first part of life. As I grew older, my will to have a positive impact on the world transitioned my preferred profession to an environmental lawyer or corporate sustainability executive. My Marxist self now smiles at my past dreams with affection as my new aspiration lays in stewarding the land on an organic farm in the countryside. My transitory desires parallel my changing being, my knowledge acquisition, my perspective shifts, and my openness to the other.

At 25 years of age with a determined path ahead and the knowledge and experience to get there, I stand at the peak of my convictions in my being and an openness to more, yet I face a hardened world of obstinance and exclusivity. Although I no longer have to question who I am and how I'll be, I observe a society teetering onto the edge of social and ecological collapse. I now question how and if the world will be, whether I can be certain that the ground won't give way between my feet.

As I transition into adulthood, taking the reins in my own life and the responsibility to murder my own bugs, I am faced with a generationally unique torment: a palpable precipice of ecological and societal ruin. At the peak of my blossoming, I witness a global pandemic claiming over two million globally, a climate catastrophe indifferent in its attack on whole species and ecosystems, and a deep, deep political polarisation threatening the stability of my country's survival. I've seen my fellow bugs venture into the unknown along the paths their predecessors set, I see the newspaper of unrestrained corporate oligarchy and the Birkenstock of ecological doom narrowing in to attack with apathy and custom.

### **A Dying World, A Divided Country**

I observe as our environmental indifference at best, exploitation at worst, convene on the edge of humanity's cause and effect. Deforestation accelerating the emergence of zoonotic diseases, while our globalised and delicately dependent system accelerates its spread. Wildfires ravage the forests of the West and penetrate the lungs of its residents, displacing millions, and claiming 35 this past year. Unlike the pandemic, this is annual.

Our atmosphere has rebelled against our anthropogenic emissions subtly over the years through warmer summers and colder winters. But, like the Black Lives Matter movement, whose National Anthem-kneeling could not peacefully bring about change, our climate revolted. Mega wildfires erupted on the West Coast and central United States, flattening towns and countless trees, animals, and insects. I watched from Salem, Oregon as the apocalyptic orange of the sky and raining ash permeated an atmosphere of mortality, while the silence of humanity's causality coloured the losses with denialism and random misfortune—a fate not too unlike the splayed bugs in my apartment.

The colonial victories of the Western want for wealth and power surpassed our balance with the natural world long ago. They have stretched for a new dominion—a declaration of supremacy even over our fellow beings.

Our societal indifference towards the lives that are and will be lost from the pandemic or climate change parallels our repudiation towards death—if we cannot value life, there is no consciousness to embracing death’s deliverance. Our individualist, societal disregard for quarantine and protecting the vulnerable and elderly complements the impact that our present climate inaction will bear on our vulnerable and young into the future. Black and Brown people lay at the intersections of both global disasters, systematically more vulnerable because of environmental health inequities and differences in employment type.

We have forgotten ‘indivisible, with liberty and justice for all’ despite the urgency to unite and resist against a changing climate and a corrupt system. The polarisation of our country is being pushed to the brink of total separation with each side blaming the other for societal tensions or political and economic disenfranchisement. Democrats vs. Republicans, Degree-holders vs. Degree-less, Millennials vs. Boomers, Vaxxers vs. Anti-Vaxxers, Urban vs. Rural, and most recently, Maskers vs. Anti-Maskers—all pointing fingers, shaking heads, and tsking teeth instead of working together to resolve the issues presented.

The social unrest has been disquieting. The rhetoric on either side marking the ‘other’ as violent and anti-human does little but marginalise our species further. Approximately 30 people have been killed across the political protests this past year. Murderers stand on all sides. I fear that regardless of the outcome of the past election and the eventual resolution of COVID, the tension between sides will regress into the Civil War that never saw closure.

As dry grass and overgrown underbrush fuel wildfires, polarisation and hate fuel the media in their broadcasting of us vs. them. Their profiteering and side-blaming for COVID inaction or economic disruption, climate change or poor forest management practices, racial equality or violent looters—tears at the fabric of our society in a time where close-knitted kinship is needed more than ever.

## **Accepting Death**

As I enter the plateau of my lifespan, I look at the paradigmatic emergence of death's frequency as a forewarning, as a precursor to the blight in our eco- and social system. The ecological balance has been disrupted and we have defied the natural order by imposing supremacy over the Earth and over our fellow beings. Anthropogenic carbon emissions, deforestation, soil degradation, soil, air, and water pollution, all accumulate in an assault against the home that brings us sustenance and life. In a planet that promotes equilibrium and mutual dependence, our domination has built on top of our planet and each other like a single-block Lego tower—higher and higher, until the base can no longer support the ambitions of the top. I fear we are toppling.

Instead of slowly withering to a ripe age on my organic farm, I fear my life might be cut short from one of the many external fates that humanity has inflicted upon ourselves. I would love to die after a valiant life of fully living and loving, but the future looms as the Earth stands over us with a Birkenstock in one hand, and a rolled-up newspaper in the other, ready to strike with a vengeful fervor for the exploitation and abuse we have inflicted. My adult life has just begun, but I question its viability to reach fruition. The uncertainty of our future coalesces in my stomach as an indigestible pit. How can I grow into full bloom when the soil below me gapes? I listen to my biological imperative and its affinity to steward new life. How could I bring another life into a world filled with so much death?

Death is not an easy topic to digest in our Western world. Our trepidation towards taboo topics of defecation, menstruation, and death in itself reveals our desire to separate ourselves from the primitive beings of the natural world. Rather than acknowledge our sameness, we deny the cyclical nature of life in digestion, reproduction, and death and push ourselves further towards a linear way of being—upward and onward to climb the corporate ladder of success, to accumulate more material goods than thy neighbor, to reach a zenith of paradise promised by our religious leaders when our eternal rest comes. Rather than accept our return to Earth's soil when our final breath gives, we hope for life beyond life, a place of promises to ease our fear of cessation and insignificance. Our smallness only prophesied when we live and breathe by our transcendence from our core. If we are not a part of the natural world, what is our purpose?

Until recently, we allowed ourselves to live without regular reminders of our mortality. We grieved for loved ones lost and gave condolences when others grieved, but beyond formalities, death was and is offensive. Even the ritual embalming of bodies divulge our denialism of the rawness of decay. The conflict between our reservation towards acknowledging our one true certainty and the ubiquity of death that has suddenly and logically descended on our system does not allow the mind to comprehend, it does not allow the heart to process. The untimely and unjust deaths of hundreds of thousands this year frame the end as an evil rather than as a universal. Instead of embracing death as an integral part of life's cycle to be celebrated with as much reverence as birth, it is difficult to celebrate lost lives when their fate fell too soon.

As underprepared as I feel venturing into adulthood, I add the compulsion to comprehend death to my list of developmental milestones to pass. With the increasing incidences of disruption-fuelled fatalities, I feel presented with a choice: to go through life with intentional indifference towards passing and loss, shielding my heart from primal sorrow; or to embrace and grieve for every and all death and final breath, every sentient departure. Will loss become easier with experience?

### **Death Will Come Regardless**

The future is bleak, filled with uncertainty and despair, transition and hardship. But only when we mark our existence as more significant and exceptional than any other do we allow nature's finality to push our suffering. I might not be able to halt the expansion of death, but my mind can thank the soils for their regeneration and the trees for their oxygenation. I can thank the stars for their matter and be certain that their light will shine regardless of the fate of our country and our climate.

As Autumn came and went, leaves shriveled to a dying brown, regenerating the soil and giving way to Spring's blossoms. I wonder if the eternity of time will fix our transgressions. As the river flows here, there, and now, so too has our energy existed in the past, the present, and will sustain into the future, regardless of the future of our physicality.

This past year, I also lost my Aunt to cancer and my childhood dog at the ripe age of 14 years. I said a final farewell to my grandmother after bearing witness to a painful, dementia-ridden decline. I witnessed a squirrel get run over by a Honda; I watched as she took her last breath. I saw a crow take away a baby blue jay; the mother jay was in hysterics. I observed as a cluster of ants surrounded a worm and made their claim.

Death will come regardless of our societal polarisation, regardless of the vengeful atmosphere, and regardless of a global pandemic murdering a million and disrupting the entire planet. My turn will come too.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Hailing from Salem, Oregon, **Micaela Edelson** is a passionate writer of prose and poetry that aims to shed light on humanity's prioritisation of profit over people and our constructed relationship with the natural world. Her work has been featured in Wild Roof Journal, the Write Launch, The Showbear Family Circus, and Route 7 Review among other literary journals and platforms. Website: [www.micaelaedelson.com](http://www.micaelaedelson.com).



## Gris-Gris

*Jack B. Bedell*

‘Yesterday we came into the yard of an old homestead long abandoned [...] The smell of those people was gone, but something remained in the air about the ruin of their cabin—something cold and disheartening’—Molly Gloss, *Wild Life* (2000).

Even the wildest of beasts  
stay clear of the stench

memories leave in abandoned  
spaces. They might explore

an old farmhouse’s cabinets  
for food, or even sleep

in its closets on cold nights,  
but once all nooks are cleaned out

and the yard’s dug up  
for whatever it holds,

nature always leaves these ghosts  
to grass and the slow return of trees.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Jack B. Bedell** is Professor of English and Coordinator of Creative Writing at Southeastern Louisiana University where he also edits *Louisiana Literature* and directs the Louisiana Literature Press. Jack's work has appeared in *Pidgeonholes*, *The Shore*, *Cotton Xenomorph*, *Okay Donkey*, *EcoTheo*, *The Hopper*, *Terrain*, and other journals. His latest collection is *Color All Maps New* (Mercer University Press). He served as Louisiana Poet Laureate 2017-2019.

## Four Poems

*Rick Hudson*

### **Wolves**

In howling trees  
Of frosty mooned forests  
The starving shadows circle.  
Retreat  
Retreat  
Retreat  
Into leering blackness,  
Ancient grey and devious.  
Clever  
Clever  
Clever.  
Clever grin of jaws.

### **Foal**

Under the fog of its heat,  
It slithers and gristles  
On crackling straw;  
Snake-like it casts off its birth shroud.  
Splayed and awkward for an instant.  
Tottering, toppling hoof-skid-  
Wide-eyed, rolling white terror-

Fearful of this life, this thing, this world.  
Knowledge fills its limbs with blood:  
It knows it is a horse.

### **Adder**

An archaic and perfect machine  
Flows and pushes  
Pouring itself thickly  
Like blood through the bracken  
Neck, wavering strangely,  
Fascinates like a basilisk.

### **Wasps**

Spreading like a tumour,  
The hive smothers the oak that supports it.  
Murmuring drones lumber the  
Humming dark tunnels  
And deep droning tombs  
Draining the sap of their world.

Catacombed queen  
Drowsy in her sepulchre,  
Lost in fifty-fathom dreams.  
Encrypted legions  
In cramped mausoleums

Wait inert, alert for another ruin.

A world of vaults:

Too grand, choked by sophistication

A decadent warren, baroque and gothic

Collapsing under the weight of its cruel technologies.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Rick Hudson** is an English Literature and Creative Writing academic who specialises in the study of horror / Gothic; fantasy and sf texts principally from a Bakhtinian and psychoanalytic perspective. He is also a writer in his own right whose fiction includes both experimental literary fiction, popular horror fiction and fiction which is located in the much disputed territory between these two poles. He has seen his fiction published along side that of writers including Neil Gaiman; Clive Barker; John Carpenter (yes, THAT John Carpenter); Shaun Hutson; Bentley Little; Storm Constantine; Graham Masterton and Guy N. Smith as well as broadcast by BBC Radio. He also contributes articles to consumer magazines available from W.H. Smith's and other major retailers that focus on the gaming industry.

## A Story About Animals

*Michael Wheatley*

Their fourth daughter died the same as their third, their second, and first.

Deaf and blind at birth, they grew up as all young girls should. They weaned themselves off mother's milk, when love left her tired and tender. They slept, every night, in a communal cuddle, their father always last to join. And, oh! how they screamed! For, when one child cried, her sisters always responded in kind.

The latest born cried the loudest, while the first whispered a whimper. The middle girls only wept with each other, as this made them safe to feel sad. If their home was too cold, or their siblings too far, their mother would always soothe them. And when their eyes opened at last, the colour divined like tea leaves emerging from milky blindness, they were hazel. They were their father's.

Inseparable since then, they explored the forest surrounding their home. Careless and clumsy-limbed, they tripped over themselves as they grew, settling into their senses. They first felt the rain against their faces, scrunching their noses at the alien assault. They first heard the breeze brush through their hair, shivering slightly alongside it. They first saw the trees inflame to meet their matching coats of fur.

Under the guidance and guardianship of their parents, the girls experienced everything, new to them but oh-so old, with brightness in their eyes.

At the end of each day, the family then returned as one. They ate food found by the father: foraged fruit and hunted game. Beyond that, there were little luxuries: no amenities, no addendums, no excess. There was a roof. An entrance. A couple of walls. And to each of them, a home.

As the days began to shorten, with the sun scurrying to set, the girls continued to play together. Braver now, they ventured further into the forest, where the leaves fell like litter. They found fences to squeeze through and great oaks to scale; rivers to wade through and homes to peer inside. They fought over silly things and then silly things helped them make up.

Watching on one day as they weaved through the wood, the mother buried her head in the father's bristle. Though their eyes might have been his, the black marks skirting the edge of their ears would always belong to her.

Later, when the snow fell and the first frost settled, the girls left home less and less. Growing still in size and confidence, they set out for the woods only occasionally, leaving ever-larger imprints behind them as if trampling on freshly ironed sheets.

But there was little need for them to brave the cold, and for this the parents were thankful. They had warned the girls not to play alone and never to stray too far. They were only to leave when the sun was fully risen or fully resting, for the limbo between was where the animals lurked. Sunrise, above all, was most dangerous. Now that the sun had changed its pace, they would all have to adapt.

Yet, their warnings were as all warnings are: a motto to tell oneself in times of trouble, but little use when trouble calls. In truth, it did not matter where they were when the animals attacked. They would be found. Flushed out. And they would be killed.

But the animals never came, and absence breeds anxiety. Worrying it too long since the last hunt, the parents refused to leave home. The father kept watch, every morning, but saw only an empty expanse. Trapped indoors, the girls screamed and cried; the mother could do nothing to soothe them. Days passed until they passed into weeks, and soon everything edible was exhausted.

With the girls needing to eat, they could stay home no longer. One trip and they would restock for the winter, wait it out until sun and spring. The parents knew of a nearby farm, at the

opposite end of the woods, where the owners kept a store of supplies. Judging it safer if they grouped together, they readied the girls to leave.

Wrapped up warm in their familial coats, they arranged into three pairs of two. The mother and the youngest took point at the front, the most in need of protection and so most cautious in approach. The father and the eldest kept guard at the back, looking out for family and foe. Between them, the middle-borns: stood together, safe together.

Skulking out into the forest, the snow crunched beneath their feet. Each pair inhabited the prints of those in front. In the blue-red sky, the moon made a fleeting appearance. The sun was cresting the horizon.

As they travelled, it seemed almost a normal trip. They mounted the odd hill or hillock, shimmying down them in a quickstep two-step. From the peaks of these mounds, they caught glimpses of the farm, smoke billowing from the chimney. They even found one or two berries in the snow which, following their parents' approval, the girls shared between themselves, juice staining their tongues.

Then the roar came. The roar somehow worse than a thousand cries of battle; a deep howl that screeched, squealed, bellowed and burrowed, coming once, then twice, then again. The parents' warnings shattered like the frost beneath their feet. In the distance, the animals approached.

The family stood silently, the last shouts shuddering through the trees. Frozen in fear, the parents hesitated; the girls huddled to their legs. Home was familiar but offered no protection; there was safety in numbers at the farm. Looking around at the wilted woods, it seemed neither choice was right.

Ducking under branches and leaping over detritus, the family hurtled for home. Behind them, they could hear the gnashing of teeth and the churning of earth; the sounds of those the animals had tamed. The trees, dead or decaying, seemed to close in around them. Birds fled the



forest in flocks. But to the parents' relief, the girls kept by their side. They ran from the animals as one.

Then the roar came louder; the gnashing and churning repeated. Through the trees, the father caught sight of the animals. They gave chase in staccato; stop-motion monsters disappearing and reappearing within the wood. Dressed in blood, the father could feel their hunger. They looked on with feral eyes.

The family kept running, all six astride of each other. But when the parents next checked, they were five. The eldest had fallen, trampled behind them. Seconds later, the middle-borns slipped from sight.

A family halved, they saw their home in the distance. Then, the youngest fell. She curled into a foetal position as her parents ran for the hills, for home, from horror. The animals bayed in victory, their pets tearing her into chunks. They took her eyes before anything else. Before all was torn and consumed.

Now, another child comes slowly. Despite everything, they still search the forest for food, now more than ever. They never have a proper meal. Never eat together. But it keeps them sated. Surviving.

It keeps them from home. What was once a wilful emptiness now draws attention to how little they have. The walls are caving in, the floor scattered with dirt and soil. The silence is so suffocating that they stand at the entrance. When no sound comes, they cry out.

They had sex, once, during spring. Now they sleep separate. She wanted it over with, afraid of the consequences. His mind was elsewhere too. She fears he has someone else, it's in his nature. Someone far away. Away from the woods.

He doesn't want them. She doesn't know if she does. Six weeks away from birth, she questions what these children are for. She will have four more. A gift or a joke. But they are not to replace, no, never to replace. They might, she hopes, repair.

The leaves are shedding again, but now it seems unnatural. The rain falls with nobody to receive it. The wind blows silent through the trees. Her children might make the world warm again. Or the world will make them cold like the rest.

The next few days, he keeps watch at the entrance while she rests. The gesture is symbolic, strained. It hadn't helped them before. But he can't bring himself to be with her.

One night, as he stood watching nothing, she came and stood beside him. There was no bridging their distance. They cried out into the woods once more.

This morning, she knows it's happening. She wakes late and he's gone. She heard no movement, he simply up and left. Perhaps it had all been too much for him. Perhaps their nothing had been easy to leave behind.

With the father gone, she sits softly at home. She feels her children kick, lays down on the ground. The roar can be heard now, approaching like a wave. She's happy for it to swallow her.

When they arrive, a monster of shining silver worms its way in. Curled up like her youngest had been, she stares into its eyes. With a boom, it speaks. The monster roars a cloud of smoke.

As the smoke rises from the den, the animals cheer and wait.

Lifting the body of the fox, they say: 'Pest'.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Michael Wheatley** is an Associate Lecturer in Creative and Professional Writing at the University of Worcester. He is currently researching for a creative writing and practice-based PhD at Royal Holloway, University of London. His debut collection of short stories, 'The Writers' Block', is published by Black Pear Press. Further prose and poetry has been published in various literary magazines including *Three Drops from a Cauldron* and *Inside the Bell Jar*. Other research interests include metafiction, perceptions of creativity, and cannibalism.

**Novel Excerpt: *My Side of the Ocean***

*Shelby London Driscoll Salemi*

*'Humans have defined Plants and Animals harmfully, as things, and it's time we undefine Them, unknow Them to know Them anew'.*

Broadcast 1

Dear ReOceaner Network,

When you're in love, it's harder to want to flood the desert and all of humanity. Mama Beth's words. My name is Flora. I am not in love. I am certainly not in love with Planet Earth, at least not in a selfish way like my Mama Beth. Mama Beth and I are not close, not just because I'm averse to her Insect touch due to my having been patched with Sensitive Plant, but because my Mama Beth is a narcissistic Humanist. I am a ReOceaner being held as a potential threat by the Humanist-controlled nation-State of Califas and I can hear my Humanist Mama Beth giving Her selfish confession to the State Prevention Department to get me out of this grey, windowless cement holding tank. Maybe you're a new ReOceaner, and not familiar with me yet. Maybe you have only recently realised that the only penance humans can do for extinguishing animals and ruining the earth is to die by the sea level rise we have caused. Most of us are on the coasts. All we have to do is break the seawalls we are constantly reinforcing. I can hear Mama Beth's message even without my cybernetic web imPlant hardware, which Fauna ripped from the port under my ear when he put me here in the slammer.

Mama Beth's confession doesn't surface from the web with a sound or handwriting signature for me. I'm just feeling it. That's how I know I'm not hearing it via my connection to the shitty non-capitalist internet. Nor am I in turn transmitting Mama Beth's words to average Califas People with State web imPlants. I'm not entirely knocking the unsponsored, unguided 'organic' wifi browsing experiences that, as you know, Califas' secession from the former U.S.A.

left us with, but my transmission is more organic, more under the radar. Mama Beth and I are special. We can bounce our messages off of Gelata, no wifi needed, because we share Gelata's glow. I'm no technophobe like Mama Beth. No, I just know that what we should really be afraid of is the organic.

f.

### **Chapter 1. To Mollusk.**

CALIFAS STATE PREVENTION DEPARTMENT AUTOMATION: BEGIN RECORDING. For the record, state your name.

BETH: Beth Graves Santos.

CALIFAS STATE PREVENTION DEPARTMENT AUTOMATION: For the record, state your charges.

BETH: Homicide.

CALIFAS STATE PREVENTION DEPARTMENT AUTOMATION: Begin your speech act, granting permission for the Prevention Archive to record by saying START RECORDING, making your speech act admissible as evidence in court at your trial by a jury of Califas Persons, until which time you say STOP RECORDING.

BETH: START RECORDING. My name is Beth Graves Santos, for the record. I give My permission for the Prevention Department to record and listen to this, my confession. I am confessing my culpability for the 2070 murder of Beaded Man in exchange for my estranged daughter Flora Santos Healy's release. Today is the twins' birthday. Flora should not have to spend her nineteenth birthday in a dank, solitary holding cell, her only crime being her nature as the offspring of Mermaid, a once-famous ReOceaner. Fauna and Flora, I know you're listening. Fauna, I know you're listening because you're the State, a warden for the Nation-State

of Califas. Flora, I know you can hear me in your heart. I will not spare any detail. I know the State will mine my speech for keywords, but Fauna and Flora, and any jurors who might take the time to peruse my recording beyond the keywords, and who might find any of my words redeeming, I want you to hear it all. The State is holding Flora because of her affiliation with the ReOceaners. I am confessing because I have a second chance to save my family. I killed Beaded Man, an old Beat poet and Re-Oceaner, because Beaded Man was a perceived threat. Califas, don't condemn my daughter for being a perceived threat. My daughter is innocent.

When you're in love, it's harder to want to flood the desert and all of humanity. Even though this is the story of Beaded Man's sacrifice, this is also a story of apocalypse. However, apocalypse is usually gradual. It's hard to put a finger on apocalypse, a time stamp, that is, unless there's an event. It follows that because apocalypse is usually more than one event—rather, apocalypse is an accretion—I, Beth, must tell the whole accretion. Too bad I'm not Jackfruit Tree. I'd rather tell this story in rings, letting the rings' thicknesses speak of drought, hardship, abundance, symbiosis, Deadness, chop.

Beaded Man's sacrifice occurred a decade ago. An old ReOceaner friend of Mer's, Beaded Man was acting as the children's tutor at the time. Indeed, I strangled him with my daughter Flora's legs. Immediately afterward I helped Mermaid, my now ex-wife, place Beaded Man's brain inside Conch Shell to satiate the curse on our family. This is not the only event I must tell to get to the bottom of what went wrong. The accretion of this apocalypse begins with love, my love for Mermaid.

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Broadcast 2

Dear ReOceaner Network,

It's gratifying in a way to hear Mama Beth say that she killed Beaded Man. I've believed she was the culprit for two years now. But I wish Mama Beth had had the guts to confess to my face.

My wooden pencil scratching my notebook echoes in this tank as I write. My writing implements are not internet conductors, not seen as a threat by my pollutant of a brother Fauna, a Califas State Preventionist, who personally locked me up. Fauna is probably also the one who locked Mama Beth up when she turned herself in. These archaic writing implements are my pillow and blanket, my bread, my final record. When the ReOceaners break the seawall and this place floods, my words will float to the sea floor with all of the other debris and fossilise, even if the State has seized them first.

Ask yourself, ‘did I experience a tic (insert your personal tic, which your arisings from the wifi cue for you) before this, Flora’s story, arose in my body?’ You couldn’t have. Because I’ve been unplugged and I am broadcasting this naturally. If you are reading this, you are reading a fossil record, before it has calcified. If you are reading this, you are actually just hearing it in your brain and body, and are plugged into the organic internet, via your patch or your evolved attunement, like the Firefly to the other Fireflies, the rhizome to the root, the glow of the Gelata, and like me and Mama Beth. I write these words to you, who might hear my story.

I am transcribing Mama Beth’s confession to the State Prevention Department as I hear it, the words Mama Beth is speaking with such special emphasis that they reach me through the thick cement, meant to block signals. I transcribe Mama Beth’s confession because it is rolling my head.

f.

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BETH (CONTINUOUS RECORDING): I was a shopgirl when I first met Mer on the night Mer gave Her speech at the Museum. I had been working retail at the San Diego Natural History Museum. I was the buyer for the gift shop inventory. I sourced trinkets carefully, to make sure they were already well-loved. This was before California’s secession, and therefore before the State ban on all new merch that you all are familiar with, but the local anti-consumerist culture

was already so strong that nobody wanted newly-manufactured merch as souvenirs. All the wares in the shop were antique, recycled. All the goods for sale being trash went with my Humanist religion, so I was good at my work. I was coming out of a dry spell with my new job at the Museum. All the Detritus around me was stimulating me. I felt on display, too, a part of the natural history exhibits.

Mermaid was at the Museum for her art opening. As the designer of full bivalve Shell-shaped sea vacuum, which as you know has since bolstered the sea trash harvesting industry, and She being a ReOceaner to boot, Mermaid's reputation had preceded Mermaid's opening. Mermaid had worked with engineers on both the sea vacuum's outside aesthetic appearance and the vacuum's internal workings, both of which mimicked the morphology of extinct Mollusk and Mollusk's mantle. I had known Mermaid would be at the Museum. The topic of the vacuum was creating a buzz in the Imperial Beach community where I lived, the same Imperial Beach where this first sea vacuum would be installed inside the sea wall that held the waves back from flooding the South Bay again. I was considering going to hear Mermaid speak, but my feet were aching, so I was on the fence about attending. I hadn't known Mermaid would come into the museum shop.

I was polishing the glass counter when there Mermaid was: tall, long dark hair, tight plaid pants, perusing the children's section. I knew Mer's image from the Museum promotional poster, 'Artist Unveiling of Sea Vacuum: The Woman Behind the Imperial Shell'. The Museum's propagandist apparently tried to design a different type of poster—it was eye-catching in its oval shape—but the propagandist couldn't escape Scallops and Woman in shades of sand. The propagandist had rendered the poster in tan sand and the 'Flesh Red' of an eighteenth century colour taxonomist. I knew, because I spent breaks soaking in the faded colors of the Werner's Nomenclature of Colours exhibit.

The exhibit took the form of a waterfall fountain alongside the main staircase. Werner's exemplary ornithological specimens perched on a cascade of plaster boulders and dusty, plastic and silk flowers in red, green, and blue. This Werner, who'd been a mineralogist back when his camp considered as mineral species Shells and fossils alike, had considered this 'Flesh Red' a



‘Human’ colour, whom a Scotsman Flower painter later elaborated as the mixture of ‘rose red mixed with tile red and a little white’. We had the flower painter’s colour atlas in the gift shop. Though it was for sale, I kept it behind the counter, for my personal perusing. This ‘Human [really a blushtastic white skin]’ color, This faded Flesh Red, was the coloration that saturated Mer’s Flesh on the poster. Though the poster didn’t centre Mermaid’s image against the tan Shell, I couldn’t see the Aphrodite thing and not be curious. We should all be curious about the most blatant of symbolism.

Mermaid had held an artist’s residency at the Museum for weeks before Mermaid constructed her vacuum prototype for the opening, but I had never seen a trace of Mermaid in person until tonight. Mermaid had this sunken treasure look from the start, with her long, messy, wet-seeming hair, weighty and excessive metal jewelry, and her smoky oils. Fragrant Juniper oil, in fact. She smelled like spice. Like a new species. Mermaid had Conch Shell tucked under one armpit. Conch Shell was adult Queen Conch Shell of Caribbean origin, which Mermaid usually toted like a purse. When Mer held Conch, sometimes Mer was at Mer’s most artistic, most alive, and sometimes, when Mer held Shell, to the point of trance, Mer took on a Dead quality. As Mer shopped that day, Mermaid was clutching Fuchsia, for sale, which hung from beaded brown macramé webbing.

I tried to act nonchalant, arranging Puka Shell necklace under the glass counter, thinking of what I might say to a ReOceaner. Jurors, you might think it weird that a fellow Humanist fell for a ReOceaner. I hadn’t spoken to many that I knew of, not that I wouldn’t, but I guess I put out strong Humanist vibes. (For one, I did carry my Humanist drinking mug at my belt). So ReOceaners probably tended to avoid me, god forbid we interact. Contrary to popular belief, speaking with a ReOceaner does not make me a ReOceaner sympathiser. Falling in love with one did not make me wish death upon all Humans after a thousand billion Jelly stings to empty our Human lungs of their last screams, like a hard ReOceaner might wish. As I arranged the necklace, Mermaid walked to the counter and stopped, quite close to me, only the glass separating us. I looked into Mermaid’s face, and heat rose from my inner thighs, apparently to my cheeks. Mermaid didn’t look like She was made of Roses and tile, as on the poster. Mermaid’s

complexion put the Pale Canary Bird in Primrose Yellow. Mermaid wore no makeup. I sensed Mermaid's cool undertones.

Mermaid set Conch Shell down with a glass-against-glass clink. I got a better look at Shell, Mermaid's curse and muse. Conch was light brown and tan on top, with eleven whorls, and Rose Red on the lip leading to a magenta deeper into the aperture. Mermaid also set Fuchsia down softly and leaned onto the glass case. Her dark, wavy hair fell into Fuchsia's soil and flowers but Mermaid didn't seem to notice or care. I occupied my nervous hands with Puka Shell necklace. I fiddled with the smooth, uneven disk-shaped Shells on their plastic strand as if They were a rosary. My aim was to drape the necklace perfectly over a small piece of driftwood next to some Mother-Of-Pearl earrings. Mermaid watched me. Then She slapped her hand down onto the case as if the glass counter were a tambourine. I jumped.

'Your cheeks are glowing iridescent', Mermaid said to me.

At that, my cheeks got even hotter. I withdrew my hand, still clutching Puka Shell necklace. *Be smooth, Beth*, I told myself. I slid the flimsy aluminum backing of the counter closed and dropped Puka Shell necklace into my apron pocket.

'Have you ever heard of blush', I said.

'Glowbaby', Mermaid said, in a velvet gargle.

I was hooked.

'My name is Mermaid', She said. 'But you, shopgirl, can call me Mer'. Mer didn't extend her hand. I wanted to touch it.

'Beth'.

‘Whatever you say, Glowbaby’, Mer said. ‘Are you staying for the unveiling? I’m making some remarks. Then I’d love to buy you a free glass of champagne’.

‘Yes’, I said.

I took forever to process Mer’s payment for Fuchsia. Then, Mer left to prepare for her speech. I no longer cared about my aching feet. I was the closer, but I left tasks undone around the shop. I would be surprised if I had remembered to lock up before rushing to the opening. Though I was in my thirties when I met Mer, I felt like a teenager, crushing.

I made a stop in the powder room. Indoor toilets were no longer at the Museum. The Museum had opened outdoor outhouses, considering the sewer problems plaguing California. So the bathroom was truly just a powder room. Just Silver-gilt mirrors and defunct plumbing. For an institution that housed countless carcasses, I wasn’t surprised that the institution couldn’t handle a shit smell to go with the carnage. Museums are unreal, clean, displaying sterilised matter. Sewage was too real. Realer than long-past mummifications, the skins scraped clean of flesh.

The mummies all had placards from decades previous, maybe the 2030s, saying ‘The Museum is working to return these remains to their places and peoples of origin’, but the repatriations had never happened. At what point on the timeline had returning plundered body matter and artifacts been too late? And there were no such placards on Animal specimens. Just on Cochineal-dyed pots, Grass baskets, shrunken heads, bones. Therefore, since the Museum had stopped short of its goal to repatriate Human art and bones, I had no hope that the Museum would get around to considering to whom Animal specimens belonged. I supposed Animal specimens, in come cases pelts wrapped around nothing, around a robbery of innards, belonged to Animals’ former Selves.

I freshened up in front of the grand mirrors. I removed my apron and set it down next to the sink. It made a soft thud, like Fox laying down in a clearing. Puka necklace was still inside. I had unintentionally borrowed the strand of Pukas. I put Pukas around my neck and twisted the silver fasteners together. I powdered my face with minerals, lest I blush again. In the mirror’s

reflection, my Scarab-green blood vessels (my colour, not Werner's) were showing through my see-through paleness. I moved the purse-size powder brush over my cheeks and down into my dark circles in half-moon strokes. My paleness was Greenish White, like the 'Vegetable' 'Polyanthus Narcissus', according to the nature colours display. I often thought of my own colour when applying makeup, when feathering out the binaries of green and white that played on my skin with a brush and homemade pigment, the palette tending towards a darker green under my eyes. 'Feathering out the binaries', was some advice a wiser woman had given me once. Helen, the doulah who'd assisted at my own birth and whom I was still in contact with, had said, 'well, Beth, as you're feathering out the binaries, you will find your way...' Helen had assumed I would succeed in this pursuit of feathering out, but as far as I could tell, I kept the words of the sage inactive in my makeup bag. *Tap, tap.* The sound of my brush on the Museum's marble washbasin, to shake the dust off. I steadied myself against the counter and took a final good look in the mirror.

My comparisons of my complexion, and, now, much that I saw, to the tints of obsessed long-dead color namers was like a psychedelic trip. The names of the colours were so delicious. Due to my genetic Firefly patch, I had always been prone to dissociative reverie, to the point of hallucination. Shapes and colours sometimes slipped me into these dreams, and sometimes stressors induced the hallucinations. It wasn't unpleasant for me. It was an escape. Because I knew the peace of dissociation, I knew why the ReOceaners fantasised about a clean-cut end. But because I dissociated, I knew the ReOceaners' desired end was selfish, irresponsible, and anything but clean-cut.

Cheeks chalked, I walked to the Great Hall. The cavernous acoustics were already picking up Mer's softly deep register. She was testing the air with a 'check, check'. I sensed Mer's spice smell acutely from my position across the space. Mer stood in front of a screen, and just behind her on stage right was, presumably, her sea vacuum prototype, draped with a white sheet. Mer began her short speech, during which She held Conch Shell in one hand and gestured wildly with Conch Shell:

*To classify a Self means to make secret what one could have seen crawling all over, in broad daylight, maybe even in one's own kitchen. Just over 200 years ago, literature man*

*Edgar Allan Poe famously abridged The Conchologist's First Book for schoolboys. My great grandfather was one of those schoolboys, and he began a line of naturalists within our family, ending with me. Today it is my express pleasure to be here to celebrate our transcendence of such Latin naming practices and the horror of the laboratory techniques that their champions like my great grandfather and grandfather after him performed. I have donated the family tome, my great grandfather's copy of the textbook, an early edition with colour plates, to the Museum. From its pages I drew my inspiration for the design of the sea vacuum.*

The cover of *The Conchologist's First Book* appeared on the screen behind Mer. Its spine was a deep forest green. The yellowed paper bearing the one-tone inked cover art was old and yellowed as a treasure map. It was torn in two places near the spine and the paper was wearing thin near the page edge of the cover, so that the green leather shone through in splotches. The title was centered in the ether, which was the suggestion of a sandy dune, due to the pillars of foliage on either side of the title capped with Willowy dangling tufts of Plant, and a few landscape lines sloping downward a long ways to the precious specimens at the bottom of the printed engraving. A Land Snail at the upper left of the bottom quarter of the cover image invited the eyes downward towards the glassy pool of a lagoon, on the beach of which the naturalists' prized specimens clustered. The Land Snail hit me hard as emblematic of my own identity, from stories my father told about those delicate creatures on Whom the Fireflies I am patched with fed. The Lagoon looked like the Salt Marsh outside my apartment in Imperial Beach where Jaca Tree lived. This idealised lagoon image, a place of fantasy where specimens, diverse, docile, and uncontaminated, pose together. The Land Snail was the only specimen with a body, at least a visible one. Perhaps other Shells on the book's cover engraving had been cleaned or abandoned, or had retracted their bodies deep within themselves. Nine Shells were pictured in total. One of Them in the image was conical and pointy, One orb-like and paper thin, and Two spotted, shiny, and thick, but I didn't have words for Them. I hated not knowing the names of Selves. And I hated how relatively uneducated I was compared to this woman Mer. Strange that the centre of the design should be a hole, as if sucking the viewer in. At the centre of the specimens was the horizontal aperture of white oblong star-shaped Shell. After much silence, affording me this long gaze, the screen went white again, and Mer continued.

*As you might have heard, yes, I am a ReOceaner. But what you may not have heard is, I, a ReOceaner, practice the Unnaming. I practice the Unnaming my way, due to my experience with the naturalists, and with a few caveats, all of which I won't go into now. I don't practice the Unnaming for Humanist reasons like you might—that is, I don't believe fellow Animal Species have the potential to become deities simply because They die out, when humans extinct Them. When I write about Animals, I don't omit articles and capitalise Animals' common names and pronouns in order to increase their intrigue, or to group entire Species into singular, allegorised beasts. Quite the opposite. I capitalise Plant and fellow Animal Species' names to pit Them better against the primacy of humans even in the realm of speech, of text. And I omit Animals' and Plants' articles because articles denote things that are about to be defined, or that have previously been defined. Humans have defined Plants and Animals harmfully, as things, and it's time we undefine Them, unknow Them to know Them anew. Plant and fellow Animal Species are knowable and rightful equals to humans. Humans should not exalt Them in name, nor should humans purport to know Species' qualities just because science has compiled innumerable data sets on Species. Humans have taken for granted the scientific documentation of Species for so many generations that we have lost touch with Plant and fellow Animal Species.*

*I have said all of this about my manner of speaking with regret for not having been able to unknow Mollusk before humans extincted Mollusk. We humans face the impossibility of Unnaming Mollusks before their extinction, as They are already considered extinct. Compounding the insult to Mollusks' memory, men like my forefathers extracted Mollusks' bodies from Mollusks' Shells in order to draw Them into their atlases. From my grandfather's anatomical drawings, you can see that there's a respiratory chamber that houses Mollusks' gills. My sea vacuum design includes gills, just as with the former body of Conch. Though instead of breathing, the wavy gills will take in and filter trash from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. In the absence of the inner bodies of Mollusks' Selves, let us at least fill an empty Shell in Mollusks' extinct Selves' honor with trash, with the pollution we humans have cast into the sea.*

*Calling all Selves by their common names, in the manner we call each other by name, is only a grammatical, end-of-days afterthought, but it's my belief that such utterances are a spell towards knowing the Selves that remain extant in this climate. It's an incantation we can all take up in our mouths and ears and brains daily. To Mollusk.*

In her short speech, Mer had radiated idealism—strange for those nihilistic ReOceaners—and I needed hope. I needed danger, too, as I felt somehow that the only antidote to apocalypse was stretching the limits of apocalypse's terror, and finding pleasure as I threw myself at the walls of terror's isolation chambers. I was afraid. I had seen the grey seawall go up as a child; I would soon see the wall against the Former U.S.A. go up and the wall against Tijuana crumble only slightly; a wall of sewer was threatening from beneath; and the vacuous blue sky was no escape, was even worse than a wall, because it reminded that the end of humanity via ecocide is not a clear stopping point like the surface of a wall. I threw myself at clear stopping points, to see if they would hold. There was pleasure in terrors, tangible objects of fear. Museums play on this pleasure all the time. A fling with this woman Mermaid, this prominent ReOceaner, forbidden to me because of Humanist social pressures against sympathising with ReOceaners, because of the principles I supposedly stood for, the survival of Humans, the most vulnerable of us first and foremost...well, a fling seemed hot.

Mer was captivating from the beginning, and not just when Mer flexed and jiggled her muscles, for instance later on when She moved into my apartment, installing our claw foot bathtub over shag carpet, or fixing up some other artifact from a hundred years ago, Mer and I patting down the housePlant soil together, biceps grazing waxy leaves. But Mer also captivated me when Mer flexed and jiggled her intellect.

And tonight, Mer's speech was such a flexion of brain. Mer finished speaking those last words of her speech, *to Mollusk*, with an orator's flourish, raising Conch Shell high above her head, to which the museum patrons all raised their glasses. I clinked my glass with the nearest strangers to me, and drained it, then set the glass and myself down on a marble pillar to shine like a gem-coloured Beetle from a bowing blade of Grass. Would Mer come over here? I smoothed

my sweater and hair. And Mer, ever impulsive, did come over. Mer bolted over, never mind the line of Museum members who clearly wanted some face time from Mer. Mer took my hand. Mer's was cold and bony extending from her mess of metal bangles. Mer's hand and fingers felt like sexy relief against my hot plush palm. Mer grabbed two champagne flutes at the open bar, without exchanging any words with the bartender. Mer didn't tip, only winked. Mer led me through the thick nautical roping beyond the crowd—we both clambered over it—towards the hall that led to a life-size marshland diorama.

When we arrived with soft footsteps, the false morass was dim, as if broken, but the Museum intended such murky non-lighting for this diorama. Mer and I stood on an ornamental footbridge, gazing over the resin pond of dark blue-grey at the taxidermy subjects, stuffed Waterfowl. Modern colour systems derived from ornithology. Naturalists preserved 'representative' Birds, in part to act as swaths in color taxonomies, but these preserved Birds' mortal forms had all faded. In their pious objectivity, collecting holotypes of all birds, the taxonomists had dulled the all of the colours in their collections. You can't preserve living brilliance.

The colour of the fake pond, conceived in a tint of Prussian Blue perhaps to reflect Mallard's speculum, that blue beauty spot of green-necked Drake and dull female alike, now covered with the grey of grime and age, reminded me of the brackish water of the marsh near my apartment, on those days when me and my father would wait for a wind to pollinate Jackfruit Tree. On those days, I would look at my reflection at a low point, and the water's quality would lower me deeper. Some false Greenish Grey Grasses, Cattail and others, grey as the 'quill feathers of the Robin' according to the taxonomy, grazed my ribcage. Me and Mer were alone in the fake former world. It was cold as dust.

Mer poured Her champagne onto the pond of paint. I glanced at Mer sideways and smiled. 'To Death and Detritus', I said, and followed suit, pouring out my glass to Mallard Deities, so that the liquid would trickle Mallards' way, maybe even float Mallards. My utterance of the Humanist prayer was my way of telling Mer my religious affiliation up front. As you know, good jurors, we Humanists (I doubt the State will have consciously selected Humans among you with any



dissenting ideology) have little scripture other than this prayer. I said the prayer whenever I jinxed or hexed. I said it to give thanks. I said it to punish mySelf for falseness. I said it all the time.

Waiting for Mer's response, I let my eyes skim female Mallards' feathered form. The taxidermist had set female Mallard upon the fake water stretched out, in a forever nod-swimming courtship pose, legs stuck in solid pond like a perverse lollipop. Mer was taking Her time. Would Mer acknowledge what I had said, my admission? Finally, She did.

'You dirty little Humanist', Mer said.

I smiled. Mer made me feel more rebellious than I was. Mer was public with her ReOceaner identity, a bold and dangerous move. In contrast, I wouldn't have dreamed of going public with the most dangerous facet of my identity, of being patched from black market Firefly.

Now, I allowed myself to take in Mer's female form. Her body was angled over the railing of the pond. She leaned with such attractive ease and confidence.

'Come to my studio?' Mer said.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Shelby London's** poems have appeared in *Spiral Orb* and collaborative chapbooks, and her translations have appeared in *Alchemy*. She does contract work in writing programs at UC San Diego and UW Tacoma and co-teaches a summer class for youth called *Language and Identity for Bilingual Writers*.

## Forest Bones

*Amara George Parker*

*'Oh, if trees could lick their lips.'*

*Something stirs in the black of a moonless night.*

*It wriggles and creeps and devours.*

*The feeble breeze bears no tender scent of the dying summer; only the stench of death, wrought rank in mist, pervades the lungs of the earth.*

*The stagnant air trembles, disturbed by the beat of the blackest of hearts.*

*From your bed, on the edge of dreams, you hear The Tree screaming your name.*

*And you wait.*

#

Just as he had on the eve of every birthday, he dreamed of The Tree. It rose above him, its pale twisted trunk a pained monument on the dead black earth; a body writhing in agony, spine bent and arched toward a bleak and cloud-shrouded sky. There were no leaves on its limbs. The air around it didn't stir; nothing breathed and Elliott's lungs ached as he tried to keep his fear silent.

Each year the tree grew, until now it towered above him, humming with a deadly intensity.

The voice—its non-voice—was the same. It emanated from somewhere within the twisted limbs, channelled through roots or earth or air Elliott didn't know, but this year, as every year before, it struck the same point inside his skull, scratching at his brain; a half-numb painful pleading that he couldn't shut out.

*Help*, it trembled.

Each year it begged and each year Elliott was too afraid to answer. But this time, he did.

*Help.*

For a moment, he stood, transfixed.

And then, summoning the courage not to run, not to fight, but to stand and face his terror, he turned to the skeletal tree.

‘How?’ he said. His voice shook but he forced the words into the air. ‘How can I help?’

And the reply, thrumming inside his head like insidious machinery, came low and dreadful.

*Let.*

*Me.*

*Eat you up.*

#

‘How’s it going then, Tom?’ The sky was sallow-grey, and Elliott had driven through the day’s long hours from where he’d been working at the old lighthouse. His van was now parked on the driveway of Tom Whitley, and both Elliott and his vehicle looked worse for wear. ‘Penny-Jane phoned and said there’s been something up with my pipes?’

Tom Whitley knitted his eyebrows together and sucked the yellow dusk air in through his teeth. ‘You not been by the house yet?’

‘Thought I’d pick you up first’.

‘Ah, you trust my judgement I see’.

‘I trust the best and only plumber in the village when he tells me I got a burst pipe’.

‘Flattery won’t get you a discount, Elliott’. He chuckled. ‘Let me get my things together, I’ll follow you’.

‘I’ll get a pot of tea brewing’.

Tom laughed. ‘I wouldn’t count on it’.

Elliott swung himself into the driver’s seat and felt the miles of road he’d put behind him leech at his bones, and suddenly the journey home seemed longer than a few minutes. He’d rounded the corner of the main street before he heard Tom’s engine growl to life and the plumber’s van’s tyres roll out of the drive.

And then he was on, out of the village centre and nearing the woods that bordered the road that led to home. It felt an age since he had been there. The sun had started to creep down behind the hills, and to his right, Elliott saw its glow flutter auburn on slivers of the woods, and burn the ground at the feet of trees a rusted amber.

He had the window open, the scent of summer grazing his face and teasing his hair. Then, through the window’s open jaws came the cry of crows. His eyes followed the sound to the right of the road, where trees met tarmac at the foot of the hill. It was lined with a darkness that was dense and watchful; black-shadow sentinels with bright metal eyes.

Elliott slowed. They seemed to be waiting.

The van juddered to a halt, the ratchet of the handbrake bringing the road through the woods to silence.

Behind the line of crows, the woods went on, stretching up into the hillside; but to the left, where their mirrored counterparts should stand, there was nothing but white mist. White obscured the trunks. All white. Like the clouds had sunk to the ground, and the world was all the wrong way up. Elliott's only reference point was the very tip of the canopy, a thumbnail-strip separating the white of the forest realm from the clouds of the sky above. And then it was gone.

Elliott studied the blank mass. The village, situated as it was in a scoop of land between hills, often found itself cloaked in mist and fog, particularly when autumn had taken hold. But this didn't feel right to him. It behaved differently. It *behaved*.

He shook it off and put his paranoia down to being road-tired. His hand reached for the gear stick, and he allowed the van to move up to second as he switched on his high beams.

The mist began to curl outwards from the treeline. It reached out onto the road. It began to seep towards his van. Elliott laughed at his own jolting reaction as the crows took to the sky like sudden splashes of ink thrown into the grey heavens. The engine stalled.

He took a deep breath. Steadied.

Elliott knew the woods, and he knew human nature. He knew how people panicked and lost themselves; familiar routes distorted under the lens of fear.

The mist had closed behind him now, like skin healing up over a wound.

Elliott fumbled to restart his engine, telling himself he was only anxious to see home, but there was only a repeated rasp that led once more back to that overwhelming silence. He leaned back in the driver's seat, hands smoothing along the steering wheel and listened. Noises

from the village filtered around in the mist, contorted and echoed and amplified like kaleidoscopic images. He tried the ignition again.

Nothing.

He heard a rumble of tyres and engine behind him and flashed his lights.

‘Hey! Tom!’

The rumble slowed, like thunder falling asleep. Elliott opened the van’s door and stepped out onto the road he couldn’t see. ‘Tom! My van’s given up. Too much for one day, I think. Well, for both of us... Fancy giving us a ride?’ Elliott strained his ears. But there was no response, only, in the distance, a peel of church bells.

‘Tom...?’ But he couldn’t even hear the church bells now. The mist had grown so dense that Elliott was sure that if he let go of the driver’s door, he’d lose his van.

‘Well’. He reached into the glove compartment and felt for the flashlight. He tried to force this to be casual, a normal event but fear had struck his vocal cords, and he heard it in himself. ‘Looks like it’s the long way round’. He pushed the van door closed behind him and pocketed the keys.

He’d left his hazards on, and their muted orange flash hardly dented the white, but it felt to Elliott like a silent scream, a warning, for him to go back to his van; to not leave his one point of reference and safety in a deformed world of mist and uncertainty.

The woods were cotton-thick and quiet as he stepped off the road and into their silence.

#

The Witch inhaled, remembering what it was to feel the cold, dank touch of the earth and its hollows.

She felt for her arms, but there were none. In their stead, thick, rotten branches stretched out into thinly spun twigs, their weight barely held in the naked boughs. Her breasts were changed into bark, rough and dead; there was no trace of the woman she once was, save her arching spine, now the curved trunk twisted like the animal in pain she had been when they had bound her here.

*I remember, she thought.*

*And I am coming back.*

She felt down into the earth, where faint traces of the magic that had rekindled her strength still lingered.

Still further she went into the earth's depths, and she began to feel the churning of the earthworms and the maggots, the desperate seeking of scavengers, and the freshly dead leaking their lifeblood into the ground. But nothing compared. She could taste the fragile potency of the soul that dwelled in the house in the woods. She hungered for it. She hungered for vengeance. And she was ready to take it.

#

At school, Elliott had learned that Heaven existed in the sky—a kingdom in the clouds. And so, as a boy, if the day brought mist, he'd be terrified to leave the house, afraid that he would inadvertently step into the afterlife and Death would snap him up.

His mother, somewhat differently minded to the school, loved the wilds and spoke of her connection to the unseen spirits that seemed to occupy them. She had at every opportunity after the school's erroneous lessons, taken him out into the backwoods and mountains, in all

conditions, until he was at ease trekking across barren ridges above the clouds, and in dense forest, or marshlands beneath the stars; navigating the land with a healthy respect for its indiscriminate perils, and not one bit afraid of death or stumbling into *Heaven* by mistake.

The tarmac's uniform flat gave out to the uneven floor of the woods. Leaf and twig rustled and cracked underneath Elliott's step and provided him with his only orientation. The mist felt dense as he breathed in. *Fog?* He couldn't remember what the difference was.

He'd tried to keep heading west from the road, and hoped that soon enough he'd either hit the boundary to the house or something else he'd recognise that would lead him home. He crept on through the trees, pressing his palms into rough bark to steady himself, and made sure with each step that the ground underneath was solid enough to take his weight. He asked himself if perhaps his slow movement was because he wanted his footsteps to be inaudible, undetectable.

A cracking from the woods made him stop. Elliott held his breath, waited, his ears pricked and head turned with blind eyes in the direction of the noise. The woods were silent, too... listening. Bracken and undergrowth snapped; the sound cut Elliott on his back like a bite of static.

'Hullo?' he called. He noted how the mist clamped those tentative syllables into its white. More creaks and cracks struck out from where he supposed the trees stood. Elliott felt the pounding of his heart in his ears, its drumbeat growing louder and more erratic, and the shape of his breath following into disturbed disorder.

He told himself not to panic. Panic leads to rash decisions, and that'll get a person lost. He slowed his breathing and checked his phone for signal. He wondered whether Tom Whitley would still be there by the time he got back to the house, and then allowed himself to grumble about how tedious it would be if he missed him. He almost smiled to himself in those woods, in the mist, at the bizarreness of it all.



He checked again, but his phone's screen showed no bars. He hoped Tom would wait.

And then, as his eyes slid from the phone to the ground, he saw something slither.

*Follow me home*, it said.

Creaks of splintered trees echoed like laughter around the wood, and a wild thing yipped in pain, and Elliott knew then that the words he had heard were as real as the sounds in the woods and that *something* was here and it was calling to him.

*Follow me*, it said.

*Follow me*.

And he followed.

#

Oh, if trees could lick their lips. She couldn't *see* it yet, but she could sense it, there, tickling at the fronds of the earth, humming. And she couldn't wait, *couldn't wait* to eat it all up.

Eat.

It.

All.

Up.

#

Elliott heard the skulls of dead creatures crunch under his boots. He was stumbling forward, hands outstretched; he feared what could be behind rather than what lay ahead of him, and so

he lurched wildly from step to step, trying to outrun his imagination. His fear pushed him onward through the trees, blind step and ragged breath guiding him.

The mist was closing in on him now, scratching at his face and lungs and he was running, not feeling the impact of branch and leaf and thorn as he fumbled through their tangle. On and on he ran, convinced that should he stop he'd be a dead man, that Death would find him in the trees and mist, and that up ahead, impossibly, he'd find shelter, he'd find home.

And then, a light. It burned through the mist with a jaundice-yellow glow. Elliott latched on to its beam and hurried, helter-skelter for the light. And then the toe of his boot dug into something hard and unbending, and the heels of his hands found the burning graze of tarmac.

Tom Whitley's laughter rumbled down at him.

'Hey, slow down there. You can't run in this weather—visibility's a goddamn joke'. His outstretched hand reached out from the mist. 'You alright?'

Elliott let Tom haul him to his feet and rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'Uuh. Yeah'. He looked back and saw the mist hanging thick and low beneath the treetops. He'd circled back around to the road. Tom Whitley's van was parked with full beams blazing next to his own abandoned van. 'Just need some sleep, that's all'. His mind felt an unexpected horror curl over and nest into his thoughts. 'Mind if we take your van, Tom? My engine needs a rest'.

'So do you, it seems. I'll give you a lift back, but let's save taking a look at that pipe 'til tomorrow, huh?'

Elliott gave a grim nod. He felt his friend looking sideways at him as he slammed the passenger door closed behind him.

Inside, the confines of the van shrank. Elliott watched in the wing-mirror as the sight of his van disappeared from view.

Tom cleared his throat.

‘You, uh, you sure you’re okay, Elliott? That was a terrible business with Don...’

Elliott grunted. He watched the white as they rolled past—almost inscrutable shifts. Shadows? Shapes? *Blood on bone and mist*, he thought. *Why did he think that?*

‘...kind of you to take in young Jacob, ‘specially after all that happened with Violet. Mand’ said if there’s anything we can do, just give us a call. You know where we are’.

*Blood on bone and mist.*

‘Yeah, sure. Hey, Tom? Could you let me out here? I think I could use the walk—been cooped up in one of these all day’.

‘Are you sure? I gotta drive past yours anyway—’

*Blood on mist.*

‘Yeah. Drop me here. My legs need the stretch’.

*It’s watching me.*

The door had clunked open before the wheels stopped turning.

‘Hey! Elliott! Your flashlight!’

*It’s watching me.*

*It’s watching me.*

## BIOGRAPHY

**Amara George Parker** is a London-based writer, editor, and Best of the Net nominated poet whose poetry, fiction, and essays have been featured in various publications, including *Msllexia*, *Mooky Chick*, *Ogma*, *Elevator Stories*, *Prismatica*, *Sufi Journal*, *Sage Cigarettes*, *Earth Pathways*, *A Writer in Morocco*, and more. Their craft essay about disability representation in fiction features in *Human/Kind Press*' anthology *Musing the Margins*. They are the English Language Editor for *Angeprangert!* and a staff reader at *Prismatica Magazine*. They run *A Wave in the Heart: Poetic Connection*, a mindful writing workshop that encourages people to explore and develop a connection with Self through creativity.

As a pansexual, genderqueer and disabled writer, they hope their work offers readers an inclusive perspective. Will read your tarot for a price.

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