

# **GOTHIC NATURE: HAUNTED SHORES**

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



### **ISSUE THREE**

**GUEST EDITED BY EMILY ALDER, JIMMY  
PACKHAM, AND JOAN PASSEY**

**FOUNDED BY: ELIZABETH PARKER**

**EDITORS IN CHIEF:  
ELIZABETH PARKER, MICHELLE POLAND, HARRIET STILLEY**

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*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 more-than-human 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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# GOTHIC NATURE

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## Foreword

*Elizabeth Parker, Michelle Poland, Harriet Stilley*

‘Haunted Shores’ marks our first foray at *Gothic Nature* into guest-edited issues—and we are absolutely delighted to work in this first instance with the wonderful Jimmy Packham, Emily Alder, and Joan Passey. We have been aware of the scholarship of each of these individuals for several years now and it was a welcome proposal indeed when they first got in touch to pitch *Gothic Nature: Haunted Shores*. It is a huge amount of work to pull together an edited collection and we are honoured to provide a home for their work—and of course for the work of the talented contributors who have each approached the topic of ‘haunted shores’ with unique, bold, insightful, and intriguing perspectives in turn. It has been clear from the outset of *Gothic Nature* that the ‘dark blue Gothic’ is a deep and vibrant area within ecohorror and the ecoGothic and one thoroughly deserving of its own issue.

Issue III marks our move to a new themed/unthemed model where we will alternate between ‘open issues’ on all things ecohorror and ecoGothic and ‘special issues’ where we will work with guest editors with a specific vision on one area or theme of ‘Gothic Nature’. We warmly invite potential Guest Editors to approach us with ideas—and though we encourage *all* proposals, we are currently especially interested in pitches pertaining to the decolonisation of ecohorror and the ecoGothic.

Issue III also marks Michelle Poland’s last issue with us as Co-Editor in Chief—and Harriet Stilley’s first! Michelle has been absolutely instrumental to the journal and we cannot thank her enough for her hundreds of hours of work, dedication, drive, humour, kindness, and support. We also cannot thank Harriet enough for stepping from Blog Reviews and shared Books Reviews Editor into the central fold at short notice and for learning the ropes so quickly and keeping us inspired!

We are delighted to present to you this special issue of *Gothic Nature: Haunted Shores* from Jimmy, Emily, and Joan—and hope that you will enjoy taking the plunge into the dark and wonderful articles, reviews, and creations as much as we have!

# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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Elizabeth Parker, Michelle Poland, Harriet Stilley

**GUEST EDITORS FOR HAUNTED SHORES:**

Emily Alder, Jimmy Packham, Joan Passey

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**Introduction:**  
**Creeping Along the Endless Beach**

*Jimmy Packham, Emily Alder, Joan Passey*

In the posthumously published *Cape Cod* (1865), Henry David Thoreau reflects on the four trips he made along the Massachusetts cape between 1849 and 1857. Within this account of his excursions, the American transcendentalist and nature writer reveals a remarkably ecoGothic conception of the shoreline. It is a space where ‘a sort of chaos reigns still, which only anomalous creatures can inhabit’ (Thoreau, 1987: p. 81). Thoreau’s vision of Cape Cod is one of shipwreck and of beaches frequently dotted with human corpses and with other kinds of death and decay. It is a site in which the human being confronts the prospect of their own erasure in their perilous contention with the wave-blasted and weed-strewn littoral environment, whose fragile sandbanks threaten at a moment’s notice to bury unwary beachgoers alive. While Thoreau, of course, is not generally considered a Gothic writer, several of his readers have rightly identified an occasional gloomy or Gothic strain to his reflections on the natural world (Bridgman, 1982; Malachuk, 2014; McMillan, 2021). Nowhere is this tendency towards the Gothic more pronounced than in his writing about the coast: the human observer achieves comprehension of the coast via interpretive frameworks we now associate with the ecoGothic.

*Cape Cod* begins with a quite explicit acknowledgement that it is coastal disaster and death that dictates the route taken along the coastline. Intending to travel by the Provincetown steamer, Thoreau finds it has been delayed due to a storm. After spotting ‘a handbill headed, “Death! one hundred and forty-five lives lost at Cohasset”’, however, Thoreau and his companion promptly make the decision ‘to go by way of Cohasset’ instead (p. 5). Observations of a beach littered with wreckage and conversations with local kelp collectors provide the text’s first signs that Thoreau understands the shoreline in distinctly ecoGothic terms. One collector, slightly distant from the site of the shipwreck, tells Thoreau that he ‘had heard that there was a wreck, and knew most of the particulars, but he said that he had not been up there since it happened’; the old man is not especially concerned with the human bodies, for:

‘It was the wrecked weed that concerned him most, rock-weed, kelp, and seaweed, as he named them, which he carted to his barn-yard; and those bodies were to him but other weeds which the tide cast up, but which were of no use to him’ (p. 12).

Two things are happening here. First, Thoreau demonstrates that he is learning to read the littoral environment with accuracy: he gleans from the old man knowledge of the different kinds of algae to be found along the shore. Second, however, the passage shows the transmutation of the human into that algae, a collapsing of the distinction between oozy littoral matter and the tragic spectacle of drowned human bodies washed ashore. As the flora comes more fully to the fore, so the human presence recedes, blurring with its surroundings.

Such a movement—from shipwreck to transformation, and the dissolution of human forms into the weedy stuff of coastal waters—is a familiar one in literary and cultural representations of shoreline spaces. As Steve Mentz (2015) argues, shipwreck narratives imagine the ‘sudden interchange between dry life and wet immersion’ and offer, as a result, ‘ambivalent vision[s] of cultural transformation’. Shoreline encounters with shipwreck such as Thoreau’s present efforts to reconstitute the human from the wreckage, to negotiate what Mentz calls the ‘fractured orientation’ (p. 131) consequent on shipwreck. These narratives also implicitly acknowledge the difficulty of disentangling the human from the more-than-human world by which it has been dramatically whelmed. Indeed, what renders Thoreau’s perspective fundamentally ecoGothic is the peculiar entanglement of horror and apathy that inflects this shoreline encounter. There are too many corpses for Thoreau to properly sympathise with the human tragedy; his sympathies, rather, are with the winds and waves, ‘as if to toss and mangle these poor human bodies was the order of the day’ (p. 13). The kelp, too, we are reminded, is collected as a valuable manure: to collapse the human with these weeds is to have a substantially earthy, rather than transcendental, vision of littoral transformation. ‘Creeping along the endless beach amid the sun-squall and the foam’, Thoreau remarks later in his narrative, ‘it occurs to us that we, too, are the product of sea-slime’ (p. 217). His reflection reminds us of the shared biological origins of human and non-human life and the role of ‘sea-slime’—that is, algae—in enabling life on earth, as well as in reclaiming it. In texts like *Cape Cod*, shoreline spaces show their capacity for prompting unexpected and sometimes uncomfortable reflections on human and non-human relations.

We are delighted to present this special issue of *Gothic Nature*, which undertakes a sustained exploration of the littoral ecoGothic. The issue has its origins in a conference titled ‘Haunted Shores: Coastlands, Coastal Waters and the Littoral Gothic’, run by the editors in March 2021. This was the first event in what has since become the ‘Haunted Shores’ research network, a platform for bringing together researchers, creative practitioners, and all enthused parties, who share an interest in the role of the coast in Gothic, horror, and weird literature, or in the manner by which the Gothic has shaped our understanding of coastal spaces. We founded the network because of our shared sense that the coast is deeply ingrained in the Gothic and ecoGothic traditions but has been largely neglected in the scholarship; this itself is a suggestive indication of the way in which the coast’s supposed topographical marginality informs the cultural imaginary. The existence of ‘Haunted Shores’ also reflects an increasing attention paid to coasts in the humanities and social sciences across the last decade or so, as these disciplines responded to increased cultural, political, and ecological interest in, and anxiety over, littoral zones. This pool of scholarship includes books by John R. Gillis (2012), John Brannigan (2015), Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter (2015), Charlotte Runcie (2019), Nicholas Allen (2021); edited collections by Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris (2009), Nick Groom, Nicholas Allen, and Jos Smith (2017), Matthew Ingleby and Matthew Kerr (2018), and Elizabeth Ellison and Donna Lee Brien (2020); and a rich range of essays and book chapters, including, from within the pages of *Gothic Nature*, the ecoGothic criticism of Antonio Alcalá González and Mark Fryers (both 2021). The first dedicated coastal studies journal, *Coastal Studies & Society*, was also launched in 2021.

We hope that the collaborative work of ‘Haunted Shores’ will elaborate why the Gothic and ecoGothic offer such a valuable critical framework to coastal studies. The ecoGothic in particular is exceedingly well positioned to help unravel those qualities that (justly or otherwise) are so frequently associated with coasts, shores, and beaches. Indeed, we began this special issue of *Gothic Nature* with a brief examination of Thoreau’s presentation of a coastal environment because it exemplifies several aspects of the shore that we believe to be significant if one is to approach it—as all of the essays included here do—with ecoGothic sensibilities. We will next sketch out the potential in ecoGothic readings of shores in more detail, and offer some reflections on why we think it is important to be undertaking this work now, in the early decades of the twenty-first century. In short, we want to draw attention to the liminality of the

shore in the cultural imaginary, its relationship with the oceans to which it grants access, its instabilities, its distinctive tidal temporalities, and the uneasy place of the human within its margins.

*Cape Cod* invests the shoreline with a very distinctive kind of liminality: it is a region positioned between proper land and proper ocean, a contested middle ground. The temptation to read the shore in this way is exemplified by ecocritical work that posits this space as ‘unfixed, fluctuant, and infinitely permeable’, as ‘the place that is no place’ (Solnit, 2010: p. 92). To enter into such a region, however, is not to find one’s self suspended between states of being. Rather, it is to be sunk in a notably fertile and active realm, one that enables, either in fact or in imagination, the kind of lurid transformations alluded to above. As Groom, Allen, and Smith (2017) have noted, ‘a coastline is an extremely rich and singular space’: as an ecotone—‘a boundary zone where two ecosystems meet and overlap’—it is better understood as an ‘interface’ between two different environments than as an edge or a margin (p. 5). Indeed, the ecotone ‘often has a biological density far greater than that of the areas on either side of it: both the intensity of its life and death cycle and the diversity of its species are greater’ (Groom *et al.*, 2017: p. 5).

The shore, from this perspective, is a space that troubles notions of boundaries and limits: pinning down exactly where the shore begins and where it ends is difficult. Moreover, the difficulty of delimiting the shoreline is exacerbated by humanity’s malign impact on the natural world. The most obvious example of this is, of course, sea-level rise caused by human-driven climate change, which poses an existential threat to human and nonhuman coastal and small island communities (see, for example, Chamber and Chambers, 2007; Weissenberg and Chouinard, 2015; Armstrong and Corbett, 2021). New research also indicates other ways in which humanity is refiguring what it means to think about coastal regions. A recent report in the scientific journal *Nature Communications* shows that a consequence of the continued pollution of the ocean with plastics has introduced ‘an immense floating plastic habitat in the open ocean’, leading to ‘the unpredicted establishment of coastal species in high seas ocean gyres’ (Haram *et al.*, 2021: p. 1). One of the implications of this for the authors of the report is that the ocean can no longer be considered ‘a physical and biological barrier for dispersal of most coastal marine species’ (p. 3). Where exactly does a coastal ecology begin and end, here? This blurring of boundaries, for which much of humanity bears the responsibility, invites the



kind of considerations that thinking with the ecoGothic can assist. The ecoGothic is not simply that which offers a critical lens for examining nature as a haunting realm, a site of fear—reflecting what has been termed the ‘ecophobic’ dimension of the ecoGothic. It is also a mode that reminds us that engagement with the natural world is not benign or neutral, but one fraught with ethical questions about how we engage with nature and, moreover, what our responsibilities are as we seek to represent nature in media and discourse (Estok, 2016).

Some useful implications for coastal studies emerge here. First, what happens, what are the ethical implications, the ecoGothic asks, when we represent the shore as a space of liminality or invest it with qualities that render it placeless? Second, how does thinking with, rather than against, the shoreline’s permeability, its strange boundaries, help us better comprehend the problematic relationship between humanity and nature, especially the ecologies of regions that lie beyond the everyday purview of vast swathes of humanity, such as the deep oceans? For Alain Corbin (1994), there is a prominent Western cultural tradition, inherited from antiquity, that figures the beach as the space where ‘the ocean purges itself and throws up its monsters’ (p. 13). Here, the beach reveals the Gothic horrors of a world beyond the human. But by reorienting this perspective, as we see ecoGothic coastal texts doing, we can imagine the beach as a space where humanity ‘purges itself’, throwing out its own monstrosities to circulate and gather in the ocean’s globe-spanning currents, before making their own uncanny returns as they wash up at our feet. In ‘Flotsam, Jetsam, Lagan, Derelict’ (2018), Lucy Wood’s haunting tale of beaches suffocated beneath endless plastics and waste products, the shoreline is covered in ‘bits of Styrofoam that were exactly the same colour as the sand’ (p. 115): the ocean and tides reshape this non-biodegradable matter and, in the process, generate an eerie artificial double of the beach itself, coating and subsuming that natural beach.

By keeping its attention on the nonhuman life of the shoreline, rather than the shore’s evocative topography and environmental cycles, the ecoGothic suggests another challenge to anthropocentrism. The shoreline is, after all, the place where humanity is most likely to encounter strange and wonderful ecotonal marine creatures and oceanic life. Readers of Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014) will be familiar with the way in which a confrontation with a starfish in a rockpool unsettles the biologist protagonist’s sense of what it means to know, to have knowledge. The longer she tries to make sense of the starfish—the aptly named ‘destroyer of worlds’—the more the assumptions underpinning her knowledge of the world shift out from

under her (VanderMeer, 2015: p. 175). This is a single starfish. In recent years, there have been repeated media reports in the UK of the stranding on beaches of thousands of starfish and other marine creatures, including crabs and lobsters. Even as such strandings are not necessarily unusual, what is striking about the commentary on these strandings is the emphasis that something is amiss with nature or that something has gone wrong—even that the occurrence is ‘apocalyptic’ (*Guardian*, 2021). Such language chimes with more widespread anxieties about the health of the natural world. It is also a productive jumping-off point for considering how we respond when confronted with a sight, even in mass death, of the abundance of life in the coast and coastal waters.

Notwithstanding the ecological fecundity of the shore—indeed, perhaps because of this intensity of biological activity—it remains an unstable environment. Coastal spaces such as beaches are marked by a daily process of erasure and transformation, as the tides sweep in and out twice a day, both throwing organic and inorganic matter upon the shores and dragging it out into the ocean. Erosion operates on the coast on a longer time scale, too, as the ocean’s waves gradually eat away at rocks and soil and, day by day, a country’s coastline is irrevocably changed in subtly different ways. Rachel Carson (2021) speaks evocatively, as ever, of the tidal and atmospheric transformations we might witness on a daily, even hourly, basis at the shore:

‘On all these shores there are echoes of past and future: of the flow of time, obliterating yet containing all that has gone before; of the sea’s eternal rhythms... shaping, changing, dominating’ (p. 280).

This tidal world has its own distinctive temporality, one that finds expression here as a kind of temporal collapsing. To confront coastal time is to find further ways to step beyond familiar or anthropocentric terms of engagement with the natural world. Indeed, for Carson, as it is for many of the writers under discussion in the essays in this issue, ‘[t]he restive waters’ and ‘the cold wet breath of the fog’ of the littoral zone ‘are of a world in which man is an uneasy trespasser’ (p. 279). We hope readers will find much in this edition of *Gothic Nature* that explores the significance of this notion of trespassing—whether unintentionally, out of curiosity, or with intended violence—and the feelings of alienation it prompts. Such work once more makes strange a region that is, after all, to a great degree synonymous in the popular imagination with holidays, tourism, and pleasurable recreation; since the development of

modern ‘seaside culture’ in the eighteenth century, the beach has been curated as a place of socially-sanctioned liberation from social norms, a place where one might let one’s guard down. Into this temporary state-of-affairs, a natural world that signifies in ecoGothic terms might not merely be a cause for terror, but an opportunity for the human to reconfigure their understanding of the world around them.

None of this, of course, is to forget that the coast remains an historically important site of lived human experience and industry, and, consequently, of substantial human-nonhuman interaction. Several of the essays that follow are interested specifically in port-towns and fishing communities and how they interact with, and exist as part of, the ecologies of the coastline. Here, ecoGothic estrangement from a natural world that is weirder and more haunting than commercial industries might imagine (or desire) provides an effective lens for thinking about the overlapping tragedies of ecological despoliation and the neglect and impoverishment of human societies that have variously relied on, benefitted from, or exploited once-abundant resources. EcoGothic stories, enmeshed in a literary mode that has always understood the nonhuman world as possessing forms of agency, have their own ways of expressing the effects of such relationships through supernatural hauntings and weird occurrences. China Mieville’s short story ‘Covehithe’ (2015), for example, brings rotting oil rigs to life. Sunk years ago, they rise and return to the coast, dripping with ‘seawater, chemicals of industrial ruin, and long-hoarded oil’, reminders of past human activity that the sea will no longer conceal (p. 306). ‘Covehithe’ draws attention to coastal communities as sites that are among the first to feel the unintended consequences of extractive industries—the first, that is, after the nonhuman species whose habitats have been disrupted or who themselves have become an extractable resource. As this issue explores, shorelines are also haunted by the violent hunting and extinction of species by colonial powers and by the exploration expeditions and the whaling and sealing industries that partly underpin colonial enterprises.

The intertwined histories of coastal ecologies and human maritime disasters are explored in the essay that opens this special issue: ‘Public Humanities as ecoGothic at the Coast in Ireland and Wales’ by Claire Connolly, Rita Singer, and James Smith, who are all members of the *Ports, Past and Present* project. This rich and engaging article establishes the significance of a public humanities ecoGothic, exploring the ways in which ecological thought and ecological catastrophe are deployed as effective points of reference in the poetic recounting

of human histories of the archipelagic space of the Irish Sea. The authors argue that ‘public ecoGothic involves digital and stakeholder-based public history activities that constitute a form of blue knowledge, sense-making in the face of danger mediated by a sense of ecological anxiety mixed with human feats of bravery, infrastructure, climate vulnerability, tragedy and community identity in equal measure’. Next, Octavia Cade, in ‘The Ghosts of Coastlines: Eco-Poetry and the Oceanic Ecological Gothic’, offers a moving exploration of eco-poetry and stories of the extinction of animal species and ecosystems. Cade explores work by poets such as Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué, Jorie Graham, and Ash Davida Jane, arguing that their work provides a hauntological perspective on vulnerable coastal spaces: this poetry imagines futures haunted by lost species of present and by humanity’s failure to respond with meaningful change to prevent such futures. By examining how ‘the oceanic ecological gothic is increasingly a way of perceiving environment that is set solidly in the future’, Cade also enables us to consider a Gothic mode that is not backwards-looking—haunted by the past—but forward-looking, bringing the future to bear on a present whose coastlines are unsettlingly and tragically haunted by spectres yet to come.

Hauntings and the supernatural also inform C. J. Scruton’s analysis of Conor McPherson’s play *The Weir* (1997) in “‘Howling and Whistling in Off the Sea’: Water, Supernatural Environments, and the Movement of Human and Nonhuman Souls in Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*’. Oceanic waters and coastal locations are important in Scruton’s reading of the play. But this article also offers a valuable reminder of the broader implications of an exploration of ‘haunted shores’ via its exploration of the shores of the River Shannon and the human, ghostly, and fairy figures that interact in this space. Scruton argues that the folkloric fairies of McPherson’s drama both suffer at the hands of human intervention in the natural world while also serving as a reminder of the limits of humanity’s dominion over the more-than-human world.

The shared deterioration of humans—at both individual and communal level—and the nonhuman is emphasised by Virginia Richter in ‘A Grave for Fish: The Haunted Shore in Wyl Menmuir’s *The Many*’. Richter’s compelling reading of Menmuir’s strange novel synthesises the ecoGothic and the psychological Gothic in an exploration of the fragmentation and disorientation that characterises the Cornish fishing community at the heart of this story. Littoral space is defined here, Richter argues, by its mutability and the consequent

epistemological uncertainty it prompts in its human inhabitants; in its depiction of fishing trips that seem only able to catch diseased fish (if any at all), *The Many* (2016) figures the nonhuman lives of the coastal waters as ‘ecospectral reminders’ of two things: a lost connection with the oceanic and the lost community of the port-town. The sense of being trapped within a littoral zone and the violence inflicted by humans on nonhumans also informs Lucy Arnold’s essay, ‘Beaches of Bones: Non-human Hauntings and Legacies of Animal Cruelty in Michelle Paver’s *Dark Matter*’. Arnold’s poignant essay explores Paver’s engagement with Arctic shorelines, particularly the Svalbard archipelago, and situates *Dark Matter* (2010) in relation to historical accounts of European hunting voyages to these shores: the ghostly hauntings of Paver’s novel, Arnold argues, signify as memorials to such violence. Moreover, the story insists on the failure of human efforts to abject the nonhuman Other, as humans seem to transmute into seals, and *vice versa*, entangling the human, and their animal selves, with the objects of their violence.

In ‘The Horrors of Ecofeminism: Exploring the Hidden Depths of Ecophobia in Evie Wyld’s *The Bass Rock*’, Kristy Strange examines the role of the coast—specifically North Berwick in the Firth of Forth—in Wyld’s presentation of masculine violence against women. Strange provides an extremely engaging analysis of the ‘fluid space of the coast’ as a witness to this violence and, furthermore, as a region peculiarly receptive to the queering of normative gender binaries. Wyld’s coast is suggestively associated with the feminine body, and presents a vision of a space in which boundaries—between living and dead, fluid and fixed, human and nonhuman—are powerfully disrupted. In so doing, Strange provides a remarkable reconceptualization of the ‘ecophobia’ so deeply entwined with ecoGothic theory.

Destruction, disorientation, and the spectral dissolution of the human into the nonhuman inform Amy Ainsworth’s study of the Baltic coast in Theodor Storm’s 1888 novella *The White Horse Rider*, ‘Nature as Secret: Alfred Döblin’s Baltic Stones and Theodor Storm’s Gothic Coast’. Ainsworth places Storm’s novella in dialogue with Döblin’s 1924 essay ‘Remarks on Mountains Oceans Giants’, and offers an evocative account of the ontological destabilisation prompted by experiences of the coast and disastrous flooding. Chiming resonantly with a number of other essays in this issue, Ainsworth explores the fraught efforts of characters in *The White Horse Rider* to exert control and establish order in the face of a shifting coastal landscape and a deluge that reconfigures a community’s understanding of their place in relation to a natural world with which they become ‘violently merged’.

Karen Eckersley returns us to poetry, and situates us on the America's eastern seaboard, in 'Fretful Seascapes: Confronting Dark Ecologies in Elizabeth Bishop's Poems of the Shore'. This essay provides a valuable analysis of the emergence of coastal ecoGothic sensibilities in material that is not usually associated with the Gothic mode. Eckersley examines how Bishop's poetry represents 'the rhythmic push and pull of the sea's machinations' in a cycle that 'implicates all beings in a strange and swirling loop' and emphasises how the mortal danger posed by Bishop's coastline helps us 'eschew biophilic presumptions' we might have of this region, and of nature more broadly, in favour of an ecoGothic appreciation. Our next article urges us to rethink a classic of the Gothic canon. In '(Eco)Gothic Doubles: Ocean and Hell in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*', Madeline Potter explores the theological dimension of the littoral and oceanic geographies of *Melmoth* (1820), connecting the text's theological concerns with its Romantic ecocritical dimension. Potter argues that Maturin's ocean—into which the demonic Melmoth is ultimately dragged—functions as a double for hell, and that the narrative's coastal settings operate as 'a space of intersection between ... the physical and metaphysical', where 'the dramatic staging of damnation is most compelling'. Here, the coast is not merely the site in which a sublime ocean might be seen to encroach on terrestrial space, the space of the human; it is also, evocatively, the site in which the terrors of hell might be found 'physically seeping into the world'.

The articles in this special issue conclude with Jennifer Schell's 'The Trouble with EcoGothic Wilderness: The Extinction Stories of the Great Auk and Stellar's Sea Cow'. This article explores two pieces of American nature writing from the 1960s—Allan Eckert's *The Great Auk* (1963) and Corey Ford's *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back* (1966)—and offers an elegiac conclusion to this special issue, via its probing exploration of the role of the ecoGothic in the telling of extinction stories. Schell explores a specifically American vision of the coastal wilderness and the figuration, by Eckert and Ford, of littoral space in the language of Gothic horror and weird fiction. Even as these texts seek to tell important stories of ecological loss, their strangely Lovecraftian prose and apparent subscription to troubling notions of the timeless ahistoricity of the coast work to 'undermine their environmentalist messages about the importance of protecting biodiversity and preserving endangered species'.

We are delighted that the articles keep company with an array of reviews and creative pieces in this issue. The film, television, and book reviews sections have remained broadly themed to ecohorror and the ecoGothic, examining recent texts which tie in with these ideas, some of which agreeably intersect with texts examined in the articles. Meanwhile, the Creative Corner—now in its second year and an area the journal is proud to be growing—flows entirely with the theme of ‘Haunted Shores’. The film and TV reviews cover intriguing texts through an ecocritical lens such as Lorcan Finnegan’s *Vivarium* (2020) and Richard Stanley’s *The Colour Out of Space* (2020). The book reviews cover such eerie fiction titles as Evie Wyld’s *The Bass Rock* (2020), Daisy Butcher’s edited collection *Crawling Horror: Creeping Tales of the Insect Weird* (2021), and Darcie Little Badger’s *Elatsoe* (2020) and explore critical works such as Elizabeth Parker’s *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods and the Popular Imagination* (2020), Sue Edney’s *Ecogothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2020), and Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles’ edited collection *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene* (2021). The Creative Corner brings together a variety of different forms, from short films and short stories to poems and creative essays. Each of our creative contributors were asked to write a short critical accompaniment on how their work engages with the subject of haunted shores and the broader themes of the journal and you can take a wander through these immersive works to interact with lost shellfish, the poetic darkness of the seas, and confront in a unique way the true horror of our creation and consumption of plastics and their unending afterlives in the ocean.

Taken as a whole, we hope this edition of *Gothic Nature* goes some way towards foregrounding the importance of the coast to the Gothic tradition and of the richly rewarding potential ecoGothic critical perspectives offer for the further analysis of this topography. It is our hope, too, that others will follow these essays down to the shore, to peer into the strange wonders of the rockpools, to examine what might lie beneath the shifting sands, and to see how the Gothic’s tides might continue to turn. Finally: we are grateful to the editors of *Gothic Nature*, Elizabeth Parker, Michelle Poland, and Harriet Stilley for supporting this special issue and providing so much by way of invaluable assistance during its production. We owe thanks, too, to all of our contributors for their insightful and provocative analyses of the coastal ecoGothic—and for all their work as we have readied the issue for publication.



## BIOGRAPHIES

**Emily Alder** is Lecturer in Literature and Culture at Edinburgh Napier University, where she teaches literature and film from the nineteenth century to the present. Her research interests lie in literature and science and the environmental humanities, especially in the nineteenth century and in Gothic, weird, and science fiction. She is author of *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), Editor of the journal *Gothic Studies*, and a co-founder of Haunted Shores.

**Jimmy Packham** is a lecturer in English literature at the University of Birmingham, with research specialisms in American literature, the Gothic, literature and the voice, and oceanic and coastal studies. He is the author of *Gothic Utterance* (UWP 2021) and of several articles and chapters on maritime fiction and nonfiction and the oceanic Gothic. He is currently co-writing a book on the human history of the seabed with Dr Laurence Publicover (Bristol) and a study of the coast in British Gothic fiction; he co-runs the Haunted Shores network.

**Joan Passey** is a Lecturer in English at the University of Bristol where she specialises in nineteenth-century seascapes and coasts. She is a BBC AHRC New Generation Thinker and has appeared on BBC Radio 3. She has previously published *Cornish Horrors: Tales from the Land's End* (2021) with the British Library and her monograph, *Cornish Gothic*, is under contract with University of Wales Press.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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## Public Humanities EcoGothic at the Coast in Ireland and Wales

*Claire Connolly, Rita Singer, and James L. Smith*

### ABSTRACT

The Gothic clings to Irish and Welsh coasts and finds voice through strange stories. Centuries of accumulated death and tragedy forms a dense web of sorrow with particularly prolific roots in the literature, songs, and stories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These traditions resonate within the longer history of lives and vessels lost in the Irish Sea, becoming part of what Gillian O'Brien has described as the 'ring of sorrow' encircling Ireland, and the wider archipelago, 'binding together communities who have suffered maritime tragedies like beads on a rosary'. This paper explores the Gothic resonances that cross the Irish Sea and some of the conundrums of expressing this material through digital and stakeholder-based public history activities. These manifestations are a form of blue knowledge, sense-making in the face of danger mediated by a sense of ecological anxiety mixed with human feats of bravery. The case studies of this essay originate from the collection of the *Ports, Past and Present* project, an initiative funded by the European Regional Development Fund through the Ireland Wales Cooperation programme.

'The salt is in the wind where the beach bellows wide,  
In the night, in the proud Port town.  
On Newry Street, smell it in the tightly terraced rows  
Through the windows where the grain falls down.

Past the Stanley Arms, smell it on the pavements  
In the dregs of the landlord's beer,  
And it sits in the cracks of the Roman Fort  
Where the dead watch the boats draw near.

In the church yard, on the stones of sleeping sailors,  
Who the sea took all for its own,

The salt is in their soil and it holds them there still  
In the dark, a grain for a bone.

It flies, a salt spectre, on Hyfrydle chapel's towers  
stinging in the rain in the breeze,  
It's looking for its kin in the face of a lover,  
Down the lanes, in the gorse, past the trees.

It speeds in the night, past Penrhos Feliw  
The salt on the standing stone,  
Then it sees her awake, a drift in the dark  
A woman in the wind all alone.

She walks by the boom of the sea by the moon,  
The salt now settled in her hair,  
It mingles with the water falling down on her face,  
for her sailor is no longer there.

They rode their bikes here, the salt in their spokes  
With the scent of cowslips by the shore,  
and they walked to their chapel, under big open skies,  
and prayed not to be riven by War.

His Captain had called him out to her sea,  
So he gave her his dagger of gold,  
The salt crusted thick on the side of his ship  
and on her skin, in Porthdafarch, in the cold'.

Gillian Brownson, 'Salt, or Evelyn on the Shore' (2021).

In 'Salt, or Evelyn on the Shore', Holyhead poet and creative practitioner Gillian Brownson (2021) recalls a story of a romantic relationship that fell victim to the power of the sea and the shaping force of history. The poem began with Brownson's encounter with a Dutch sword on display at the Holyhead Maritime Museum. Her subsequent research into the history of this

resonant object led her to the story of Jan Christiaan Van Aller, a Dutch mariner who landed in Holyhead following the German invasion of the Netherlands in 1940. There he met a local woman by the name of Evelyn Hughes to whom he gifted the sword, known in the Museum as ‘the Midshipman’s Poniard’ and displayed alongside other maritime curios. Van Aller returned to sea, posted to the Dutch East Indies, and Hughes held onto the sword for many years until her daughter finally gifted it to the museum (see Holyhead Maritime Museum, 2020). Brownson’s poem is inspired by the stories that the sword has accrued over its sixty years on Anglesey, including deeply personal recollections of a presumed death at sea.

In some ways a familiar lyric poem of loss, ‘Salt, or Evelyn on the Shore’ is haunted by forms of absence that are deeply placed in their island context: salt tears mingle with salty water while the sea’s presence is at once pervasive and spectral. Traversing the landscapes of Holy Island and Anglesey, including its ancient sites and graveyard, the poem alights in Porthdafarch where it contemplates the ‘salt crusted’ entanglements of memory and loss. Despite its invocation of a familiar flora (cowslips, gorse) and a recognisable topography, the poem remains haunted by a sense of secrecy, expressed in terms of a constellation of images connected to ideas of depth, cold and distant violence.

What happens when public humanities work, located at the perimeter of the Irish sea, speaks in a gothic idiom? ‘Salt, or Evelyn on the Shore’ is a good place to start a conversation about public humanities ecoGothic at the coast. Commissioned by *Ports, Past and Present* (hereafter *PPP*), an initiative funded by the European Regional Development Fund via the Ireland Wales Cooperation programme, the poem probes the raw edges of a real-life story and draws out its ecological resonances. Attuned to the bleakness as well as the beauty of Anglesey, ‘Salt’ expresses an understanding of island life that mingles environmental and Gothic modes.

Public humanities ecoGothic at the coast consists of fundamental affective tropes and idioms drawn from the Gothic as cultural mode, brought into connection with lived experience of loss and shadowed by looming environmental dangers. Public humanities, in this context, means thinking about ‘how the humanities are viewed and provide a road map for changing the world’ (Smulyan, 2020) while also being aware of tensions between what Margaret Kelleher (2020) calls ‘the arts as a form of social cohesion’ and the disruptive, jagged forces of culture and creativity. As traces of tragedy mingle with the vibrancy and polychromatic



melange of life, mediated by the ecologies of the coast, coastal ecoGothic may help to explore the ‘challenge’ articulated by John Brannigan et al (2019): ‘to understand how some forms of cultural valuation are connected intimately to forms of ecological catastrophe’ (p. 298). The case studies below explore our experiences of narrating coastal regional identities in combined public humanities and Gothic modes.

In using Brownson’s poem to capture a sense of the reach and potential of public humanities ecoGothic at the coast, this essay seeks to understand how Gothic operates within the Anthropocene, considering the ways in which past tragedies connect to environmental fears secreted within narrative and memory. T. J. Hillard (2019) reminds us that ‘[i]f we consider [fearful secrets] in the context of the story of ecocriticism, the Gothic mode (or the “ecoGothic”) urges us to ask: What has ecocriticism been burying? What has it been keeping out?’ (p. 28). Nature writing and stories about a particular environment—in this case the coast—can be perceived in a purely pastoral or positivist mode, but to do so would be to ignore the anxiety that lurks at their edges. The conventions of the Gothic as genre cling to the coast because they are a good match for its preoccupations. Littoral spaces bring to the surface the ecophobia and caution that characterises the human condition. Jimmy Packham (2019) points out that the coast and the Gothic are entwined through shared liminal and anxiety-inducing indeterminacies:

‘While definitions of the genre are quick to point out the nebulousness of the gothic, a recurrent theme of this fiction is the occupying and transgressing of borders and boundaries—political, cultural, spatial, ontological, epistemological, and so on—in order, on the one hand, to spook readers with the threat of such transgressions and, on the other, to highlight the constructed nature of those limits’ (p. 206).

The specifically environmental register of this uncertainty and border-anxiety is expanded upon by Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland (2019) in the inaugural issue of *Gothic Nature*

*Journal: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic*. They explain why it is that the traces of coastal tales cling with such tenacity:

‘We see the “overwhelmingness” of Nature reflected in the fact that canonical Gothic is frequently associated with the sublime, an important precursor to Gothic Nature, which emphasises the awesome, exciting, and terrifying aspects of landscape. Ambience is vital to the Gothic and we have many instances in which it is the natural world that provides much of this ambience’ (Parker & Poland, 2019: p. 3).

The Gothic resonates with coastal communities and their folkloric imagination because the coast and the Gothic are matched in their confusion regarding and transgression of borders, physical and ontological. Gothic *nature* specifically adds to this enduring influence by merging terror in and wonder at the natural world with Gothic uncertainty, melding the character of bioregion and fluid marine boundaries. As a result, a great deal of the power of Coastal Gothic stems from human anxieties about the uncertain nature of the coast itself coupled with the anxieties originating from thrills and fears of corporeal transgressions (e.g. the monstrous) and that of environments. In Ireland, Jack Fennell (2020) has made a case for the role of landscape in the monstrous: haunting and disrupting neat categories, a heterotopia or space of crisis. In an age of Anthropocene upheavals and economic uncertainties generated by the twin forces of climate crisis and Brexit, the Irish Sea has merged Irish and Welsh Gothic with twenty-first century fears about the constitutional state of the region, coastal erosion and disruptive weather events (see Connolly, 2021; Evershed, 2021).

### **Irish Sea Gothic**

The Gothic has long been familiar to the inhabitants of the North Atlantic Archipelago, embedded in some of its most famous works of literature and shared across these islands over centuries, including Mary Shelley’s classic novel, *Frankenstein* (1818). When north-easterly winds carry Victor Frankenstein from the Orkneys to the coast of Ireland, Shelley asks her readers to imagine islands joined by sea, buffeted by wind and weather. Victor’s ‘skiff’ must battle with prevailing south westerly winds while navigating treacherous Hebridean currents.

Shelley may have had in mind the writing of her father, the Gothic novelist William Godwin, for whom Ireland as fatally entangled with Britain and ‘a place of less security than most other countries which are divided from it by the ocean’ (Godwin, 1794, Vol. 3: p. 93). That image of an insecure island shadowed by injustice is ramified in the shadows cast within the literature of archipelagic sea crossings. In Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), the ship that transports the vampire from eastern Europe to the eastern shores of Britain has been read as ‘a capstone to a long tradition of nautical and maritime gothic in literature and legend’ (Alder, 2016: p. 4; see also Trower, 2021). The great twentieth-century teller of ghost stories, M. R. James, meanwhile, situated some of his most famous tales on the eroding East Anglian coastline, at the edge of ‘the monstrously avenging, unstopably advancing North Sea’ (Armitt, 2016: p. 107; see also Bacon & Whybray, 2021: p. 218).

According to Jane Aaron’s (2013) study of Welsh Gothic, ‘coastal spots frequented by smugglers or wreckers’ were teeming with stories of ghosts and hauntings during the eighteenth century (p. 14). The Dolgellau-born surgeon, antiquarian and writer Thomas Richards explored the effects of great storms not just for ships foundering in the water, but also for the coastal communities who tried to save lives. In his short story ‘Alice Denby’, first published in 1825, Richards mingles childhood memories of All-Hallows Eve, which include various practices of divination still in use in the Barmouth area around 1800, with descriptions of a dramatic wrecking occurrence during ‘a sore night for the sailors’ with a white foaming sea described as ‘the mermaid driving her flocks ashore’ (2017: p. 28). Further south, along the Pembrokeshire coast, mermaids were less associated with storms, but more with sightings of mercurial people and sharing some traits with fairies. In folklore, the Plant Rhys Ddwfn were a tribe of magical people who lived on their own enchanted island just off the coast, but who frequented the markets at Fishguard, Cardigan, Milford Haven and Haverfordwest, all towns with considerable port activity up to the nineteenth century (Davies, 1911: pp. 89-92; Singer, 2021b). Ireland has similar legends of the *Sí* or fairy folk, especially surrounding the supernatural coastal events of November 10<sup>th</sup>, St. Martin’s Night, when fishermen must never take a boat out to sea (Smith, 2020b). On Anglesey, the supernatural attaches to several holy wells that used to be venerated for their healing powers, whereas others attracted pilgrims with more sinister motives. The coastal Penrhos estate was home to such a cursing well until the farmer on whose land it was located destroyed it because of the busy stream of visitors who caused damage to his property (Singer, 2021a; Stanley, 1872: p. 256).

These traditions resonate within the longer history of lives and vessels lost in the Irish Sea, becoming part of what Gillian O'Brien (2020: p. 112) has described as the 'ring of sorrow' encircling Ireland, and the wider archipelago, 'binding together communities who have suffered maritime tragedies like beads on a rosary'. In centuries-old literary and folk traditions, Irish and Welsh coasts invoke the Gothic through strange stories of drowning, shipwreck, suicide and smuggling. The ecologies and bioregional imaginaries of the Irish Sea basin knit adjacent coasts together as stories, imaginaries and tragedies span the crossings that define it. The resulting accumulated death and commemoration found expression in the songs, and stories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as echoed within Brownson's poem.

Histories of a haunted shore run deep in the Irish Sea region meaning that a version of Public Gothic is well known to visitors. Ireland is home to a rich folklore of the sea and millennia-long thalassic mythologies. The Welsh coast exhibits a mirrored version of this aesthetic, as do the other Gothic coasts explored in papers across this collection. Perhaps less well understood, the public *ecoGothic* draws on the participation of Ireland and Wales in a region defined by monstrous ecologies of animal, vegetable and mineral, desolate haunts and hidden coastal caves. The ever-changing fortunes of the coastal communities in the region are of crucial importance. Within the PPP cases discussed below, public *ecoGothic* involves digital and stakeholder-based public history activities that constitute a form of blue knowledge, sense-making in the face of danger mediated by a sense of ecological anxiety mixed with human feats of bravery, infrastructure, climate vulnerability, tragedy and community identity in equal measure. The cases discussed offer examples of what Sarah Rich (2021) terms 'hauntographs', identified as 'liminal objects that are capable of negotiating those murky, fluid boundaries between past and present, nature and culture, and particularly life and death' (p. 13). The uncanny ecological ruins of the Gothic are fixed in material form in lighthouses, wrecks, memorials and infrastructures, but also haunt the present by shaping the undercurrent of ecoanxiety experienced by coastal culture. Today, these hauntographs sit alongside more visible phenomena such as storm surges, coastal erosion and the vagaries of ocean-going traffic and trade.

## Public Coastal eco-Gothic

A shared past framed in Gothic modes can bring benefits to communities: London exploits its macabre literary and social history, while the Cornwall of coastal Gothic horrors outlined by Joan Passey in her doctoral research (2020) and in her edited collection of Gothic short fiction, *Cornish Horrors: Tales from the Land's End* (2021), gains a great deal of its bioregional and cultural lure from this identity. In regions such as the Welsh and Irish coasts, suffused by Gothic tropes and yet not strongly defined by them, the question of how much of the public humanities 'mix' should be Gothic—and coastal—in nature is an important question. Reframing the narrative is a task that cannot be undertaken lightly, but is frequently required to remediate a sense of place in the face of upheaval, such as the collapse of industries, the loss of jobs, a shift in generational and social memory. As Chambers et al. (2021: fig. 5 for summary) put it, shifting the frame is fundamental to 'co-develop more creative and transformative possibilities', but also runs the risk of creating echo chambers if the frame spans conflicted identities with power differentials. When reframing the ecoGothic along with a region, it is important that the result curates the memories, emotions and affects that resonate not only with the visitor, but also with the local community. Lived experience can never be reduced to a spook show, nor would the notion of and discourse on the ecoGothic suggest that it should.

Humanists telling stories of these coasts continuously ask themselves how tragedies and macabre deaths fit into a frame and constructive identity for community. They certainly tell as much of a story as positive stories, and coastal communities retain the grim legacies of the past and its triumphs in equal measure. Tourism cannot exist without also being—to some extent—thanatourism, and nowhere is this truer than in coastal zones. The ecoGothic intrudes when the tenuous relationship between humanity and technology clashes with the often-unforgiving terrain and hostile waters of oceanic spaces. As Emma McEvoy (2016) describes, engaging in Gothic tourism means presenting a place 'in terms of the Gothic' (p: 3). As a result, presenting environment and social life through this frame means, as the metaphor implies, making what is outside of the frame invisible. At the same time, as Simon Estok (2019) reminds us, not all fear of the environment is fundamentally Gothic, and the balance must be maintained:

‘Ecohorror and the ecoGothic are always ecophobic. Antipathies and ecophobia toward nature, on the other hand, often arise from rationally perceived threats to physical survival, such as tsunamis or earthquakes, and clearly do not always rank as ecohorror or the ecoGothic’ (p. 48).

In the communities with whom we work, a wholly Gothic Irish Sea would not be welcome: there are many histories interweaving to produce a complex mix that allows community members to understand themselves with pride while visitors can understand them with admiration. As Estok (2019) suggests, not all fear of and negative emotion towards the coast is ecoGothic: rational fear of loss of life at sea or coastal erosion or extreme weather is only Gothic when glossed as such by culture. The way communities absorb this tension and make sense of it through story is a topic of interest to our project specifically, and to all scholars of the Gothic more broadly. Some elements of coastal life are macabre, others thrilling, and some are ornately Gothic: others are living community problems that should not be made into something gaudy for tourism. Too many Gothic tropes applied without discretion can cause imbalance. An excessive reliance on the Gothic in framing coastal identity risks turning daily life into a spectacle.

In addition to the ethical rationale, there is an equally important commercial tourism reason. Simply put, community preferences and the shaping of narratives that meet them is an important enabler of just blue growth. As Pafi et al. (2020) explain:

‘Developing a systematic understanding of the tourist market that reflects community preferences and needs is a tactical challenge that is valuable to local communities. Lay knowledge and anthropological narratives are useful but normative constructs that give communities a sense of the complexity of markets are also tactically important as Blue Growth will intensify the multiple pressures they face in the future’ (Pafi et al., 2020: p. 9).

Localised manifestations of a littoral life are defined in part by danger in the face of the ocean: the unpredictability of the Atlantic and Irish Sea coasts of Ireland and Wales define the storytelling and folkloric cultures that they nurture. The infrastructures designed to offset and prevent the loss of life caused by the waters are integrated into and captured within the reception of this history of blue tragedy, including lighthouses, lifeboats, the evolution of shipping and the rescue of lives at sea. They define identity, the contours of its negotiation, the aesthetics of its communication to publics large and small, and the kinds of stories taken into the corpus or canon of what is popularly remembered. They mingle with other large-scale hyperobject-like human events, such as the Industrial Revolution, the British Empire and its legacy, the First and Second World Wars and, most recently, Brexit (see Morton, 2013).

The ecoGothic privileges engagement with the political and affective ecologies of Gothic tropes and idioms, seeing them as an essential component of a discourse on subsequent phenomena such as climate crisis, ecophobia and ecogrief. Likewise, seeing the participation of Irish and Welsh coastal communities in a shared regional participation in the Gothic tells us a great deal not only about the present identities of these communities, but also the evolution and potential futures of a specifically coastal Gothic littoral space. The haunting of shores by clinging memories explains much of the character of place in the present and how it came to be storied, but also allows us to anticipate what stories might be told into the future without sanitising the past.

### **Case Studies from *Ports, Past and Present***

With the help of storytelling activities, the *PPP* project seeks to present a depth of narrative across five coastal communities—Dublin Port, Rosslare Harbour, Pembroke Dock, Fishguard and Holyhead—and to bring the past to life for visitors and residents alike. The goal of *PPP* is to increase tourism activity in the ports of the Irish Sea basin and to join stakeholders together in a tourism network. Using a taxonomy established by Chambers et al. (2021), the project engages in a range of knowledge co-production modes aimed at sustainability. The most relevant mode to this essay is that of reframing problems, which can be a key component of efforts to reframe agency, navigate differences, reframe power and brokering power. The modes by which a port community, and a region, understand themselves define a great deal of

which histories are ‘in’ and which are ‘out’, and the scopes of narrative and community agency in self-imagination and self-narrativisation. This is important in the context of the public humanities ecoGothic because the role of Gothic themes and tropes in the constitution of identity forms part of regional and community self-expression. As Susan Smulyan (2020) puts it, contemporary public humanities should be ‘rooted in process and collaboration and dedicated to political activism’, because ‘we don’t do research about communities, we do research with communities and then present what we’ve learned together’. Publicly-funded research projects that address landscapes at once historic and lived have to look ‘beyond the boundaries of the academy, embracing both past and present, and theory and practice, in equal measure’ (Daniels and Cowell, 2011: p. 116).

The stories that are emerging in the corpus of *PPP* are diverse in both theme and affective register. They are both history and living memory, and a reminder of the hardiness of coastal people and their vulnerability, running the full spectrum of coastal Gothic: tragedy, folklore, criminal activity, shipwreck, technology and disruption painted in an often-stark palette of long nineteenth-century flavour. Increasingly, they trace the inescapable entanglement of the human and non-human, the ecologies of Gothic emotion. Coastal Gothic framing is a method for making sense of generations of labour, loss, growth, decline and ecological entanglement. It draws on literary strains of Gothic tropes and themes, but also gives voice to their overall affective resonances and preoccupations in other modes. Some are creative, ranging from tragic to mournful to reflective. Others are historical, detailing gory motifs that titillated the contemporary press and the community alike. Some are a mix of modes, combining the creative and the scholarly, the ‘professional’ and the ‘amateur’ and the positive and negative valences of coastal life. In combination with geolocation, these interactions often trace the endurance of the physical imprints and relicts of intangible cultural heritage, a different form of haunting on the shores of the Irish Sea. Capturing the emotionology of this landscape in a widely consumable public format is difficult, especially when ensuring that stakeholders with a very personal stake in the narrative are happy with the results. In this section we will explore a set of stories that run this thematic gauntlet and consider what decisions they might necessitate by their curators and what messages and modes of coastal living they might engender.



In what follows, we explore a series of stories from our project collection that participate in the themes of the Coastal Gothic. They are tinged with the hidden threat of the ocean and the fragility of coastal life, the vital services of coastal communities in the form of the lifeboat service, the long tail of community trauma and resonances that link nineteenth-century material to the present. When taken together, they demonstrate the longevity of the Gothic and its vital role in modern identity at the coast. These stories also demonstrate that tinges of the ecoGothic permanently tie the human and non-human together, making the story of coastal life inseparable from the whims of the environment and the intrusions of the plant and animal world.

In the case of the famous shipwreck *Alfred D. Snow*—located in the watery estuary that forms the border between Counties Waterford and Wexford—we glimpse the depth of memorialisation embedded into coastal memory (Smith 2020a). Rich (2021) has described shipwrecks as ‘uniquely capable of dismantling the murky, fluid boundaries between past and present, sacred and secular, ‘nature’ and culture, and particularly life and death’(p. 13). This episode of tragic loss of life and heroic performance of the lifeboat service in challenging circumstances is an excellent socio-ecological illustration of her thesis. Steve Mentz’s (2015) account of shipwrecks as a form of ‘ecological parable’ captures the fight against the ocean, documenting its capriciousness and patterns on an intimate local scale. He creates a lasting image of the destruction and the legacy of death at sea as flotsam washes up on the beaches for many weeks and months to come:

‘They’re willing for to risk their lives  
to the coastguards’ house they go  
And they ask the captain for the boat  
And he quickly tells them “No”.  
At last when he gave his consent  
To the gallant hearted crew  
In spite of storm, wind and tide  
To the sinking ship they flew  
But just as they reached the doomed ship  
In hopes some lives to save

They see the last let go the mast  
And sank beneath the wave  
The dauntless Captain Cotter  
With “Dauntless” ship by name  
With courage brave they face the wave  
To their assistance came’ (‘The Alfred de Snow’, duchar.ie).

This poem memorialises and reinforces the double coin that is rescue at sea: heroism and tragedy combined. For every ship in distress off the Irish Sea coast that the lifeboatmen saved, another was lost with all hands. This harsh reality is best observed in the reaction to a wreck off the coast of Wexford that saw the crew of the lifeboat set out to sea under appalling conditions and fail to save the crew. In a piece of weather-themed lore from Passage East, County Waterford, ‘the fishermen fishing near the spot [of the wreck] got warnings of an approaching storm [and] hear cries just like the cries of drowning men. When they hear these cries they make for home at one’ (‘The Fishermens’ Warning’, duchar.ie). Omens and predictions of weather to come tie the ecological into the Gothic, tuning in the community to the capricious changes in weather that characterise that stretch of coast. In another macabre piece of lore, ‘Passage-men for weeks afterwards recovered the bodies. They are all buried at Ballyhack graveyard. The captain’s body was found in a life jacket at Arthurstown strand the next day’ (‘The Wreck of the Alfred de Snow’, duchar.ie). Tragedy and the subsumed discomfort of the ecoGothic are separate, but always close.

The temptation is to focus on the wreck of the *Alfred D. Snow* as either a community tragedy or as a macabre piece of folklore alone, but it can never be just one or the other. As we have seen, fear of the coastal environment is rational and is often openly on display: memorials to shipwrecks, life-boat disasters, drownings, and aeroplane crashes sit side by side—all of which can be found across all of our *PPP* port communities—with macabre mediated folk tales like the story of the *Alfred D. Snow*. As a result of this multifaceted affect, it would be a disservice to those who are the custodians of these stories to turn their community history into something simplified for the purposes of tourism. The long-term memory of the wreck haunts the present, and the medium of the national folklore collection also ensured that the legacy of

community reaction survives, recorded in the early twentieth century when the wreck was still living memory.

In contrast to submerged wrecks, lighthouses represent more visible key components of coastal lore: they are repositories of an identity centred around imperial and industrial engineering achievement, challenging sites that were often erected at great human cost, beacons that saved lives, and lodestones of a particular genre of coastal Gothic ambience. The once lonely life of the lighthouse keeper, now automated, is a central trope of the genre. When crossing the Irish Sea, its lighthouses are impossible to ignore. South Stack, Strumble Head, the Skerries, The Smalls, Tuskar—they mark out the dangerous contours of a stretch of water that has long claimed lives.

The story of Tuskar Rock, so prominent in the shipping lanes entering and exiting Rosslare Europort today, is a sign of the macabre ambience of prominent public locations. The mode in which their story is told is a bellwether for the entire enterprise of telling the stories of coastal communities. When done with nuance, it can be a prism for the multitudes of stories that are possible within this region. If reduced to thrills and chills, it eclipses later perspectives, and tragedies. The story of the lighthouse and its construction on a tiny rocky outcrop is recorded in popular folklore and memorialised by the community of Rosslare Harbour village (Smith, 2020c). It couples a major improvement in shipping safety with large-scale drowning of workmen in harsh and unforgiving conditions:

‘In the Spring of 1813 it was decided to erect a lighthouse on Tuskar Rock. Beams were thrown across it, and connected to it firmly by iron clamps. On this a platform was laid on which huts were erected for 41 workmen.

Six weeks afterwards a terrible storm arose. Some of the men ran naked from their beds to the highest point of the rock, but before the rest could escape a surge swept the huts away and many men were drowned. Those who escaped were clinging to the rock from Sunday at 4 o’clock until Wednesday’ (‘Local Happenings (Murrintown)’, [duchas.ie](http://duchas.ie)).

The men who died building the rock are memorialised in Rosslare Harbour town, but also form part of an ecoGothic mythology. Lighthouses and shipwrecks are such powerful Gothic tropes that episodes featuring them are dragged into the orbit of the Gothic. Despite this powerful magnetism, it is still important to avoid defaulting to the ecoGothic. This is not fiction, although related through folklore in a fictional mode. This is not literature, although it is amenable to ecocritical reading because of the mode of its recording.

For comparison, another more macabre and overtly Gothic companion piece to the Tusker Rock story exists on the other side of the ferry route to Pembrokeshire on another tiny rock in the sea where the Smalls Lighthouse is erected (de Chroustchhoff, 2021a). In a famous story, two lighthouse keepers fell out and became antagonistic to each other, trapped together on a tiny wooden structure in complete isolation for prolonged periods of time. When one of the keepers died of natural causes, his companion, fearing accusations of murder, kept his rotting corpse lashed to the outer face of the lighthouse for the remainder of his tenure, haunted by the increasing odour and consequences of his actions. The story is both a disaster that led to reforms in the staffing practices of lighthouse keepers—set at three men on shift minimum—but also a dripping Gothic confection that has spawned two films entitled *The Lighthouse*: a 2016 Welsh film starring Mark Lewis Jones and Michael Jibson and the 2019 American version based loosely on the episode at a genre (and importantly, at a Gothic) level, starring Robert Pattinson and Willem Dafoe. The ecoGothic nightmare of Dafoe's and Pattinson's descent into isolated madness is simply another layer of adornment upon the already sensationalised Smalls Lighthouse story, which in turn is a story of tragedy and what we might describe as cascading structural failures. Tourism Gothic risks adding a layer on top of community memory and raw emotions that does not fit the source content—a dangerous possibility.

Moving on from the Gothic affordances and risks of *PPP*'s Irish Sea stories, it is worth focusing on the environment itself to explore the *ecoGothic* more explicitly. Another notable nineteenth-century tale of improbable journeys glossed with the Gothic appears in the case of Alfred 'Centennial' Johnson, a Danish-American mariner who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a small dory. He avoided death at sea by clinging to his boat, (allegedly) fought off a shark and eventually washed up, bedraggled, on the Pembrokeshire coast:

‘The inhabitants of Abercastle, Pembrokeshire were much surprised on Saturday [10<sup>th</sup> August 1876] by the arrival on their coast of a seaman named Alfred Johnson in an open boat in which he left Gloucester Massachusetts on the 15<sup>th</sup> June. The boat is called “Centennial” and is only 15ft 6ins keel... After partaking some refreshments at Abercastle he again put to sea, directing his course for Liverpool’ (‘Extraordinary Voyage across the Atlantic’, cited in de Chroustchoff, 2021c).

Johnson is a fascinating case, because the *story* of his crossing has a Munchausen-esque quality. It is impossible to verify any of the more outlandish details of the crossing—Johnson supposedly fought off a shark—yet cross the Atlantic he did. The achievement, even rendered down to its most mundane elements, is still extraordinary. But the story contains layers upon layers of additional reception and adaptation: Johnson’s tale of the crossing is likely to be tall, there is no way to know the full role of reporters and first-hand accounts in the telling, and the legacy of the tale has gained the added inflation of folklore and local legend. Despite all this, it did happen: Johnson was celebrated locally, and the *Centennial* was towed back to Gloucester, MA. The boat can be found today, expertly restored, in the collection of the Cape Ann Museum.

Other stories of improbable survival participate in the dissonances of coastal Gothic at once extreme and every day. In another story from 1859, the villagers of Cwm-yr-Eglwys in Pembrokeshire survived an unprecedented weather event known as the *Royal Charter* Storm—for the ship that it famously claimed off the coast of Anglesey—despite their vulnerable parish church being swept away (see also Jones, 2021). The tones in which the aftermath is described are directed through a mournful and stoically macabre Gothic lens:

‘The congregation in the church, many of belonging to sea going families, were doubtless praying for deliverance but at the height of the storm the tide, driven by the wind, surged through the east door and across the nave, bringing down

the north and east walls of the building. Miraculously, no one was lost or injured in the confusion and all the worshippers managed to escape via the west door. The graveyard however sustained the full force of the waves and was half washed away. Coffins were exposed or broken apart and some were seen bobbing on the water, with the corpses of the recent dead visible to their kinsfolk' (de Chroustchoff, 2021b).

The trope of the Big Storm and its strange revelations—a common Welsh theme along with that of the drowned hundred, *Cantre'r Gwaelod*—is often an omen for the deep, dead animals, strange deposits on the shore or other unusual weather lore. It has attached itself to the small community as a memory of potential extinction. This tale is distinctly ecoGothic because it merges uncertainty about the extent of coastal vulnerability with the anxiety-inducing unpredictability of weather to create a story of hardship and commemoration. In a time of rapid climate change, it also functions as a warning for galloping coastal erosion around the Irish Sea which threatens many coastal villages' future. Today, only the stories remain, and *Cwm-yr-Eglwys* is empty, except for three permanent residents, a host of holiday homes and a car park, the mournful relics of the village and natural beauty most often experienced through the lens of coastal walking, boating and sea swimming. In 2009, poet Emyr Lewis, who knew the place from childhood holidays, wrote a short epitaph that captures the lonely aftermath of a place swept away by time and weather so that only stone remnants and incongruous tourists remain:

'Gwylan haerllug a glaw yn arllwys,  
cŵn, tai haf ac acenion Tafwys,  
tonnau a beddau ar bwys, a chreigle;  
mae rhyw wagle yng Nghwm-yr-Eglwys.

*Impudent seagull and pouring rain,  
Dogs, summer homes and Thames accents,  
Waves and graves nearby and rocks,  
There is an emptiness in Cwm-yr-Eglwys'*

(Trans. Morys Rhys, as cited in de Chroustchoff, 2021b).

## Conclusion

As blue tourism becomes increasingly popular and a valuable way to tie coastal regeneration to the preservation of community histories, the public role of coastal eco-Gothic remains in question. Just as *Dracula* can be interpreted in tones ranging from Hammer Horror to subtle refashioning and psychological drama, so too can shores be haunted by more than ghosts and pirates. Ports, Past and Present has collected coastal Gothic material that touches on every theme of coastal life imaginable, and it is crucial that this material forms an intrinsic component of the project's public humanities storytelling. Such a merging of the Gothic into public narrative requires that distinctions such as that between literary criticism and history, texts and the lives of their authors and 'professional' and 'amateur' scholarship be dissolved. This is wholly appropriate to a Gothic nature, for one of the central tenets of the discourse is the inescapability of a grasping, enveloping ecology populated by the monstrous and strange animal, vegetable and mineral alike. The clinging affective tendrils of the ecoGothic are a dream for the public humanities scholar when used sensitively and sparingly. Its final effect—or affect—is a slow education in the emotional complexities of shores haunted by layer upon layer of complex emotions and often traumatic stories, digested and blended to present an entirely new sense of littoral spaces and their importance.

Although the PPP project is not fully realised at the time of writing, it has become clear that a tourist identity for the Irish Sea Basin is not complete without Gothic and ecoGothic dimensions. Gothic natures reside in every tale, from deposited sand-encrusted traces of tragedy at sea to intruding waters to fragility in the face of unyielding environments. The stoicism and endurance of those who live at the coast remains a rebuke to any urge to exoticise the coast. Only when a balance is achieved in which triumph sits adjacent to tragedy and love is mingled with loss can the multi-faceted experience of a life at the mercy of and attuned to the ocean and the littoral ecology emerge.

This article has suggested both the attractions and limitations of public humanities ecoGothic. While it is true that it is 'useful—maybe even therapeutic' to tell stories that concern

the Gothic pasts of coastal places, there are ethical concerns to bear in mind (Bacon & Whybray, 2021, p. 230). Different publics—the local community, visitors and tourists, observers from afar—experience a rich bricolage of affects when learning about the coast. There are some fearful, traumatic and uneasy stories to be found, expressed with and alongside mediators such as the sea, the sand, the coastal biosphere. By the reckoning of family and local history, much of the coastal Gothic in Ireland and Wales remains close at hand. Deaths are remembered and mourned: they are not presented as fictions, the cruelty of the coastal environment does not exist for atmosphere, and the legacy that they represent is tied to a long sequence of memories and tales. But no history is complete and there is always more room for further research, always adhering to the principle that ecoGothic stories can only be told with and alongside the coastal communities from which they originate.

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**Claire Connolly** FLSW MRJA is Professor of Modern English at University College Cork in Ireland. With Marjorie Howes (Boston College), she is General Editor of *Irish Literature in Transition, 1700-2015* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); as well as editor for Volume 2 of the series, *Irish Literature in Transition, 1780-1830*. She is Project Lead for Ports, Past and Present, funded by the European Regional Development Fund via the Ireland Wales Programme.

**Rita Singer** has a special interest in Cultural Studies of Victorian and Edwardian Wales, ideas of space and place in fictional and non-fictional writing, heritage tourism, maritime history and cultural geography. More recently, her research focused on travel writing from continental Europe about Wales since the mid-eighteenth century and the impact of German submarine warfare on Welsh communities during the First World War.

**James L. Smith** works at the intersection of the blue, environmental, spatial and digital humanities. His monograph is *Water in Medieval Intellectual Culture: Case-Studies from Twelfth-Century Monasticism* (Brepols, 2018). James is the editor of *The Passenger: Medieval Texts and Transits* (punctum books, 2017), and co-editor of the Open Library of the Humanities



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# GOTHIC NATURE



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## The Ghosts of Coastlines Past: Eco-Poetry and the Oceanic Ecological Gothic

*Octavia Cade*

### ABSTRACT

The oceanic ecological gothic produces poetic narratives defined by history, culture, and place. This essay explores the ways in which biological and physical realities of biodiversity loss and climate change have resulted—and will continue to result—in coastlines that are haunted by the loss associated with ocean rise. Extinct or absent organisms, as well as drowned and vulnerable cities, link human activity to ocean transformations and, through metaphor, to the transformation of human identity. The ability of the ecoGothic to reflect human nature is emphasised by the fact that it is human action (and inaction) that is causing the ocean environment to change. This essay argues that the unrestrained consumption of the one is given concrete and threatening form by the devouring rise of the other, resulting in a coastal environment that is haunted by absence.

In November 2020, 35% of the little blue penguin chicks of Matiu/Somes Island in Wellington harbour, New Zealand, died of starvation (Cook, 2021). Warming waters had limited the amount of available small fish, and the chicks could not survive their absence. The effects of climate change are felt on our coastlines as much as any other ecosystem, and those coastlines—and the oceans that they border—are becoming places of death and absence, of grief and remembrance. Seagrass beds disappearing up to ten times as fast as tropical forests (NIWA, 2011), algal blooms smothering shallow water ecosystems, coral reefs bleached to ghostly skeletons. Coasts, long acknowledged as examples of the biological littoral, are more than ever becoming liminal as well as littoral spaces, places where ecological horror can be experienced as well as observed.

This horror has significant and growing crossover with the ecoGothic. Sharae Deckard (2019) refers to the ecoGothic as narratives where ‘land- and water-scapes are themselves extreme, sites of monstrous fecundity that seemingly threaten human civilisation’ (p.

174).<sup>1</sup>This sense of peril is reinforced by Timothy Clark (2020), who uses the phrase ‘Anthropocene horror’ to describe ‘a sense of horror about the changing environment globally’ (p. 61). The prospect of this monstrous, amorphous vengeance on a planetary scale, looming over humanity, is representative of a very oceanic threat, one that is not far removed from the history of the ecoGothic as it applies to forests. Setting aside the extraordinary rate of growth of the kelps, and the fact that kelp forests can be as disorientating and dangerous to travel through as terrestrial forests, there is also the metaphorical image of respiration: the apparent breathing pattern of tides that, if not quite the same as the respiration of forests, at least encourages the perception of the ocean as a living organism rather than a physical system. This impression is reinforced by the descriptions of rising sea levels and the effect that this has on coastal environments: land is swallowed, consumed, eaten up by tides, and vulnerable to storms that would erode it.

Notably, the oceanic ecological gothic is increasingly a way of perceiving environment that is set solidly in the future. Comparisons between the ecological relationships of present and future might be referred to as the future-now, where the effects of climate change, for instance, are being observed and recorded, and their future consequences extrapolated. Poems that explore the future-now are arguably speculative, in that they predict possible futures, albeit futures that are predicated on that contemporary evidence. The Gothic is often connected to the traumatic past (Beville, 2014: p. 52), and the shift between the traumatic past or present, to the traumatised present or future, is itself an unsettling sort of transformation. It is also a change that is especially well-placed to exploit the future losses connected with ocean rise, ocean warming, and climate change.

One of the forms that can be used to best explore this loss is eco-poetry, which has a history of both engaging with the natural world and exploring loss through the practice of elegy. As poets such as Jorie Graham (*Sea Change*, 2008) and Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué (*Losing Miami*, 2019) explore the effects of climate change, biodiversity loss, and sea level rise on biology and culture, their narratives begin to engage with the ideas of consumption and reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> Deckard (2019) goes on to argue that, in the ecoGothic, ‘nature becomes a character, often embodied in spirit-form’ (p. 174). I have to confess, when I first read this passage I read it as *spite*-form: the idea that nature was retaliating, that it had *motivation*, seemed particularly apt, and is an interpretation that underlines the horrific within the ecoGothic.

Consumption on an individual and a societal level becomes reflected by the increasing consumption of oceans, and the boundaries between human, nonhuman, and watery bodies begin to blur. In the works of Jarod K. Anderson (*Field Guide to the Haunted Forest*, 2020) and Ash Davida Jane (*How to Live with Mammals*, 2021) however, this blurring comes to be seen as simultaneously natural and uncanny, reinforcing poetic engagement with the ecoGothic.

### **Engaging with Loss in the Future-Now**

Eco-poetry has the capacity to marry science and a quiet, burning horror, by visualising the haunted environments of present and future. It no longer simply skirts the ecological Gothic; rather it brings fear and death and sorrow at a failing sublime into the ecologies we are turning into wastelands. This is especially clear when the subject of that poetry exists within a littoral (and liminal) zone. The effects of climate change are becoming ever more apparent, and are likely to have profound consequences on our experiences of coastal regions. Jorie Graham's collection *Sea Change* (2008), for example, contains poems that explore loss and extinction, and which are solidly set in the future-now. The title poem, in particular, fits extremely well into the idea of mourning and loss. It is in parts reminiscent of the little blue penguins of Wellington harbour, in that it catalogues the increasing absence of species from the marine environment. Narrating the consequences of warming ocean currents, the 'Sea Change' poem relates that:

'plankton is forced north now, & yet further north,  
spawning too late for the cod larvae to hatch, such  
that the hatch will not survive, nor the  
species in the end' (p. 4).

As with the little blue penguins, the reproduction of the cod is compromised due to lack of food caused by warming waters. Similarly, in the poem 'Positive Feedback Loop', the existence of famine and death is again mentioned:

'fish are starving to death in the Great Barrier Reef, the new Age of Extinctions is  
now' (p. 42).

It is especially interesting to relate Graham's images of absence back to Deckard's characterisation of the ecoGothic as a site of 'monstrous fecundity'. In such poems as the above, it is the *lack* of fecundity that is the problem. Where, then, does the monstrosity lie? There are several possible explanations—or explorations—of fecundity that may play into these instances of starvation.

The first relies on the fact that ecosystems are comprised primarily of relationships. Changes that have negative consequences for one organism may be positively received by another. Some fish on the Great Barrier Reef may starve, but the colonisation of Reef by the crown-of-thorns seastar (*Acanthaster planci*) is a model of enormously successful reproduction, albeit one that exists to hideous effect. The crown-of-thorns seastar feeds on coral, and warming waters have caused it to migrate south and feed upon the Great Barrier Reef. The population numbers, and the consequent hunger of those voracious appetites, is immense: it is estimated that up to half of the coral loss on the Reef is due to the crown-of-thorns (Uthicke et al., 2015). The starvation of the fish, then, is directly related to the monstrous fecundity (and the proportionately monstrous hunger) of the seastar.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the image of swarms of voracious mouths, the seastars and organisms like them do not actually rise to the level of threat to human civilisation, as Deckard describes aspects of the ecoGothic. Their destruction and unwavering consumption can act as metaphor, however. It is a sad irony that the behaviour of the seastar is a reflection of the species whose actions have allowed for the seastars' migration to begin with. The ecoGothic is frequently so disturbing, and so compelling, because it pits the protagonist against the natural world in ways that emphasise the connection between the two. The connection between wonder and terror is substantially increased if the key factor linking those two emotions is recognition: the acknowledgement that something monstrous and alien is both like and unlike ourselves. The crown-of-thorns seastar has provoked such levels of revulsion that attempts in pest control include hacking the seastar to pieces with a machete, or injecting it with vinegar so that it may dissolve from the inside out (Boström-Einarsson & Rivera-Posada, 2016). And yet, the same

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<sup>2</sup> In much the same way, the removal of cod—or penguins—from the oceanic ecosystem may diminish the biodiversity of the region, but it also changes the species composition and population profiles of the biota that remains.

out of control consumption which prompts this violence is, for human observers, the most readily identifiable feature—and the most shared characteristic—of the seastar.

Climate change is a result of that thoughtless overconsumption. Arguably, it is worse: the seastars do not know that they are destroying one of Earth's most iconic ecosystems. Humans, however, *do* know, and they continue to increase their carbon emissions despite this knowledge, thereby increasing ocean temperatures and further encouraging seastar migration. The truly monstrous consumption, the monstrous fecundity, is both ours and self-inflicted. Fred Botting (2002) claims that 'Gothic signifies a writing of excess' (p. 1), and arguably, the presence of uncontrolled consumption in the ecoGothic is an example of this excess. Uncontrollable, irrational consumption has an effect not only on the individual and their community but, in the case of the ecoGothic, on their environment as well. Botting continues: 'Nature, wild and untameable, was as much within as without. Excess emanated from within, from hidden, pathological motivations that rationality was powerless to control' (p. 12). The capitalist focus on ever-increasing consumption is, in the light of subsequent environmental effects such as climate change, wholly irrational. Yet it continues, as if humans are as incapable of self-control as seastars. Such is not only a culture of excess, but also a culture of Gothic indulgence.

A poetic narrative that places humans at the edge of the oceanic gothic can be seen in Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué's collection *Losing Miami* (2019), which is in many ways an example of the almost-apocalypse of the future-now mixed in with eco-poetry and the ecoGothic. This collection looks at the future loss of the city to rising tides, and if other aspects of the future oceanic gothic come with these awful, horrifying connotations of starvation and sterile habitats, *Losing Miami* is securely located within the imagery of consumption, of a breathing, rising, *hungry* natural force come to sweep away human endeavour. It is interesting to look at this collection in the light of data that predicts the effects of ocean rise on the Florida coastline (SeaLevelRise.org, n.d.). Miami is unlikely to be the only city to be significantly affected, but what *Losing Miami* imagines is a world where the apparent solidity of cities, and of the cultures built around them, is a frangible thing, dissolving almost as coral reefs dissolve in the warming waters that come with sea level rise.

Furthermore, the dissolution of this city, its future engulfment by tides is, for many, an accepted future. The collection begins with the poem ‘Losing Miami I’, and its acknowledgement:

‘I was raised in a city  
that could be swallowed  
by the sea within  
the next century’ (p. 17).

Such an acknowledgement is not only disturbing, but also isolating: it is the absence of future history—and not only a loss of individual history, but a loss of family history as well, and of culture. Ojeda-Sagué compares the loss of Miami to the loss of Cuba: ‘I wonder what it would be like to be exiles from Miami, to have the city be an effect only of memory and simulation as Havana is for the Cuban exile’ (‘Losing Miami I’, p. 21). The potential experience of exile, then, of alienation from a loved and lived-in environment, can be embedded in the experiences of similar displacements, and the loss of geography and culture due to political conflict, for example, may act as a sort of imaginative template for similar losses resulting from sea level rise.

This sense of disconnection, of absence and yearning, is difficult to navigate. Katharina Kalthoff & Leonie Windt-Wetzel (2021) state that ‘Endangered littoral landscapes and the related loss of home environment cause a distorted sense of place and challenge narratives of national and cultural identity’ (n.p.). The reaction is supremely emotional, and amidst the grief and the loss and the sense of simulacrum is anger. Ojeda-Sagué is very clear about this: ‘I am trying not to show it but I am enraged. I feel cheated by consequences I cannot fully comprehend. I feel guilty enough in causation but unequipped to remedy my/our actions’ (‘Losing Miami II’, p. 54). The guilt is connected to the anger, and to a sense of disbelief. It can be difficult to accept that humanity is capable of affecting such a monstrous body of water as the ocean. It can be difficult to accept, as well, that humanity is equally capable of adjusting their behaviour so that cities such as Miami might be saved, or the damage to them mitigated. This is a dual responsibility: cause and prevention, and while the former is enough, the latter

is increasingly seen as insufficient. Reading Ojeda-Sagué's anger, the loss of Miami appears, if not certain, then at least highly probable. Why waste anger on improbability?

Matthew Griffiths (2017) comments, of *Sea Change*, that Graham 'recognises that we are attempting to sustain a sense of ourselves and our cultural practices rather than our environments' (p. 217), and this is something that *Losing Miami* also grapples with. The prospect of sea level rise is frequently interpreted in purely physical terms: debates as to how much land will be swallowed by the ocean, or how much infrastructure will be rendered either vulnerable or unusable. Deckard's monstrous fecundity, when applied to the ocean, may not describe the unbounded reproduction of particular species—although the increased likelihood of smothering, suffocating, and toxic algal blooms is something also associated with increased pollution and warming waters (Gobler, 2020)—but it is certainly related. The fecundity, here, lies not only in the looming and unstoppable expansion of oceanic waters, but the fecundity of its appetite. The ability of the ocean to increase, to swallow more and more, is an exercise in abundance, assimilating previously terrestrial land and turning it to seabed. As Ojeda-Sagué makes clear, however, this is only the beginning of the loss. The impact on culture, on the personal and community histories that are inextricably linked with place, will be immense. Those things, too, will be consumed by the ocean. It is not only the biological that risks extinction; it is the cultural as well. This, too, can resonate in ghostly ways. If Miami disappears entirely, something of its presence (and absence) will still linger, but in what form? Fred Botting (2012) argues that part of the ambivalence of the Gothic is reflected in 'the doubleness of the relationship between present and past' (p. 22); both the memory, and the continuing lived experience, of cities like Miami are increasingly intertwined, as the history of ecological and cultural loss is repeated again and again. These losses, and the new ways of living that inescapably result, are likely to be especially ambivalent, laced as they are with permutations of guilt and responsibility.

This focus on the possibility of future extinction leaves us re-imagining future coastal environments as haunted, not only by the lost species of the present, but of the choices currently being made to ensure that those species do not survive in the future. Elaine Gan *et al.* (2017) argues that extinct species leave traces in the landscape, artefacts of absence and haunting, and that these ghosts indicate not only the lost past, but the potential for lost futures, those that

occur after current or future extinctions. On a cultural rather than an ecological level, Mark Fisher (2012) argues a reverse relationship, stating that ‘The future is always experienced as a haunting’ (p. 16), in that its relationship with the present sets cultural expectations. Furthermore, Fisher (2014), in writing on lost futures, comments that haunting can be interpreted as a ‘failed mourning’ (p. 22), one characterised by an inability of the mourner (or the mourned) to let go of each other. Combined, these two observations—the ecological past and the cultural future, both haunting the present—indicate an experience of haunting that is anchored to the idea of continually witnessed (and continually *chosen*) absence. Perhaps this is what really emphasises the ‘haunted’ nature of the future ecological gothic; it is a narrative very strongly characterised not only by absence and change, but also by presence. The very act of imagining humans in a post-apocalyptic world—and climate change may very well have apocalyptic scale consequences for the biosphere—presupposes that survival of climate change is a weighted endeavour. Weighted towards humanity, who by present choice have allowed the cod to fail, and the coastal cities along with them. Ojeda-Sagué observes that:

‘the hardest is to concede treasures  
to an imaginary coastline’ (‘Losing Miami III’, p. 71).

and those treasures are cultural as well as geographical, as well as biological. It isn’t just cod and penguins caught up in climate, as the memories of their presence become ghosts imprinted onto a lost landscape. Miami is on the verge of becoming a ghost city. It is becoming a city of the lost, a city that will be lost, and it is a loss that is so incomprehensible in its scale, in the consequences that the Ojeda-Sagué cannot entirely comprehend—can anyone?—that even the first indicators of that loss, present in the storm surges and increasing strength of hurricanes, is hard to fathom.

Fathoming, perhaps, is what eco-poetry is for. The long tradition of elegy and emotion, of engagement with the natural world can, when mapped onto climate and culture, produce an effect that epitomises the ecoGothic, and can imprint current experiences of loss onto the lost shorelines of the future. It is not a loss that is restricted to cultural experiences, or to cities bound up in geographic and oceanographic realities. As Graham’s ‘Sea Change’ reminds us, much of the loss will be biological in nature, but it is in our cultural reactions to changing ecosystems, and to the loss of species, that the approaches represented by her and by Ojeda-



Sagué find common ground. The threat that climate change presents to nonhuman life is a significant one. The Bramble Cay melomys (*Melomysrubicola*) was pronounced extinct in 2016 as a result of climate change (Fulton, 2017), and it is unlikely to be the sole victim (Maclean & Wilson, 2011). In that sense, nonhuman life may be more permanently affected by climate change than human life, and the results of that are likely to be widespread. They are also likely to impact in unusual ways, and it is here that the often interconnected spaces of biology and culture are highlighted. The loss of a city such as Miami is, as Ojeda-Sagué argues, a loss of language and community, but interaction with ecology is also an aspect of culture, and one which, in the ecoGothic, is frequently prioritised.

Increasing biodiversity loss has led to localised disappearances from an ecosystem and even extinction. Species loss changes the human experience of environment. This may be an anthropocentric assertion, implying as it does that such an impoverished human experience is the most important aspect of ecological devastation, but such relationships are included in a systemic approach to ecology. The growing understanding of the phenomenon of ecological grief is a case in point. Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis (2018) note that for people significantly affected by climate change, ‘grief and mourning were prominent and recurring themes as people struggled to make sense of the environmental changes wrought upon their loved home environments’ (p. 276). Humans are social and loving animals whose lives are deeply embedded within an ecosystem, and the relationships they form with the nonhuman organisms in that ecosystem are complex and strongly felt. The example of the little blue penguins which opened this paper is characteristic: the penguins are a popular and beloved presence, and their exploits are highly-viewed topics of news articles—see, for instance, their repeated attempts to nest underneath a Wellington sushi shop (RNZ, 2019). That baby penguins are dying due to human acts is a painful realisation, and if the population in question were to cease to exist then the ecology and culture of Wellington harbour would be the poorer for their absence. The penguins would be missed, and they would be mourned. The extent of that potential grief is arguably in question—is it sufficient to change patterns of behaviour that promote anthropogenic climate change?—but that it exists is certain.

How, then, does the ecoGothic engage with ecological grief in its exploration of ocean environments? The looming presence of the future-now, the seeping in of expected and braced-

for absence is only partially speculative. Engaging with ecosystem loss as it is experienced today provides a template for future inevitabilities of mourning. Such is the subject of Ash Davida Jane's collection *How to Live with Mammals* (2021), which mirrors present and future losses as a way of navigating future ecological mourning. In the poem 'marine snow' she says:

‘I don’t  
want to eulogise anything’ (p. 47).

The act of eulogy is a formal acknowledgement of loss, and the loss of a species is a curious mix of knowledge and ignorance:

‘does the last  
of anything know  
it’s the last’ (p. 46).

Jane queries, and it is arguable as to whether this question makes the sense of loss more tragic than less. Either way, for many it is a loss that appears unfathomably difficult to navigate.

‘I’m not built  
for this kind of grief’ (p. 46).

Jane admits, but then who is? Humanity has experienced extinction before. The scale of what Elizabeth Kolbert calls ‘the sixth extinction’, (2015, p. 3) however, is something that is in human experience unprecedented.

The sheer scale of biodiversity loss in the oceans will touch even the most celebrated marine ecosystems, and the most charismatic ocean species, regardless of any protections that their fame may provoke. The repeated bleaching events in the Great Barrier Reef is one example of this; the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss on marine mammals is another. In the poem ‘taxonomic loss’, Jane considers grey whales and their disappearance from the Atlantic ocean: ‘I call a name but the named thing has vanished ... salt water rushes to fill the absence’ (p. 41). That replacement of the whale body by the salt water that occupies the space where the whales would have been is an immediate image of absence. It is also one

of presence, the looming spectre of uninterrupted water that is ever more homogeneous, more purely water than before. An expanse of water, furthermore, that is ever more hostile to life, incapable as it is of supporting it. This is an assertion specific to whales, however; ecosystem change can benefit some organisms at the expense of others. Many species of jellyfish, for instance, are liable to benefit from oceanic warming, leading to an oceanic environment that is increasingly gelatinous (Richardson *et al.*, 2009).<sup>3</sup>

If we interpret the ocean through the lens of the ecoGothic, do the constituent populations of the ocean alter that perception? Are jellyfish more redolent of the ecoGothic than whales, are red tides of algae more representative of the ecoGothic than seagrass beds or kelp forests? Perhaps this is something that can only be decided in retrospect, in which case the response to other extinctions, those less contemporary and less fraught with emotion and responsibility, may be illuminating. Jane's 'love poems when all the flowers are dead' is a litany of creative response to the extinction of the dinosaurs, yet such responses can only be limited: 'you can dress up a skeleton as much as you want but it still looks dead' (p. 62) she says, and this is undoubtedly accurate. As the poem states, however, there is more to museums than dinosaurs, and the stuffed birds behind glass, reconstructed to look more alive than dinosaurs, are representative of more modern extinctions. Such a museum may articulate a grey whale skeleton for the edification of visitors, but even covered with fake skin and made to look alive it is still profoundly dead.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Dreadful and the Sublime: Identifying with the Oceanic Gothic**

If Gothic literature is an often uncomfortable—and deliberately uncomfortable—mix of wonder and terror, shot through with the fear of death, then the ecoGothic can be interpreted through the same expectation and lens. The prospect of sea level rise and the inundation of cities, as well as the potential loss of biodiversity within those waters, is not one that, on the face of it, inspires a great deal of wonder, if wonder is taken as an emotion linked to awe and

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<sup>3</sup> And increasingly redolent of horrifying ecoGothic, given the spectral appearance of many jellyfish. Notably, species include the ghost jellyfish (*Cyanea nozakii*) and the giant phantom jellyfish (*Stygiomedusa gigantean*), both of which invite descriptions of haunted waters.

<sup>4</sup> On a recent visit to Te Papa, the national museum of New Zealand located in Wellington, I observed under glass a specimen of giant squid. Preserved as it was, almost pickled, signs of decay were still clearly visible in the looseness and damage of the skin. It was an exhibition piece that verged on the eerie and the unreal.

inspiration. Arguably, this is because of the sheer devastation and destruction and loss that would occur if a city like Miami were to be consumed by climate change. Recalling the ‘distorted sense of place’ described by Kalthoff&Windt-Wetzel, Fisher’s ‘failed mourning’ may in fact be a *distorted* mourning for a place that has become (or is in the process of becoming) unfamiliar; an uncanny home where grief for what is—somewhat ambiguously—left behind is undermined by loyalty to what remains after waves of ongoing loss. It is a loss that would likely come with a great deal of death, likely to be suffered primarily by the underprivileged and marginalised populations who lack the economic resources to relocate to less vulnerable environments. This is certainly a prediction that leans more heavily into horror than it does to wonder. Wonder, however, remains something that can potentially be found within the ecoGothic, through an expanded definition of death into something that leads to a transformation of identity rather than a mere termination of bodily life.

When a change in identity occurs, it can have profound effects. These effects can be seen both within the individual and, when widespread, into the community as a whole. And indeed, the change in identity that is proposed by an increasing number of scientists, and by poets such as Jarod K. Anderson, blurs the boundary between individuals and communities until they are nearly identical. It is a change in identity rooted very clearly in evolution and biology. The idea that humans are purely natural creatures, influenced by the same natural selection and mutation as other organisms, is challenging enough for some—the theory of evolution may have widespread scientific support, but it is very far from having universal support in lay populations. That that same biology undermines individuality, making the (apparently discrete) human form as a colony of organisms, can be seen as a further undermining (Ironstone, 2018). The microbiome, the collections of microbial life without which the human body could not function, results in that body containing roughly ten times more nonhuman than human cells, and one hundred times more nonhuman than human genes (Brüssow, 2015). For some, like myself, this shift in identity is an article of true wonder; for others it might be a grotesque undermining of identity, a forced transformation into the other. It is a transformation, moreover, which has its beginning in the oceans.

That all life on Earth is related to each other—admittedly, in many cases the shared ancestor is *very* far back—is already an acknowledgement that breaks down barriers between

the human and the nonhuman. That all such life began in the oceans, however, is acknowledgement of another sort. If the ocean is life's first home, then a lingering connection and identification remains. It does not have the biological connection of kinship that exists between life forms, but it is a connection nonetheless, and one that can emphasise the ambiguously horrifying nature of the ecoGothic. If the ancestors of humanity crawled out of the oceans onto dry land, then the swallowing of cities such as Miami, the fervid, breathing consumption of the new home by the old, harks back to that early habitation. Our experiences of ecosystem—the ecosystem of the self, and the ecosystems which surround us, networks of plants and animals and microbial organisms, living in the environments which we also experience—are linked to our sense of identity. This identity is arguably compromised when one of those ecosystems is oceanic. The lingering connection remains, yet it is inescapable truth that those early ancestors of humanity who crawled out of ocean did not crawl back, and the loss of gills, the inability to breathe beneath the surface of the sea, means that the change in habitat is a permanent one. We are both of the ocean and separated from it, existing at a tension point of relationships that plays particularly well into the ecoGothic.

Anderson, in his collection *Field Guide to the Haunted Forest* (2020), is particularly interested in emphasising the links between human and nonhuman life. Frequently those links are influenced by elements of the oceanic. For instance, in 'The Chain', the body of the reader, and of their mother and grandmother, are presented as links in a chain that:

‘stretches back to the first living cell  
awakening in a young ocean’ (p. 7).

Furthermore, those links are such a fundamental part of existence that Anderson, at the poem's end, argues for an actual equivalence in personal identity between the human body and the sea:

‘Just remember what else you are.  
Your mother. Her mother. The ancient seas beneath a thin, new sky’ (p. 7).

This kinship is further emphasised in 'The Whole', where Anderson traces his ancestry—and by extension, all of human ancestry—to 'the sunlight waters where life began to feel its own strange power' (p. 17). And in the poem 'Family Resemblance' he writes:

‘The landscape is not scenery.

It’s family’ (p. 10).

This conclusion is drawn from the fact that red blood cells evolved to use oxygen supplied by ‘trees and phytoplankton’ (p.10). Had the ocean been different to what it was, the life that evolved inside it would also have been different, adapted to alternate conditions and exhibiting alternate characteristics. This, then, links the imprint of the ocean on the bodies of early life forms to the bodies of their later descendants. In a very real way, the ocean is connected to the human body, and conflation of those two things in the form of metaphor is a common occurrence. Recall the perception of breathing tides, of images of the sea swallowing cities such as Miami: imagery that is connected to the bodily elements of lungs and mouths and gullet.

In the often-fraught spaces between human and nonhuman, identification with the ocean can be an almost transgressive act, and one that blurs the boundaries of identity. For all that there may be wonder and a sense of awe in this identification, the increasing threat of sea level rise, and the increasing frequency and strength of hurricanes and other storm-based climate events, ensures that the ocean can also be perceived as a slowly increasing and unstoppable threat. There is little that can stop the rising tide, and the possibility of enormous and unending consumption, of destruction, balances out the wonder of identification with horror. There’s no possibility of bargaining with the ocean; for all the trappings of distant kinship, there can be no communication. If you are startled by a loud noise and make one in return and nothing answers, says Anderson in his ‘Home Safety Tip’, then congratulations are in order, because ‘You are the monster now’ (p. 5).

This is, after all, the truth. The ocean doesn’t reply; it doesn’t need to. Sea level rise is a dreadful consumption, rife with horror and death and loss, but it is a consumption that reflects, very clearly, the consumption of its descendant-progenitors. Humans may have evolved from the ocean and its primordial life forms, but their contemporary actions, filling the atmosphere with carbon emissions enough to cause significant, long-term climate change, are the direct cause of this particular oceanic rise. And those carbon emissions result, inescapably, from

uncontrolled and conspicuous consumption. The ocean, then, in devouring the shorelines of the present and the future, does so in consequence of (and in mimicry of) the monstrous devouring of the human. The phrase ‘we are what we eat’, or, more aptly, ‘we are what we consume’, has rarely been more relevant. Human consumption leads to oceanic consumption, the human body linked to the body of the ocean yet again.

Layered on top of these horrifying, all-consuming identifications are the experiences of grief and guilt; indeed, they can hardly help existing in narratives where horror and death are so frequently explored. The consuming effects of climate change are not incomprehensible, and there is no softening the calculus of cause and effect that ends in starving penguins and eaten coastlines. The feeling of guilt sends fault lines through identity, with the oceanic gothic encompassing both the odd sensation of sympathy, as the natural world moves in concert with the human behaviour, and the experience of the monstrous other, as familiar settings are drowned, made alien and inhospitable, by water. That water, both the stuff of life and the ending of it, plays into that central ambiguity of the Gothic and the ecoGothic: it is a place of binaries, where opposite elements are melded together in new and challenging ways. Elements of life and death, presence and absence, the human and the nonhuman, and the natural and the supernatural are all played out on shorelines, which are themselves ambiguous and binary environments, and places where the land and the sea come together in continual mutability.

### **The Uncanny in the Oceanic Gothic**

The place of the supernatural in the oceanic ecoGothic is not perhaps as well explored as it is in terrestrial versions of the same. Settings such as woods and forests, for instance, are more typical for the genre. That the ecoGothic is becoming more concerned with marine environments, however, is certain, and much of that may have to do with the elements outlined above: the history of evolution and its beginnings in the ocean, the metaphorical use of bodily characteristics in descriptions of that ocean, and the use of oceanic metaphor as mirror for human behaviour, particularly in regard to the increasing effects of climate change on our coastlines. These elements all have their genesis in the natural, deriving from science and observable phenomena. There is nothing intrinsically *supernatural* about any of them.

There is, however, an element of horror that sits well with the supernatural, and that is the uncanny. One of the primary elements of the uncanny is the recognition of the familiar, interpreted through an unfamiliar or unsettling form. The three elements listed above can certainly, in concert, produce uncanny effects. In Jane's poem 'phosphorescent animals'—a poem that begins with blurring the boundaries of body and the not-body, using the imagery of waves and currents—humans and their artefacts, in the ocean, are compared to the jellyfish that already live there. The poem invites the reader to:

‘drag your arms through the water  
and get caught in strands of plastic                   like gossamer  
                  they wrap themselves around you  
they twist and turn in gauzy white  
and catch the light’ (pp. 22–23).

The images, here, are layered atop each other. The long life of plastic, floating in the ocean, causing death to whatever creature is entangled in it; the abandoned ghost nets which circle in currents, their long strands entrapping animals and slaughtering them there, victims of drowning or strangulation. The half-natural, half-supernatural figure of phosphorescence (or bioluminescence), floating like a ghost; the half-human, half-nonhuman creature of the mermaid, luring in and dragging down. As with Anderson's poems, the disconnection between human life and the rest of the physical and ecological world is broken down. Jane, however, goes a little further, adding elements of the ghostly and the uncanny to her version of the oceanic ecoGothic.

If the future body can become a place of surreality and of the uncanny, Jane argues that the same can be done for future experiences of the world in general. In the poem '2050', inspired by a suggested bio-engineering solution for climate change in which pollution is actively encouraged by a deliberate increase in sulphur dioxide emissions, the marine environment is re-imagined as an alien space. The ocean is turned into:

‘a room of  
mirrors reflecting itself



the edges of waves tinged pink  
like we're on another planet' (p. 34).

The future described is a horrific one, yet there is something fascinating and beautiful about it even so: a pink, reflecting ocean, a series of blush-coloured waves so unfamiliar that they might as well exist on another world. This re-visioning of familiarity into the unusual and the bizarre is a feature of the uncanny that reflects, as well, the wider conversation of the ocean as a mirror of the individual human body.

It is this mutability, embedded in ecological narratives about the future-now, that is the basis of interpretations of the uncanny in the oceanic ecoGothic. The transformation of the oceans, of what the oceans border and consume, and of what they reflect in the body—and the identity—of the human descendent-observers, is of significant and growing concern. The oceanic ecoGothic, influenced by histories, biologies, and culture, is well-placed to explore how humans navigate the shifting currents of our marine present—and our oceanic future.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Octavia Cade** is a New Zealand writer. She has a PhD in science communication, and in her academic work she often looks at the intersection between science and speculative fiction. Relevant examples of this include work in *Horror Studies*, *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *Supernatural Studies*, *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction*, and more. She has sold close to seventy short stories to markets including *Clarkesworld*, *Asimov's*, and *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Two short story collections, two poetry collections, an essay collection and several novellas have also been published by various small presses. Increasingly, however, her focus has been on climate fiction. Her novel *The Stone Wētā*, on suppression of climate data, was published in 2020, and her most recent book, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*, which looks at ecological grief, was published in 2021. She has won four Sir Julius Vogel Awards, and was the 2020 writer in residence at Massey University.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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**‘Howling and Whistling in off the Sea’:**

**Water, Supernatural Environments, and the Movement of Human and Nonhuman Souls in Conor McPherson’s *The Weir***

*CJ Scruton*

**ABSTRACT**

Irish playwright Conor McPherson often incorporates the supernatural into his work, but nowhere does McPherson engage with ecology as deeply as in the ghost-story-laden play *The Weir* (1997), whose title refers to the apparent disruption of the countryside’s environment by a river weir. Many scholars have discussed sociality and mourning in McPherson’s ghost plays, but this may ultimately prove a shallow means of interacting with the spaces McPherson constructs related to water, coasts, and the disruption of supernatural ecosystems. I argue in this essay that *The Weir*—portraying water as an actant that renders the supernatural visible as an integral part of the natural—considers how both human and nonhuman beings and forces collectively inhabit ecosystems. Considering Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of matter-flow and material vitalism, I argue that McPherson portrays water not just as a haunted liminal space but as an actant that renders already-existing supernatural ecosystems visible. McPherson draws attention to perceived transgressions of human/nonhuman and natural/supernatural boundaries to depict a space that encapsulates the motions of many different beings and forces, including the water itself. As a result of these stories, water is shown to be its own actant in the environment just like fairies, ghosts, and still-living humans. The goal of this article is to consider the ways McPherson imbues his littoral ghost stories with ecological materiality, and thus to consider further how we may approach supernatural ecosystems on their own material terms.

Irish playwright Conor McPherson often incorporates the supernatural into his work, at times wry (e.g. the punk, partying vampire youths of *St. Nicholas* [1997]) and at other times dramatic and deadly serious (e.g., a widower confronting the ghost of his recently dead wife in



psychotherapy in *Shining City* [2004]). More than once, McPherson has referenced maritime settings to force his human characters to consider their mortality and their connections with the supernatural. One of McPherson's most famous plays, *The Seafarer* (2006), sees a man in a coastal Dublin suburb battling a devilish entity for his soul in a game of poker. But perhaps nowhere in his oeuvre does McPherson engage with the aquatic environments and spectral folklore as deeply as in *The Weir* (1997),<sup>5</sup> whose title refers to the disruption of the Irish countryside's ecosystems by a river weir. Many scholars have discussed storytelling, sociality, and mourning when considering McPherson's ghost plays, but this may ultimately prove a shallow means of interacting with the spaces that McPherson imagines in his engagement with ghosts. Water does not serve as a mere environmental setting to the ghost stories, but rather shows itself as an animate element of the environment that influences ghosts and hauntings as much as the human narratives being told. As such, I argue in this article that *The Weir*—portraying water as an actant that renders the supernatural visible as an integral part of the natural—considers how human and nonhuman beings collectively inhabit ecosystems.

Many compelling studies read Irish Gothic ecosystems as significant predominantly in their representation of cultural or historical realities. Yet when studies of Irish Gothic consistently position nature as representative of human socio-political concerns, the implicit argument is that wetlands, littoral environments, and other ecosystems cannot be significant in and of themselves. In these frameworks, ecosystems may only be considered significant insofar as they can be applied to sociohistorical contexts. To explore how McPherson constructs supernatural ecologies with his ghost stories, we must be willing to read these ecosystems and their constituent human and nonhuman components as significant in and of themselves rather than simply representative of cultural or historical narratives. In this article, I examine how *The Weir*'s ghost stories work to establish ecological space and relationships among humans and nonhumans, not merely how these stories represent supposedly pre-existing cultural forces.

It is my goal to consider how aquatic ecosystems are constructed in McPherson's play, focusing on these ecosystems' materiality. To do so, I approach *The Weir* through the

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<sup>5</sup> The years noted in this paragraph refer to the dates of these plays' initial performances, not the dates of their scripts' first publication. All primary-text quotations in this essay are cited from *The Weir and Other Plays* (1999).

ecoGothic, which requires reconceptualising the supernatural as a fundamental component of natural ecosystems. Relatedly, Andrew Smith and William Hughes, acknowledging the relationships among the Romantic and Gothic (2013), consider the ways human language is employed as a means of both relating to and fundamentally constructing the natural. They argue that the Romantic Gothic ‘illustrates how nature becomes constituted in the Gothic as a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological’ (p. 3). McPherson’s play dramatises such concerns of interpretation, in which the act of storytelling may draw attention to the potentially fictional or human-constructed nature of supernatural stories. Yet these characters’ ghostly experiences also invite them to engage with spirits in terms of ecological knowledge for which language may prove insufficient. McPherson’s ghost stories do not depict new or undiscovered ecosystems but rather gesture towards material, ecological realities that may exist outside of human knowledges and logics, an epistemological potential referenced in many recent works in oceanic studies (Alaimo, 2017; Blum, 2010; Blum, 2013; Steinberg, 2013). Gothic approaches to oceanic studies often allude to the Gothic’s tendency to trouble or even wash away binaries of life and death, land and sea, human and nonhuman (Alder, 2017). Even these studies recontextualise the material significance of the ecological as it relates to human socio-political constructions such as nationality and race, which is deeply important work that perhaps also prioritises the human over the nonhuman in some cases. Despite Jimmy Packham and David Punter’s (2017) sage warning not ‘to anthropomorphise, or “terrestrialise”, the ocean’, ecoGothic approaches to aquatic ecosystems might more effectively account for the nonhuman by treating water as an actant within these ecosystems (p. 27). McPherson’s play reveals water to be not only a troubled boundary between land and sea but an animate actant, an element of the ecosystem itself rather than merely the site of an ecosystem. Thus, this article employs an ecoGothic approach to address the ecological significance and impact of ghosts, living humans, fairies, and water as vital actants in complex supernatural ecosystems in *The Weir*.

Central to my reading of McPherson’s supernatural ecosystems is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1987) fluid conception of vitalism. Exploring their concept of material vitalism, Deleuze and Guattari can only describe vital matter in fluid, aquatic terms, as ‘flows of grass, water, herds, which form so many phyla or matters in movement’ (p. 410). Material vitalism ‘doubtless exists everywhere but is ordinarily hidden or covered, rendered unrecognizable’, and it is typically the trades of human manipulation of matter, such as

metallurgy, that may bring about ‘the consciousness or thought of the matter-flow’ (p. 411). Within this framework, all matter is imbued with vitality and is always already in motion, but a disruption is required to render this motion noticeable to humans. In this sense, the elements of a space that often garner the labels of *liminal* or *supernatural* might also be considered collective networks comprising living humans, noncorporeal spirits (such as ghosts), beings that trouble our categories of spirit and body (fairies), and inorganic-yet-agential matter (water). As represented by the focus of this issue of *Gothic Nature*, a great deal can be learned from viewing the littoral and supernatural—the in-between and uncertain—as ecosystems that function according to their own natural rules and logics. McPherson’s play does particularly good work of highlighting the inherent interconnectedness of these elements of an ecosystem on the shore of the Shannon, a focus on connections, networks, and assemblages being central to a great deal of recent oceanic studies and new materialisms (Bennett, 2010; Haraway, 2016; Oppermann, 2019; Steinberg, 2013). Moving beyond a consideration of the shore’s liminality—a reading invested in simply undermining binaries—a vitalist approach shows that matter and energy that are human and nonhuman, living and dead and inorganic, make up a collective and animate supernatural ecosystem. In thinking towards material *bodies* (of water, of humans, of supernatural beings), we might more ethically think of ecological, material knowledge forms that exist in addition to the human language we apply to ecosystems and beings.

*The Weir* comprises many ghost stories in which McPherson makes a concerted effort to construct rural, Irish, supernatural space via recognisable folkloric narratives. Set in a bar attached to Brendan’s house—a plot of land he has taken over from his father and is making efforts not to sell—*The Weir* sees the thirty-something man passing an especially dark, windy night over drinks with the older Jim and Jack. Local realtor Finbar has been giving Valerie a tour after she bought a house in preparation to move up from Dublin, and this pair ends up at the bar, as well. In the process of making casual conversation and attempting to introduce Valerie to the area, the group reveals that her newly purchased house is the subject of local folktales, having supposedly been built in the middle of a fairy road. Everyone shares stories of spirits and mysterious happenings from their own lives—stories they often discount or only half believe—that mimic common narratives from ghost folklore and urban legends. These include a spirit conjured by young girls playing with a Ouija board, a former neighbour reappearing in the moment of her death, and a gravedigger confronting a mysterious man in a

cemetery only to discover the man's newspaper obituary. Although Finbar is wary of scaring Valerie off, she eventually reveals she has had her own encounter with the supernatural. Valerie's young daughter had always experienced trouble sleeping and claimed there were people watching her. After the daughter dies in a tragic swimming accident, Valerie later receives a deeply troubling phone call from her daughter's voice, asking to come take her home and expressing the same desperate fears of people watching and children knocking on the walls. The men immediately express their sympathies. By turns, the group validates Valerie's experience and delicately suggests that the human brain constructs such experiences as a response to grief—perhaps finding it the kindest option not to interrogate the possibility that Valerie's daughter does not exist in a peaceful or heavenly afterlife space. As everyone begins to leave the bar, Valerie promises Brendan she will return even during the crowded season of foreign tourists, to which Jack responds with one core message of the play—'Ah, I think that's the right attitude. You should stay with the company and bright lights'—as the lights are cut off and the stage is left empty (McPherson, 1999: p. 71).

A great deal of the critical literature on McPherson's supernatural plays focuses on common Gothic themes as they intersect with Irish historical and political narratives. Richard Rankin Russell (2016) calls McPherson 'one of our greatest contemporary explorers of loneliness' (p. 194), and Graley Herren (2018) connects the playwright's explorations of ghosts to moral evil as well as a sense of 'mystery' (p. 97). Matthew Fogarty (2018) reads *The Weir* as emblematic of Irish Gothic's dual focus on the past and present, depicting 'the haunting remnants of a comparatively more recent past, while simultaneously conveying the magnitude of the modernising force that triggered their displacement' (p. 22). Many scholars also consider *The Weir* and its popularity in the context of Celtic Tiger-period globalisation and economic boom, adding another layer to Irish Gothic negotiations of rural/modern and past/present/future (Hazucha, 2013; Kerrane, 2006; Mathews, 2014).

These socio-political readings of McPherson's work—most often focusing on modernisation and colonialism—tend to examine the binary of urban and rural space, which is consistent with critical approaches to Irish Gothic literature more broadly. Several studies examine the significance of Irish rural space to Gothic literature across centuries, commenting on the rural-supernatural as an Othered space to an increasingly modern, urban audience

(Killeen, 2014; Morin, 2018; Sage, 2012). Some studies also read the significance of Irish bog space in Gothic literature, though these scholars similarly tend to frame the ultimate significance of these ecosystems as a ‘repressed primitive past’ (Galiné, 2018: p. 82) and a representation of ‘how geography influences Irish culture and socio-political histories’ (Gladwin, 2016: p. 3). Critics’ readings of *The Weir* tend to prioritise the play’s socio-political valences. Nicholas Grene (2005) connects the communally shared ghost stories of *The Weir* to Irish ‘family country roots, the stories told by the fire, [...] traditional romantic pastoral’ (p. 302). Even readings of McPherson’s ghosts that consider materiality return to the theme of human connection as it relates to increasingly modernised Irish space. For instance, Graham Wolfe (2013) reads the staging of *Shining City* as signalling: ‘What all McPherson’s characters have in common here [...] is that none of them is able to be at “home” [...] McPherson’s characters are both haunted and haunting, ghostlike in their displacement’ (p. 191-92). These readings assign meaning in *The Weir* in symbolic terms, eschewing the hauntings’ materiality. Here, the Gothic becomes a convenient metaphor for socio-political forces of modernisation in Ireland, and McPherson’s ghost stories are interpreted as rhetorical stances rather than descriptions of real, material ecosystems. What scholars have perhaps yet to consider about McPherson’s play is its construction of supernatural, rural Irish space that forces a fundamental reconsideration of the categories of nature and supernature.

Distinct from these readings’ focus on (solely human) sociality, McPherson’s note preceding the print version of *The Weir* demonstrates that the playwright actively constructs a supernatural environment rather than merely illustrating a rural/urban opposition:

‘It’s full of ghost stories. This play was probably inspired by my visits to Leitrim to see my grandad. He lived on his own down a country road in a small house beside the Shannon. I remember him telling me once that it was very important to have the radio on because it gave him the illusion of company. We’d have a drink and sit at the fire. And he’d tell me stories.

And then when you’re lying in bed in the pitch black silence of the Irish countryside it’s easy for the imagination to run riot. I always felt different there.

I can still see him standing on the platform at the station. He always waved for much too long. Much longer than a person who was glad to have their privacy back' (p. 3).

The sense of loneliness and isolation is apparent here, and indeed, Julia Briggs (2000) considers a primary function of ghost stories to be the banishment of isolation and the affirmation of human sociality (p. 126). Critics who focus on the sociality of McPherson's ghost stories are not wrong to do so, clearly, but this focus often leads us to miss the importance of the countryside in this play. McPherson's own discomfort in this anecdote implies a closer engagement with the local ecosystem than readings of the ghost stories' sociality might acknowledge. Is it McPherson's imagination that evokes this 'different' feeling particular to rural Ireland? Is it the lack of visibility or sound (the 'pitch black silence') or a lack of ability to apprehend one's surroundings (p. 3)? Could the sociality noted by Briggs and *The Weir's* audiences represent a folkloric means of approaching the supernatural's materiality?

McPherson's focus in these ghost stories demonstrates an engagement with matter's vitalism, particularly the stories surrounding the titular river weir. Indeed, the human structure that is connected to land while controlling the water's flow highlights the constant interactions among land and water, humans and nonhumans, living and dead matter. And water is revealed to be an even more consistent catalyst of spirit-human interactions than the rural Irish landscape. Early in the night, the group discusses a photograph of Brendan and Finbar's fathers on the shore at the ceremonial opening of the weir. Jack is in the photo as well, as a small boy. Immediately, the weir is associated with local fairy stories. The photo was taken from the 'top field' of Brendan's property, and Finbar lets his mind wander among associations: 'This'd be the scenic part of all around here, you know? Em. There's what's? There was stories all, the fairies be up there in that field. Isn't there a fort up there?' (p. 28). The group does not intend to focus on fairies, and conversation wanders to the town's former political importance, but Valerie confesses she wants to hear more about the fairies and the weir.

The weir and Brendan's land—notably on the shore of the river—are associated with fairies here, and Jack's story reveals that the most significant local fairy story involves Maura

Nealon, whose house Valerie has just purchased. In the early twentieth century, Maura was sitting alone with her mother Bridie when they heard a knocking unlike a human adult's, 'very soft [...] and very low down the door' (p. 32). Bridie, who normally loved practical jokes, this time seemed uncharacteristically terrified and would not let Maura answer the knocks. After a priest subsequently came to bless the doors and windows, the knocking stopped. But Maura eventually found that her house formed part of a 'fairy road', notably marked by bodies of water; the road runs from the fairy fort in Brendan's top field—and thus from the weir on the river—to Maura's house and onward to 'the cove where the little pebbly beach is', where 'the fairies would come down [...] to bathe' (p. 33). This 1910 incident is the most dramatic spirit story related to Valerie's new house, but Jack adds, 'Maura never heard the knocking again except on one time in the fifties when the weir was going up. There was a bit of knocking then she said. And fierce load of dead birds all in the hedge and all this, but that was it' (p. 33). Jack and Finbar attempt to discredit the story as a bit of local, superstitious flavour, but Valerie is more open-minded about the tales, declaring, 'I think there's probably something in them' (p. 33). Valerie's phrasing carries a double meaning: first, the stories may contain some truth, and second, some supernatural nonhuman being may inhabit the water and the shores.

This central fairy story clearly demonstrates modernisation as having natural as well as supernatural ramifications. The fairies themselves, if we are to believe the knocking stories, have been pushed from their homes and habitats to interact more with humans. The ecological reality of the fairies' presence is upheld by the more empirically measurable reality of local birds dying as the weir was being constructed. These coinciding, troubling encounters with nonhumans encourage us to connect the supernatural beings' devastation with the (more immediately visible) devastation on avian populations. As Andrew Hazucha (2013) explains of the Electricity Supply Board's twentieth-century influence on River Shannon ecosystems, weir and dam construction disrupted many nonhuman populations and created great 'human misery' among rural fishing communities connected to the river (p. 72). The fairy stories of *The Weir* depict ecological realities becoming visible as the natural and supernatural elements of the environment collide.

Thus, the audience learns early in the play that these local waters signal an ecosystem comprising animate, supernatural beings and matter. It might be easy to conclude that the focus



on storytelling and the indeterminacy of *The Weir*'s setting—either ‘Northwest Leitrim or Sligo’, yet also vaguely ‘a rural part of Ireland’ (p. 5)—in fact distances the play from real-world potential for ecosystems. As Eamonn Jordan (2004) notes of McPherson’s vaguely Northwest rural setting in the play, Irish Romantic or ‘pastoral spaces are often without specific dimensions, remaining ill-defined’ (p. 354). This lack of spatial specificity may allow McPherson more freedom to construct an ecosystem in which the (disrupted) motion of water also reveals the motions of fairies and formerly-human spirits. In some ways, fairies help McPherson establish his setting by incorporating old Irish folklore that, as Jack admits, one hears often in rural villages. But considering that the fairy-associated weir gives the play its title and that fairies first make ecological realities visible in *The Weir*, these beings and the waters around them clearly carry a great deal of thematic weight in the play. Helen Lojek (2011) states that—despite the intentional vagueness of the rural Irish setting—McPherson took the play’s original director and set designer to Leitrim to better understand the environment. As Lojek interprets this intentionality:

‘McPherson’s indication that the production of this play, which takes place entirely indoors, needed to arise from a clear sense of the landscape and the weir confirms the complex relationship between the interior space of the set and the exterior space around which so much dialogue circles. The play may be set in an interior, but it is by understanding exterior space that characters establish their status as among those who belong’ (p. 38).

We may say the rhetorical entry of the fairies and ghosts into the interior storytelling space of the ‘small rural bar’ (McPherson, 1999: p. 5) reveals the lack of concrete boundaries between these supernatural beings and the human characters. While appearing to be outside-of-real-space in the pastoral tradition, *The Weir* constantly draws attention to the fact that the bar and its patrons exist within a wider ecosystem of interconnected beings—some of whom may remain unseen, and some of whom may knock on the door or pick up the phone and ask to come in.



In this way, I argue that McPherson's littoral ghost stories in *The Weir* engage with Irish supernatural folklore to acknowledge the natural/supernatural division while in practice undermining this binary. In these traditional stories, the boundaries between natural and supernatural spaces may be porous in special circumstances—fairies can interact with humans in the natural world and then return to a spirit-world, humans can become spirits through death, etc.—but each being typically has a space where they *belong* and a space where they are *foreign*, and thus a border they may transgress. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin (1991) notes that one consistent function of Irish fairy lore is the designation of safe domestic or community spaces as distinct from unsafe, unpredictable wilderness and oceanic spaces:

'The supernatural world was especially the untamed world of the mountain, the moor and sea, where fairies lived. But it could also be much closer to man's cultivated space [...] In the evening when the order imposed by the sun had dissolved [...] the other world closed in [...] It could even enter the house unless certain norms, such as throwing out dirty water (representing disorder), were observed' (p. 201).

As Ó Giolláin suggests here, even the so-called rules or boundaries of folkloric supernatural space are quickly and consistently transgressed in stories. The only discernible difference between natural and supernatural is in fact constructed in this moment of the binary's transgression.

By alluding to these associations with his ghost stories, McPherson similarly presents transgressions of human/nonhuman and natural/supernatural boundaries to reveal the vital, fluid motions of energy and matter. The dread of fairies in this central story comes from their ability to transgress boundaries of human and nonhuman spaces, even though fairies must already live in the same ecosystem as humans if they do, in fact, exist. Jack alludes to changeling folklore—stories of fairies stealing human children and replacing them with nonhuman lookalikes—when he asks the group, 'Are you really interested? All the babies' (p. 29). Yet Jack's story is not the feminine Gothic tale of a heroine being menaced by an invading, external evil, because the human family were the invaders whose home now interferes with the

pre-existing fairy road. Fairy hauntings represent the possibility that not all resources and beings found in the natural world belong to humans for enclosure, consumption, and ecological disruption. The weir, after all, was constructed by the ESB to transform the water and land into an energy commodity for humans.<sup>6</sup> The fairy in Jack's first story also impeded Maura from gathering more peat to feed the fire, another way of literally transforming the land into energy for human consumption at the expense of nonhuman elements of the local ecosystem.

Further, *The Weir's* engagement with the fluid movement of bodies and spirits runs deeper than an exploration of the natural/supernatural or city/country divide. The bar patrons' stories often find their conflict in the question of whether humans belong in a space. After recounting his haunting experience, Finbar admits it may have affected his decision to leave town as a young man (p. 40). In Dublin, Valerie, too, insists that there is some reality to the ghostly phone call she received from her daughter but also recognises that she actively wished for the contact to be made, perhaps influencing her perception. In life, she told her daughter 'that if she was worried at all during the day to ring' and Valerie would come to her (p. 54). Then, when the phone is ringing and Valerie is alone, she says, 'I just left it. I wasn't going to get it' (p. 56). As explanation for the call, Valerie also admits that she wished for the indication that her daughter still wanted to reach out: 'She still ... she still needs me' (p. 57, ellipsis original). Although the grieving process has been long already, it is the aftermath of this haunting that causes her to move to the countryside without her husband. This is the play's final ghost story, but Jack ends the night with a regretful tale of the one significant love of his life, who he lost from staying at home, from 'an irrational fear' of following her to Dublin (p. 64).

To view these stories more closely, then, fluid movement is the most significant and consistent idiom in *The Weir*: the movement of souls and spirits, the movement of living humans across space throughout their lives, and the movement of water. Water is immensely significant in McPherson's telling of these ghost stories, as it variously represents a vital form

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<sup>6</sup> Hazucha (2013) notes that the real-life dam near the home of McPherson's grandfather was not hydroelectric and was in fact built in the mid-nineteenth century (p. 78). As Matthew Fogarty (2018) responds to Hazucha's observation: 'To reimagine this riparian structure as an extension of the Shannon Electrification Scheme as McPherson does, however, is to recast it as a highly charged emblem of Ireland's modernisation' (p. 19).

of matter that moves independent of humankind, a medium through which humans move, and a site where the perception of human/nonhuman, natural/supernatural boundaries is disrupted. The shore is indeed a setting for *The Weir*, but situations where water is revealed to have an active effect on other elements of the ecosystem reveal water to be a vital actant, as well. Rather than representing a Gothic transitional space between separate worlds of the living and dead, McPherson's waters affect humans' perception enough to reveal the ultimate connectedness and coexistence of these supernatural worlds. The play's stories run from the river weir's disruption of the fairy road to Niamh's death in a swimming pool, from the coastal region of Northwest Ireland to Dublin on the East Coast. The rain chases humans indoors and shows them ghosts in graveyards. Water creates an environment necessary for these ghost stories and directly interacts with the other bodies and spirits in the immediate environment.

Taking a step further with Deleuze and Guattari's vitalism in mind, it is necessary to consider how exactly water functions as an actant within the *The Weir*. A greater attention to what water *does* in the play reveals the effects of fluid matter on both organic and non-living beings. Most fundamentally, if the river weir has disrupted the fairy road and other elements of the local ecosystem, the haunting fairy-human interactions have been caused by a chain reaction that relates to the redirected water rather than the human-made structure itself. McPherson does not exactly suggest a narrative of foolish humans intruding on nature, but rather shows how water continues to act and influence other beings in the supernatural ecosystem in relation to human action; the agency in causing (or simply rendering visible) *The Weir*'s countryside hauntings is decentred from humans, revealing the water just offshore to be more of an actant than the human characters realise.

Water also actively mediates an encounter that blurs distinctions among human and nonhuman, natural and supernatural, in Jim's ghost story. As a young man, Jim had agreed to do some work outdoors for a priest, but he was already running a high fever and a torrential rain soon started. In a delirious state, Jim and a friend dug a grave in the downpour. Just after, a mysterious man came out of the church and told Jim they should bury the deceased in another grave, pointing to a young girl's. Later, Jim saw in a newspaper that the man he had spoken with was the same man whose grave he had dug, also learning this man had a reputation as a sexual predator. Here, water acts on the story and human perception in several ways. In addition

to the cold rain affecting Jim's sight and feverish state, he admits, 'we'd been having the few little drinks', to which Jack responds, 'Oh Jesus. Firewater. Sure that'd put a hole in the glass, let alone give you hallucinations' (p. 48). It is the experience and consumption of liquids that Jim remembers best, yet he also turns to alcohol in this story in the hope that it will provide a non-supernatural explanation for his encounter. David Longhorn (2018) in fact acknowledges that 'alcohol is invoked' in all the men's stories as a believable non-supernatural explanation for what would otherwise incontrovertibly be a ghostly encounter (p. 86). Additionally, each character is progressively drinking throughout the play, further colouring their relationship to the surrounding environment and the language they employ to understand its supernatural possibilities.

It may certainly seem a tenuous connection to associate the consumption of alcohol with McPherson's aquatic supernatural ecosystems, nonetheless the agency of water. Yet treating water as an actant in this ecosystem, the consistency of drinking in these hauntings becomes surprisingly relevant. Alcohol is notable for being one of the few substances that is dehydrating for humans. Alcohol represents not only altered consciousness here, but a state of internal liquid disequilibrium. One of Steve Mentz's (2015) shipwrecked ecological truths is, 'Oceanic reality is distortion', due to how water appears external to humans and to how salt water may enter human bodies and affect homeostasis (p. 181). Inebriation and dehydration are more popularly associated with reduced mental capacity, as in Longhorn's allusion. Yet, in a way, the substances serve a similar ecologically disruptive function to the weir in McPherson's play—further supported by the point that both forms of disruption render the previously-unseen supernatural visible to the human characters.

For an even more conspicuous case of water representing an actant and a mediating force for humans to view the supernatural environment, we may consider Valerie's story:

'last year she, she [Valerie's daughter Niamh] was just dying to learn how to swim.

[...] She was learning very well. No problem. Loved the water. She couldn't wait for Wednesdays and swimming. [...]

But then, in March, last year, the school had a, a sponsored swim, [...] but em, when I got there ... [ellipsis original] There was an ambulance [...] another one of the mums came over and said there'd been an accident. And Niamh had hit her head in the pool and she'd been in the water and they'd been trying to resuscitate her'. (p. 54-55).

Water here is central to the circumstances of Niamh's death. The swimming pool is a space of both life and death for Niamh, and its liminality is emphasised in the fact that Niamh's death and its aftermath in this space are presented as uncertain. For instance, Valerie's grief does not allow her to clearly express the official time and place of death, whether at the pool, in the ambulance, or at the hospital. While the ultimate fact of Niamh's death is clear enough, Valerie's story presents Niamh's spirit as floating among the worlds of the living and dead during this time, unable to clearly locate Niamh in either. The paramedic 'didn't know if she was alive' in that exact moment, even if they assumed the girl would ultimately not survive (p. 55). According to Valerie, 'She just looked asleep', but in reality, 'she was dead' (p. 56). Even the position of Niamh's body in space-time seems unfixed. She was in the water, and then adults were trying to resuscitate her presumably on the pool deck. She was an organic body imbued with a spirit, and it is unclear when that spirit moved elsewhere—and where, exactly—throughout the account. In this story, water seems to exist as an actant as well as a metaphor for the ghostly liminality of witnessing the divorce of body from spirit.

Yet it is important that Niamh's traversing of life/death, natural/supernatural space is not new or particular to the events of her death. These binaries are undermined earlier in *The Weir* when it is made clear that Niamh had some sense of spirits surrounding her, but it is water's role in Niamh's death that renders the human construction of these binaries visible. The accident in the water causes the commingling of natural and supernatural beings to become apparent and believable to Valerie. Prior to the accident, Valerie doubted Niamh's ghostly experiences, and the exit of Niamh's spirit from her corporeal body makes these elements of the supernatural environment real for her mother when she hears them on the phone. Water creates a space through which the dead talk and obscures perception for Valerie, who races in a car to reach Niamh's ghost but 'could hardly see, [she] was crying so much' (p. 57).

In each ghost story of *The Weir*, water is not actively considered a character; yet water *does* a great deal to affect each haunting. Water mediates, it moves bodies through natural space and into supernatural spaces. Water exists in its own bodies, which change shape and flow through the weir and to the coast, connecting the Northwest to Dublin. Water obscures and confuses. Water acts out against humans who have disrupted it, but it also sustains and provides solace to distressed humans. Water makes itself noticeable in moments when human characters begin to become conscious to the complex motions of bodies and souls in their universe, a signal that there is more to understand of matter and energy than we learn from merely paying attention to human actions upon a nonhuman natural world. And indeed, this understanding is only accessible by decentring human knowledge and approaching water on the terms of its own materiality and vitalism.

Perhaps paradoxically, this focus on the nonhuman actants in McPherson's ghost stories can remind us of the impulse away from loneliness and toward social collectivity noted by many critics early in this article. Patrick Maley (2014), for instance, argues that even McPherson's monologues demand 'both that a storyteller be heard and that storyteller acknowledge the reality of their words' (p. 207), ultimately revealing 'a concern for and investment in the individual and collective self-understanding of the human' (p. 208). I would agree that McPherson's characters in *The Weir* concern themselves most consciously with the human rather than the nonhuman. Yet even if the characters do not fully grasp the vitally material nature of their world as revealed to them in moments of haunting, those associations are laid out in a different story setting for McPherson's audience. Roger Luckhurst (2002) notes that studies of spectrality run the risk of reverting to cliché readings of ghosts as psychosocial representations of trauma and melancholia rather than material, lived experiences: 'the discourse of spectralized modernity risks investing in compulsive repetitions of a structure of melancholic entrapment' (p. 535). It is up to readers and critics to resist the impulse of recursive melancholia in our approach to ghost stories, but I also argue that, as a playwright, McPherson constructs a complex material world with his ghost stories. McPherson's close attention to ecology and place on Ireland's Northwest coast reveals that haunted humans telling ghost stories are not merely asserting human social collectivity but further asserting collectivity and interconnectedness with water, fairies, ghosts, and all other known and unknown elements of

a complex ecosystem. *The Weir* does not deny the importance of human narrative but decentres humans to invite greater consideration of how we may account for our many nonhuman relatives, both living and non-living.

Although the men spend most of the play downplaying the significance of their supernatural experiences, as previously noted, the reality of *The Weir*'s supernatural environment is underlined in the responses to Valerie's climactic story. After Valerie recounts her haunting, the men interpret the nature and origin of the ghostly phone call in a number of ways. Finbar stammers, 'Your ... brain is trying to deal with it, you know?' and, 'something as, as, you know ... that you don't even know what it was' (p. 57-58, ellipses original). Brendan, however, validates her experiences, responding, 'She said she knew what it was' (p. 58). Jim also does not deny the reality of Niamh's ghostly return, assuring Valerie, 'I'm sure your girl is quite safe and comfortable wherever she is' (p. 60). The final note of the play returns to McPherson's insistence that something is in fact noticeably supernatural or different about the setting, as Jack wonders if it is healthy for Valerie to stay in the Northwest, 'Listening to old headers like us talking about the fairies. Having all your worst fears confirmed for you. Tuh. Ghosts and angels and all this' (p. 68). As John Kerrigan (2018) describes McPherson's supernatural fiction, the playwright's conflicts often exist on a 'borderline between the psychological and supernatural' yet also more earnestly 'raise questions about the nature of reality while provoking audiences to reflect on their own commitments' (p. 78). Consistently, when we look closer at these commitments, they seem to expand beyond the human social to include a myriad of nonhuman ecological concerns. To recall McPherson's own assertion that something always 'felt different' (p. 3) in that place, *The Weir* never seems to ask the audience to question the veracity of the ghost stories. Even Brendan, Jack, and Jim do not deny the presence of ghosts and angels and fairies here; they only acknowledge that the stories of these beings' presence in the local ecosystem have influence on humans regardless of whether humans believe in them. Rather than entertaining a debate of ghosts' reality, *The Weir* encourages the more ecological questions of *what* precisely feels different in this environment, why this difference can be felt so acutely, and what we can learn from exploring the supernatural as a core possibility of the natural.

The bar patrons in *The Weir* cannot always specify exactly who spirits are, where they come from, or what they do. But the act of engaging with the particulars of a haunting can be generative and even revelatory of these realities of the world, especially insofar as humans can invite the haunting visibility of our disproportionate impact on our ecosystems. McPherson's goal is seemingly not to make audiences debate the existence of ghosts, or even debate the veracity of the storytellers' tales. More so, McPherson encourages a conscious attention to a vital flow of bodies and souls, a supernatural ecosystem that lies on the River Shannon but could teach us about interconnected ecosystems elsewhere, as well. Just as the characters onstage are stuck in the bar being pelted with rain, left to reckon with the implications of the ghosts that have entered their lives, we too must wonder how well we understand our world and how many of its material and immaterial bodies we are comfortable facing after dark.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**CJ Scruton** received their Ph.D. in literature and cultural theory from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Scruton's scholarly work focuses on horror media, ghost stories, and global Indigenous studies, with an emphasis on broad definitions and narratives of 'spirit'. They explore not only how horror stories represent social norms and fears, but also how stories of spirits and afterlife spaces represent complex cosmological ecosystems that show the many ways souls can move within (and without) bodies. In their current writing, they are exploring these ideas in relation to race, class, queerness, and nation. Their scholarly writing appears in *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, where they will be the co-editor of the special issue on 'Hawthorne and the Environment' in spring 2023. They are a founding member and director of the Milwaukee Queer Writing Project.



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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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## A Grave for Fish: The Haunted Shore in Wyl Menmuir's *The Many*

Virginia Richter

### ABSTRACT

The fish that are caught, rarely enough, in an empty and silent sea in Wyl Menmuir's short novel *The Many* (2016), are either diseased—'burned [...] with white lesions down the side of each body [...] black skin dull and flaked away in patches'—or ghostly—colourless, translucent, 'the outlines of organs visible, shadows in the pale flesh'. The uncanny atmosphere of *The Many* is multilayered, evoked by an elusive ecological menace and an even less tangible sense of entrapment and doom. The run-down state of the isolated fishing village where the novel is set appears to be caused by an environmental disaster, 'a profusion of biological agents and contaminants' in the sea, but the actual cause is never explained. The novel hovers between the ecocritical depiction of a polluted shore and a Gothic sense of claustrophobia and oppression, expressed through the protagonists' dreams and memories as well as embodied in an external agency that keeps the village under constant surveillance. In my paper, I explore the mutual enhancement between an ecological and a psychological Gothic, which Menmuir effects by shifts in focalisation, chronological breaks and the engagement with space. The littoral setting plays a decisive role in the process of disorientation which affects the characters as well as the readers. In a constantly shifting and treacherous environment, sensory perception and memory appear more and more unreliable, until finally the boundaries of personal identity are as much eroded as the very ground beneath the villagers' feet.

'A thin trail of smoke rises up from Perran's, where no smoke has risen for ten years now' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 1). From the very first sentence, the atmosphere in Wyl Menmuir's novel *The Many* is oppressive and sinister, but the actual source of the lurking menace is hard to pin down. Smoke is rising from a house that has been abandoned for over ten years; the sea is unnaturally calm; the fishermen returning with empty nets are taciturn. While none of these



features is in any way implausible or unrealistic, a quickly established sense of doom begins to unsettle the assumptions of realist narrative. When the stranger, Timothy Buchanan, moves into the derelict house that is still referred to as ‘Perran’s house’—though Perran, a boy from the village, has been dead for ten years—and begins to probe into the village’s secrets, he runs into a wall of silence. The novel’s other main character, the fisherman Ethan, the most unsociable in a community of tight-lipped men, is haunted by Perran’s death, and becomes obsessed with Timothy. Is his hostility due to guilt and loneliness, or is there some other, ineffable cause? An unexplained ecological and economic disaster befell the village, but does this suffice to explain the pervasive sense of oppression? The shore is polluted, but is it also haunted?

As I will show, the novel hovers between the ecocritical depiction of a contaminated shore—and the economic and psychological consequences of the ecological disaster on the village’s inhabitants—and a Gothic sense of claustrophobia and oppression, expressed through the protagonists’ dreams and memories as well as embodied in an external agency that keeps the village under constant surveillance. In this paper, I explore the mutual enhancement between ecological and psychological horror, which Menmuir effects by shifts in focalisation, chronological breaks, and the engagement with space. Space plays a key role for the novel’s Gothic quality: in a constantly shifting and treacherous environment, sensory perception and memory appear more and more unreliable, until finally the boundaries of personal identity are as much eroded as the very ground beneath the villagers’ feet. I therefore examine littoral space as a setting that has agency, looking specifically at the bay, Perran’s house, and the flooded beach—the breakdown of fixed boundaries and stable grounds in which the novel culminates. While there are no explicit references to, for example, the works of Ann Radcliffe or Wilkie Collins, I regard these ‘spatial frames’ (Ryan, Foote & Azaryahu, 2016: p. 24) as situated within the Gothic tradition, marked by isolation, secrecy, and a sense of being haunted by the past. I also draw on Laura White’s (2020) concept of ‘ecospectrality’ to examine a potentially redemptive quality concealed beneath the horror, the possibility of connectedness not only between human agents, but also including nonhuman ‘cohabitants’. However, such a regenerative dimension is only hinted at in *The Many*, and remains overlaid by feelings of isolation and destruction.

## The Bay

The littoral setting plays a decisive role in the process of disorientation which affects the characters as well as the readers. As scholars of littoral space emphasise, the most defining characteristic of the shore is its mutability: the constant shifting and changing of the terrain under the impact of the tides, wind and storms, erosion and silting. The atmospheric conditions at the coast undermine the dependability of the senses, and lead to a deeper ‘epistemological uncertainty in those who live here’, as Jimmy Packham (2019) has argued: ‘Knowing and processes of perception and memory become almost tidal in this world, unfixed or unmoored from certainty’ (p. 206). The setting on a lonely shore is thus concordant with the Gothic genre, traditionally ‘at home in borderlands’ (ibid.) and invested in the exploration of transgressions. This epistemological uncertainty of littoral space renders it particularly amenable to critical approaches that devote themselves to the exploration of ambiguity, indecision, hesitancy, and disorientation. Concepts such as Freud’s ‘uncanny’ (2003), Derrida’s ‘hauntology’ (1994), and White’s ‘ecospectrality’ (2020) share an interest in the collapse or erosion of boundaries, not only between different real and semantic spaces (for example the realms of the dead and the living), but between different periods of time. The figurations of the spectre and of haunting signify just such a disruption of chronology, as White suggests: spectres ‘resurface across centuries and continents, not only putting vast scales into intimate contact, but also making minute scales perceptible’ (p. 2). Of these three approaches, White’s is the only one to explicitly foreground the connection between spectrality and the ecological, and therefore lends itself particularly well for an analysis of Menmuir’s ecoGothic entanglements.

*The Many* brings together the elements I am interested in here: the topographical instability and epistemological uncertainty of littoral space, a Gothic sensibility defined by ambiguity rather than downright horror, and the linking of ecological and psychological endangerment. While the fishing village remains nameless, and the location unspecified, personal names and topographical features point to a Cornish setting. *The Many* is thus situated in a tradition of Cornish Gothic, in which the region is associated with cultural marginalisation and economic depletion—following the mid-nineteenth century decline of its mining industry—as well as ecological damage and a threat to health, as Joan Passey (2016) has suggested: ‘there is something unsustainable or toxic about the land itself’ (p. 24). In Wilkie Collins’ *The Dead Secret* (1856), to which Passey refers, it is both the setting and the sense of

haunting (by past offenses) that contribute to the endangerment of physical and mental health, especially of female characters. Even more than the land, it is the sea that is associated with the '[f]ragmentation and disintegration of bodily self and psyche' (pp. 27-28). For Passey, 'the sea is a vital peripheral location for describing disintegration and threat to both self and the self as a larger representation of society', while the shore is a site of transgression and the dissolution of boundaries; the shore is 'the space that isn't quite land and isn't quite sea; the space so hard to delineate, measure, know, is demarcated as dangerous, as where the sea and land ends is where life ends, connecting self to this notion of time as space, and space as time' (p. 28). We find a similar intertwining of spatial and temporal instability, personal disintegration, and narrative fusion of perspectives in Menmuir's novel.

A defining feature of the fishing village in *The Many* is its isolation from the outside world, both in the landward and the seaward direction.<sup>7</sup> The village is barely accessible by road, and Timothy's phone, his only connection to the outside world, keeps losing the signal. The bay where it is located is closed off from the open sea by a line of 'container ships three miles off shore; skeletal for their lack of cargo, idle sentries to an empty coast' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 23). The container ships are empty and unstaffed, and their presence, as so many oddities about the village, is oddly ineffectual, a meaningless bureaucratic act: they were installed as a barrier to control '*fish stocks in restricted zones*' and to contain '*harmful waterborne agents*' (p. 52, emphasis in the original), but of course the water and whatever is in it flows unhindered past the ships. Nevertheless, they seem to form a magic circle enclosing the bay, beyond which the fishermen do not venture. Their presence creates an atmosphere of oppression and surveillance, as experienced by Ethan on his round to inspect his—always empty—lobster traps:

'[H]e has the feeling of being hemmed in from all sides and a thought rises in him that he could break through the line of ships, that he could break one of the unspoken rules of the fleet. He suppresses the thought, concentrating instead on the body of water in between the boat and the ships, looking for shadows in the water. He is close enough to the ships now to feel observed, though he cannot

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<sup>7</sup> An isolated setting is of course a staple feature of the classic Gothic novel, associated, in the works of Ann Radcliffe, with liberty as well as endangerment; in contrast, Matthew Lewis and the Marquis de Sade depict isolated nature as 'a feral place' where the innocent heroine is destroyed (Kröger 2013: p. 20).

recall, even when they first arrived, ever having seen lights or any movement from the huge, rusting hulls' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 6).

This description of the container ships illustrates Menmuir's ecoGothic aesthetics, namely the blending of realistic description with a muted horror that feeds on allusions and lacunae rather than explicit evocations of endangerment. According to Ethan's recollection, the ships appeared on the horizon without any human agency, unstaffed and unlighted 'even when they first arrived'—ghost ships that close in the bay without practically hindering passage beyond the border they create. Ethan's sense of 'being hemmed in' is equally psychological; as a subsequent scene shows, passing beyond the line of ships is perfectly possible. In fact, not to cross the symbolic barrier is an 'unspoken rule of the fleet' rather than a decree that is enforced. But when Ethan contemplates the possibility of breaking this rule, he immediately suppresses the thought. The continued silent presence of the ships is thus effective on a psychological level, engrafting a sense of enclosure and surveillance. It is also significant that Ethan feels observed although he knows that there is no crew on board the ships. The 'multiple, automatic and anonymous power' (Foucault, 1995: p. 176) of modern surveillance is here taken a step further; Ethan and the other fishermen have internalised the injunction of governmental disciplinary power and obey the 'unspoken rule' not to venture beyond the symbolic barrier enclosing the bay, even if they *know* that the observer's position is empty. The bay is in fact a realisation of Foucault's ideal Panopticon, where the inhabitants are 'caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers' (Foucault, 1995: p. 201).

The inhabitants of the fishing village are thus more or less cut off from their wider surroundings, in a globalised world defined by accessibility and connectivity. They are restricted to fishing in the contaminated bay, and if their hauls are successful at all, the catch is diseased: 'The dogfish look burned, as though with acid, their eye sockets elongated and deep, showing through to the bone at the edges and there are white lesions down the side of each body' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 26). With products such as these, the villagers are isolated on a different level as well: they are cut off from a free market economy. Nevertheless, the inedible fish find buyers, apparently government agents (p. 27). Just like the container ships, these agents, looking 'out of place in the village' and 'at odds with their surroundings' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 27), suddenly appear out of nowhere to buy up all of the fish. While keeping the villagers in cash, this subsidised, closed economy contributes further to the community's

psychological stasis. In its multiple isolation and stagnancy, the village serves as an example of coastal communities which ‘offer a particularly salient vision of world-ecological violence’ (Campbell & Paye, 2020: p. 8). For Alexandra Campbell and Michael Paye (2020):

‘The novel’s aesthetics of enclosure [...] reveal that the oceanic “waste frontier” is not just a space filled with inedible fish and toxic water, but a zone bereft of promise, where the coastal “waste population” spend more time in the pub than on the water. [...] But from an oceanic perspective, the tale operates as a meditation upon the collapse of coastal futures due to the failure of scientific and infrastructural fixes, as a community chooses to wallow in its own dissolution instead of facing up to its psychological and ecological loss’ (pp. 9-10).

The ecological devastation of the sea is thus both the cause of and a metaphor for the village’s current social, or rather, *asocial*, condition. However, if the collective failure to protect the orphaned Perran from harm, and the subsequent failure to mourn him adequately, is an indication, the community has never been thriving. Its latent xenophobia, brought into the open by Timothy’s arrival, reflects the locals’ indifference towards nature, their purely economic relationship to the marine ‘coinhabitants’ (White, 2020: p. 4) of the bay, which they only perceive as more or less profitable merchandise. They are thus not only the victims of a global economy that accepts environmental damage as its premise, but are deeply implicated in its moral and economic structure, as they go on trawling an already depleted and toxic sea. On the macrolevel—the global food industry—and the microlevel—the local practices of the fishing village—this stance is tied to ecophobia. This ‘uniquely human psychological condition’ (Estok, 2018: p. 1) forms the basis for negative attitudes to nature, encompassing the spectrum of ‘fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment’ (ibid.). According to Estok, the ecophobic condition frames nature as an antagonist of humankind, and enables not only destructive acts against nature, but also inter-human violence such as terror and war—which in turn serve as metaphors for natural disasters (p. 50). Menmuir’s novel depicts such violence, directed at everything felt to be alien, both in the devastation of the bay and in the villagers’ attacks against Timothy and his house. However, *The Many* does not stop at an exploration of the ecophobic stance that marks the coastal community. Rather, the novel oscillates between ecophobia and ecospectrality, a concept that

focuses on the ambivalence rather than the abjection of nature. The diseased fish ‘that *haunt* their polluted waters’ (Campbell & Paye, 2020: p. 9, emphasis added) function as ecospectral reminders of a lost vital connection with the sea, and of a past in which fishing was a communal endeavour enabling forms of agency other than ‘reactionary violence and grief’ (p. 11). Tentatively, the novel thus also envisages the possibility of cohabitation and reconciliation, among humans as well as across human/nonhuman borders.

This potential is hinted at in a second trip on the *Great Hope*, Ethan’s pathetically misnamed boat, during which Timothy persuades Ethan to venture beyond the line formed by the container ships. At first nothing spectacular happens, as Timothy exclaims: ‘No one opened fire on us. No monster waiting for us on this side. No chasm opened up, dragging us down to the depths’ (Menmuir, 2016: p. 55). Then, however, a weird kind of Miraculous Catch of Fish (Luke 5.1-7) happens. A shoal of fish appear, colourless and featureless creatures that embody the muted horror of *The Many*:

‘The net, when they raise it, comes up heavy with pale bodies and both men work hard at getting the catch onto the deck. The fish they pull are colourless and long, and their scales, when Ethan lifts some of them with his knife, are translucent. Ethan holds one of the fish up and he sees its eyes are pale too, as though it does not see and has never seen, and it is dull and lifeless, though it has been less than a minute since they raised the net. Beneath the skin, the outlines of organs are visible, shadows in the pale flesh. As he picks up some of the fish, he sees, in some of them, that thick bunches of roe show through the distended skin of their underbellies’ (Menmuir, 2016: p. 57).

This second haul is even more disturbing than the previous one, because these translucent creatures elude every categorisation. They do not belong to any known species, they are undead and yet lifeless, strangely immaterial and yet carriers of abundant new life in the thick bunches of roe shining through their transparent flesh. Despite Timothy’s disclaimer, these malformed fish are monsters, evoking both horror and hope, as their abundance raises the expectation that the polluted sea may become ecologically sustainable once more.

For a very brief moment, the Miraculous Catch of Fish seems to promise a new start: for the fishing village, as the empty sea fills again with life; for the incipient friendship between Timothy and Ethan. But nothing comes of it. The abundant haul is never again repeated. Timothy's status in the village develops from an outsider met with hostility to a harbinger of new wealth, a 'golden hen' (p. 70), to descend again to a figure of ill portent who becomes the target of increasing anger and violence. The bay thus continues to function as a Gothic space, defined primarily by its closed-in quality. The two men's horizontal course across the surface of the water does not result in their liberation, despite their breaching of the physical and psychological barrier of the container ships. The deep gives them their catch of ghostly fish, but it does not disclose its mystery, or any mystery; the secrecy surrounding Perran's death, haunting Ethan and increasingly also Timothy, needs to be elucidated on land. But in a littoral setting, the land is equally shifting and elusive as the sea.

### **Perran's**

In *The Many*, the topographical fluidity and epistemological uncertainty of littoral space is further reinforced by the narrative structure. Focalisation is closely tied to Timothy and Ethan, themselves highly troubled and unreliable observers. As we follow the story in chapters alternately told from their perspectives, a narrative emerges that is as mercurial as the shore itself. The storyline set in the present is further complicated by italicised sections referring to the past—to Ethan's and Timothy's history, respectively. While offset typographically, the distinction between the present and the past is blurred by the fact that both temporal levels are narrated in the present tense. The 'spatial form' of the text (Ryan, Foote & Azaryahu, 2016: pp. 5-6) thus simultaneously contributes to elucidation—the cursive insertions partly explain the protagonists' psychological condition—and to a continuing, and even increasing, disorientation, as the differentiation between real and delusory experience, between memory and dream, as well as the differentiation between the characters themselves is eroded. The novel's textual form thus mirrors the tension between a realist and a Gothic narrative that we can also see on the semantic level. The narrative is in flux, and this corresponds to the mutability of its littoral setting.

As its main stylistic procedure, the novel sets up distinctions——insider vs. outsider, the taciturn Ethan vs. the loquacious Timothy, but also the sea vs. the land——and then



proceeds to undermine them. Further accentuating the theme of surveillance, the narrative emphasises acts of sensory perception, especially of seeing which is often connected to watching, even to spying on someone. Through the focalisers' perceptions, the novel constructs an impression of the environment which often turns out to be unreliable or incomplete, determined by a hidden personal history which is only gradually revealed. In the first two pages alone, focalised through Ethan, the fisherman is described as an alert watcher: Ethan 'spots' the smoke coming from Perran's house, 'scans the houses', 'lowers his eyes', and 'looks' (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 1-2) again at the rising smoke—the only one of the fisherman to have noticed the anomaly of smoke rising from an abandoned house. However, this attention to the act of seeing is less an indication of Ethan's acuteness than of his obsession with the place, and the boy who used to live there. In the first of the italicised passages, we learn that Perran drowned, partly in result of Ethan's neglect. As the parentless boy served as a kind of guardian figure, 'a good luck charm' in Ethan's words (p. 75), for the fleet, his death is symbolically tied to the fishing village's decline, and a direct cause of Ethan's dejection. For Ethan, 'not moving into Perran's' (p. 2) is another of the unspoken rules of the community, unwittingly broken by Timothy.

As Timothy finds out when he moves in, the house is dilapidated, with 'peeling wallpaper and huge shadows of stains on the walls and ceilings' (p. 11), no central heating, flimsy furniture, and a general sense of desolation—'the shabbiness is far from rustic or endearing' (p. 13). More importantly, the house immediately becomes the focal point of the villagers' observation: 'Through gaps in curtains and stolen glances as they come within sight of Perran's, the village watches Timothy as he passes on his walks and runs, and as he carries out, over the period of several days, the tattered contents of Perran's house' (p. 20). Surveillance is thus not concentrated in a single point, as in Foucault's Panopticon, but dispersed among many observers. At least in the beginning, none of his new neighbours offers any help. Instead, they monitor closely his every movement 'as he runs out and back along the coast road': 'They count the minutes or sometimes the hours he is gone and obsess over where he might be until he returns and talk about him in the café and the pub' (p. 21). In addition to the governmental surveillance symbolised by the container ships, there is also an internal ring of vigilance, focusing on the stranger and emphasising his outsider status, a collective malevolent stance, triggered as much by his sudden appearance one night—like a ghost himself—as by the debased state of the community. Knowing nothing about Timothy, they



imagine him alternately as a saviour and a menace, come to ‘hold up a mirror to them [in which] they will see themselves reflected back in all their faults and backwardness’ (p. 21).

The only villager who tries not to join this vigilant circle is the one who is most obsessed with the former and the present inhabitant of the derelict house: ‘Ethan tries to keep his eyes on the horizon, away from Perran’s house, and avoids being drawn into conversation about the incomer, though he follows him more closely than any of the others’ (p. 21). As Timothy begins to interact with the villagers, chatting up the fishermen and watching them launching their boats, Ethan—seeing Timothy seeing them—invests the stranger with preternatural meaning: ‘Standing up on the sea road, Timothy looks down onto the beach, his collar pulled up around his ears, and Ethan wonders what type of omen this is, what effect the incomer’s gaze will have on the trip’ (p. 24). For Ethan, Timothy’s appearance takes on the form of an ‘ecospectral encounter’, that is, an encounter that at least potentially uses ‘disorientation and disruption of borders of time and space to make environmental threats tangible and to transmit environmental wisdom’ (White, 2020: p. 3). Laura A. White here takes her cue from Jacques Derrida’s (1994) idea of ‘*being-with* the other’, with the spectre, as a way towards living ‘otherwise, and better’, or ‘not better, but more justly’ (p. xviii, emphasis in the original). In this ethical endeavour, the spectre functions as a conduit precisely because it is a stranger to life, an ‘other at the edge of life’; only such a border figure can import the ‘wisdom’ of learning to live, through a ‘heterodidactics between life and death’ (ibid.). The wisdom of learning to live is also the aim pursued by White through her ecospectral readings. As she emphasises in reference to Derrida, the spectre is not just a figure of fear oriented towards the past, but has a double nature: ‘the ghost as both revenant that returns the past to attention and arrivant that announces possible futures’ (2020: p. 8). Ecospectrality thus uses the figure of the spectre to highlight the interconnectedness of past and present in the service of an ecologically viable, hospitable future.

While Timothy, by the very fact that he is a stranger, inspires fear and obsessive vigilance, he can also be seen as Perran’s revenant. Transiently, he inherits Perran’s role as ‘a good-luck charm’. As an ‘omen’ affecting the fishing trip, Timothy may have a good or evil impact on the outcome; and for a short period following the Miraculous Catch of Fish, he seems to take on a positive role. For Ethan, Timothy’s occupation of the space left empty by Perran’s death, seen at first as an offence, offers the chance of healing the trauma of his own implication

in the boy's drowning. In other words, despite the novel's ecological bleakness, the entangled relations between the two men, the village, and the polluted bay are not exhaustively framed in ecophobic terms, seeing nature as menacing because it is agential (Estok, 2019: p. 41), but temporarily offer the potential of ecospectrality:

'Distinct from conceptions of ecogothic, ecohorror, and ecophobia which foreground fear and hatred directed at nature and opposed to models of haunting that aim at the resolution of the past and the exorcism of ghosts, ecospectrality seeks to mobilize the productive potentialities of haunting, with the consequence that instead of attempting to avoid or silence ghosts, texts that demonstrate ecospectrality seek to live with specters in the unstable time/spaces they open, offering this contact as an invitation to inhabit the current moment with awareness of a multitude of coinhabitants' (White, 2020: pp. 3-4).

If Timothy is seen as Perran's spectre, he can bridge the past and the present as well as serving as a connector between the village's inside and outside, its human inhabitants and the nonhuman coinhabitants in the sea. As Ethan overcomes his initial hostility and even makes a symbolic overture of friendship, such a movement across boundaries at least between human beings seems to be possible, and the breaching of the barrier enclosing the bay similarly promises, if not an ecological renewal of the bay, at least a new lease of life for the fishing fleet. However, as discussed above, the resurgence of a new multitude in the sea and therefore, renewed economic viability for the village, remains an anomaly, and the possibility of friendship is literally buried in Perran's garden.

The turn towards a more positive affective engagement between Ethan and Timothy is triggered by Ethan's recognition of the spectral connection between his dead friend and the newcomer. For a brief moment on board the *Great Hope*, Ethan has a vertiginous sense of recognising Perran in Timothy. This moment is truly ecospectral, destabilising space and time, as it is connected to a sense of vertigo prompted by the view of the empty horizon (as they are past the line of container ships), a feeling that 'if the world tipped, there would be nothing to stop them falling for as far as they could fall' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 56). The moment of recognition is marked by resistance—'Ethan observes Timothy and tries not to see Perran in him'—and silence—'neither man questions the other, as though they are each pushing the other

on' (p. 56). This mute bonding, which results in the extension of their fishing trip, immediately precedes the appearance of the shoal of spectral fish, their abundant catch. It is also a tipping point in the relationship between Ethan and Timothy.

As a gesture acknowledging his 'new sensation [about Timothy], one he can't explain to himself' (p. 59), Ethan keeps back some of the fish to deliver them secretly the following night to Perran's, or Timothy's house. However, this mute offering of friendship is not reciprocated, or not recognised as such by Timothy when he opens the parcel:

'In the torch beam he sees the translucence of the scales has already started to turn milk white. He looks at the small offering for a while and leaving the fish where they are, he returns to the house, and digs out from his toolbox a trowel, the only tool he has that will do the job. In the darkness, lit only by the light from his kitchen window and the torch, which he lays on the grass next to him, he digs a small grave for the fish beneath the tree furthest from the house, and buries them there, under the tattered streamers which hang from its branches' (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 64-65).

Clearly, the gift of dead fish is not enough to establish an enduring relationship between the two men. If the silence they shared on the boat seemed to indicate a bond, now it signifies a fundamental failure of communication. Ethan can only articulate his 'new sensation' through his offering of fish, which in turn Timothy does not accept and consigns to the grave. Instead of being a symbol of new life and positive affect, the fish, not eaten but buried, become a grotesque figuration of death. Shrinking away from the community and rejecting Ethan's mute overture, Timothy finds himself both encircled and isolated; in Perran's house, he 'is profoundly alone' (p. 64). As the potential of the ecospectral encounter fails, each of the two men retreats into his own circle of silence and traumatic memories, as the external events spiral into violence perpetrated by humans and by nature.

Perran's house never truly becomes Timothy's home. As Freud explicates in his seminal essay *The Uncanny*, originally published in 1919, in German etymology the term *unheimlich* merges with its opposite, *heimlich*. The root of both words is *das Heim*, the home, which, as the site of repressed childhood trauma, becomes the true locale of the returned—

spectral—memory: ‘The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, “the unhomely”) is in some ways a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, “the homely”)’ (2003: 134). In this sense, Perran’s house becomes the spatial frame of Timothy’s double alienation: because he is seen as its unrightful occupier by the villagers, but also because the very materiality of the house resists his attempt to make it habitable, homely. Despite his efforts, the house ‘is disintegrating under his care’ (Menmuir, 2016: p. 69). In addition, the house becomes the site of oppressive nightmares of drowning and suffocation. The first dream takes up the themes of boundary crossing and tipping worlds, as Timothy swims impossibly far down through the regions of the deep seas, passing ‘down through the warm and cold streams of the sea’s subtle strata, until the light that floods the surface gives way to darkness’ (p. 63). The journey across the sea’s surface he undertook with Ethan is supplemented by a vertical dive into ‘the deepest flooded valleys’ (p. 63). But like all of Timothy’s experiences in Perran’s house, whether awake or dreaming, this dream journey is claustrophobic and nauseating. Timothy keeps retreating to the house as a safe haven against the villagers’ hostility, but it is in the house itself, and partly caused by the house’s adverse materiality—such as the lack of heating—that he undergoes the most intense physical and mental suffering.

In the second dream, the sea and the house merge into one. The dream begins by again invoking Timothy’s role as a saviour, but in a way that strips off any messianic potential: ‘Timothy has the feeling he could walk forward onto the water, as though he might be stepping not into something liquid, but onto a solid veneer that only has the semblance of water’ (pp. 83-84). Like Jesus, Timothy can walk on the sea (Matthew 14.25-27), but in contrast to Jesus’ feat Timothy’s stepping out on the water’s surface is neither connected to divinity nor to the power of faith, but is much more mundane: ‘he steps out and is only partly surprised to find the water does not rise up over his shoes, but remains beneath his feet’ (Menmuir, 2016: p. 84). Through this discrete biblical allusion, Timothy’s potential as saviour is touched on but then dropped; as in the episode with the Miraculous Catch of Fish, the possibility of redemption remains spectral. The supernatural event has less to do with Timothy, a reluctant and inept Messiah at best, and more with the mutability of water, its ‘extraordinary ability to metamorphose rapidly into substances with oppositional qualities’ (Strang, 2004: p. 49), namely ice or steam. In this capacity for quick transformation consists, as Veronica Strang argues, the agency of water, its life-giving and destructive potential. Destruction by water, which will materialise in the final part of the novel, is already prefigured here. Timothy’s dream

thus does not constitute a fantasy of human mastery over matter or nature (an ecophobic desire); it is rather a quirk of (dream) matter that allows him to walk over (liquid but simultaneously solid) water. This leads to an experience of profound disorientation, until Perran's house—'though it is Perran's house as a child would render it' (p. 84)—emerges out of the vast empty landscape as a landmark towards which he can run. However, when he reaches it, the house provides only a very precarious shelter; 'the walls are thin—terribly thin' (p. 85), while around the house steep walls rise up enclosing it, and blocking out all the light. Then, another material transformation happens which, from an ecocritical perspective, points again to the transformative and agential quality of water:

'[Timothy] looks up and out of the window again and he sees that what he had identified as steep walls around the house are actually made of water, an impossibly tall, dark wave. The water seethes and he can see within it the detritus it has ripped away from the ground on its long journey to the small house, and buried far within the wave he can make out some of the forms of the village and the coastline around, contained now within the crushing weight of thousands of tons of water. He sees, within the wave, the long bows of the container ships, weightless in the wave's body, and, though he cannot make them out clearly, he is sure he sees, suspended within its structure, the shapes of arms, legs and torsos too. As the wave approaches at what feels like impossible speed he feels the water draw all the heat from within the house, and the cold that penetrates far within him feels final and complete. Yet despite its speed, the water seems at the same time frozen, or slowed down [...]' (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 85-86).

As in Timothy's first fishing trip with Ethan, which also refers to Jesus on Lake Gennesaret and where the world seemed to tilt, in the dream the coordinates of the material world are out of kilter. A liquid acts like a solid; in fact, it appears to maintain both aggregate states at the same time: 'despite its speed, the water seems at the same time frozen'. The flat water surface rises up from the horizontal to the vertical to form a steep wall or wave. While tsunami waves of great height are, of course, nothing out of the ordinary, this wave behaves in a weird way in its 'impossible' height and its simultaneous great speed and slowness. Most importantly, the wave obliterates the distinction between the sea and land, as it not only carries along the detritus

it has swept up along the way, but the very ‘village and the coastline around’. In the face of this tremendous force, the flimsy and childish house provides no shelter. At the same time, the boundary between the house he is dreaming about and the actual building in which the dream takes place collapses: ‘the cold that penetrates far within him’, in the dream resulting from the freezing power of the wave, is in fact the real cold of his bedroom, in which Timothy awakes drenched in sweat and severely ill.

To return once more to the concept of ecospectrality, in White’s (2020) definition the destabilisation of time and space result in a productive opening up and reaching out, ‘an invitation to inhabit the current moment with awareness of a multitude of coinhabitants’ (p. 4). *The Many*, as the title suggests, plays with this possibility: despite the dire ecological state of the bay, the sea offers up its abundance of spectral fish. This image of a sea that is not empty but brimming with fish and other creatures is echoed in the dreams, Ethan’s as well as Timothy’s. However, the plenitude of the sea is less a wish fulfilment than a nightmare. In Timothy’s second dream, the sea is replete with objects, but not with generative coinhabitants—rather it carries along detritus, the material traces of death and destruction. *The Many* takes a sceptical stance on abundance: the sea is full, but it is filled with the wrong stuff— toxic waste, unsaleable diseased fish, ghosts and monsters, and ‘the shapes of arms, legs and torsos’ (Menmuir, 2016: p. 86). For Timothy in particular, the plentiful offerings of the sea denote abhorrence rather than redemption. In a third dream, occurring after his—Perran’s— house has been ransacked by the villagers, he sees himself standing by the moonlit sea. But this ultimate romantic trope is subverted into horror as ‘they emerge’ (p. 111), a ‘faceless and featureless’ multitude ‘pouring out of the sea’ (p. 112). It is their number that is shocking and overwhelming, the erasure of their individuality but also the fact that they do have a definite identity: ‘Perran upon Perran upon Perran. Timothy knows they are all Perran and that each one of them has within him the potential for infinite variety’ (p. 112). As they move towards Timothy, these Perrans are definitely threatening; like the wall of water in the previous dream, ‘they block out the light from the moon’ until ‘the darkness takes him’ (p. 112). In another italicised analepsis (pp. 124-128), we learn that Timothy (and his wife Lauren, who is supposed to join him once he has made the house habitable) had a stillborn son, also called Perran. This late disclosure has several effects: it converges Timothy’s and Ethan’s stories, as both are mourning a boy called Perran; it explains Timothy’s own obsession with the mystery of the drowned boy; and it reinforces the spectral connections of the plot, the various identities

merging into each other. However, this network of recollections, rather than supporting chronotopic connectivity, and thus, ecospectrality, remains strangely evanescent. Just as Timothy has lost any memory of his son's features but '*all his memory can return for him is the sight of the crematorium tower*' (p. 122, emphasis in the original), so his sojourn at the fishing village will be erased: 'He has the sensation that when he walks away from the house for the final time, any memory he currently holds of it will fade completely' (p. 133). In the end, the novel renounces the hospitable potential of ecospectrality; instead, it leaves its protagonist suspended between the horror of an excessive multitude and the emptiness of erased memory.

### **Crumbling Ground**

In a grand finale, the sea rises against the land, drowning the beach and obliterating the boundary between the beach and the village. This violent act of nature follows upon the destruction of Timothy's house by the villagers because he did not desist from enquiring about Perran; a final act of inhospitality which forces Timothy to leave for good. The wrecking of the interior is described in terms of a coastal disaster: the living room looks like 'the aftermath of a hurricane' (p. 113). As he is getting ready to leave and throws a last glance at the bay, Timothy sees 'something different' about the village and beach: 'he sees the sea has risen overnight and the beach has been entirely drowned, though there has been no storm and no warning of high tides' (p. 113). The violence wrought upon his house is paralleled by the natural destruction of the shore; it almost seems as if the unleashing of human malevolence, perceived by Timothy as 'elemental somehow' (p. 113), had triggered the sea's retaliation. However, the villagers' violence aimed at, and succeeded in, re-establishing a boundary that had been getting fragile: by destroying his dwelling, they reconfirmed Timothy as an outsider, as a stranger who was denied a place in the community. By contrast, the flood destroys the boundaries between the land and sea, the village and the beach; or rather, everything becomes beach, this in-between, mutable space:

'The water has risen above the height of the concrete wall that separates the beach from the village. The roof of the winch house is still visible, and sections of railing that run along the boundary between the beach and the road poke up out of the water. The café, too, is now an island floating in the sea. It looks as



though it has been unhitched from the land and stays where it is only for lack of movement in the water or air. The coast road, too, is under water along the sea front, and the waves lap at the foot of the houses on the other side of the road' (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 113-114).

After the flood, the boundary markers separating the beach from inhabited land, and the road connecting the bay to the hinterland, are partly or totally submerged; the buildings important to communal life, the winch house and the café, have been transformed into 'floating' and desolate islands. The destructive agency of the sea, acting without any apparent natural cause, has accomplished in reality what Timothy had been dreaming about: the fusion of land and sea. This coalescence is only the first manifestation of a more profound reconfiguration of materiality, a literal cracking up of the world accompanied by a converse movement, the perceptual fusion between Ethan and Timothy. The deeper implications of these changes are disclosed only in the following chapter, focalised through Ethan.

As the waters fall away the next morning, Ethan takes stock of the destruction. If the demolition of his dwelling appeared to Timothy as inhuman, elemental, and resembling the aftermath of a hurricane, the damage wrought by the flood is described as partly domestic, turning human habitations inside out. At the waterfront café, the door was 'wrenched from its hinges', and 'tablecloths, salt cellars and menus have been dragged out of the building by the retreating water' (p. 116). Interior and exterior are mixed up, the one entangled with the other, as the sea water penetrates into the houses and wrecks the furniture, appliances, and machinery, while dragging bits and pieces out to the sea: 'The cove is littered with plastic bags, polystyrene blocks, floating on the oil-slick water, and they are slowly being sucked out through the mouth of the cove with the tide' (p. 117). As in Timothy's dream of Perran's house, inside and outside are inseparably intertwined, just as the various sections of littoral space—beach, village, and sea—are no longer distinguishable, all covered by the same kind of debris. However, as Ethan soon discovers, the damage goes deeper and acquires a metaphysical quality:

'It takes him a while to understand what is wrong with the scene, and at first he thinks he must be mistaken, but as his eyes follow the outstretched cables and ropes down towards the beach, he sees it is no longer the same beach, and the stones that make it up are no longer the same stones. It is as though while the



space remains the same, it has been filled with items that are similar but not the same. He feels as though everything has been replaced by someone who knows this place well, but who has had to reconstruct it from memory. He looks around and the feeling compounds itself and although when he focuses on any one thing—the rocks at the mouth of the cove or the stones on the beach—and they match the image in his memory, he suddenly feels like a stranger in this place’ (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 117-118).

While taking place in waking life, the scene has a dreamlike quality. It is uncanny in the truly Freudian sense: as simultaneously *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, secretive, familiar, domestic, and eerie, it ‘involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced’ (Royle, 2003: p. 1). Both aspects, Ethan’s sense of identity and the robustness of his sensory experience, are affected by his perception that the spot he is standing on is ‘no longer the same beach’. The subtle realignment of the material world around him, and consequently the alienation of the familiar place, results in Ethan’s estrangement, from his native village but also from himself. The change is so impalpable and yet so profound that Ethan begins to doubt his senses. Timothy and Ethan now exchange places: as the former is preparing to leave, the role of stranger falls to the latter. The fairly realistic mode in which the flood and its aftermath are described at first, ultimately shifts into the uncanny as cracks emanating from the sea appear on the ground, and spread across the land and even onto people’s bodies: ‘Thin black lines that run the length of the beach from where they emerge out of the water, up through the stones towards the concrete wall’ (p. 118). The lines proliferate and criss-cross before his eyes until they form a dense network of ‘hairline fractures that run and spread throughout the fabric of the whole place’ (p. 129), and through the fabric of his body, ‘through his muscles and bones and all his tissues until his body is alive with lines’ (p. 130). Only Ethan seems to be able to see them, so perhaps they are indications of his unhinged mental state, but perhaps they are ‘signs of fissures too deep to contemplate’ (p. 129), of a world breaking apart.

Ethan’s disorientation is compounded by his isolation from his fellow-villagers, as he fails to communicate the observation nobody else seems to share: ‘the words will not form in his mouth and he must keep them to himself, since no one else talks of them either’ (pp. 129-130). At the beginning of the novel, his taciturnity was self-imposed; now, his inability to talk is a sign of his isolation and loss of self. Ethan’s state can be read as a mental breakdown,

ending with his suicide by drowning—which in turns echoes both Timothy’s earlier dive into the polluted bay, and Perran’s death (Packham, 2019: p. 216). However, it is the question whether this cognitive and psychological collapse which accompanies the cracking up of the ground—suggesting an apocalyptic ending at least of this corner of the world—is really as ominous as it sounds. If acknowledging the multiple inhabitedness of the world, the vibrancy of matter in Jane Bennett’s phrase (2010: p. xiii), is a sign of ecospectrality, then perhaps Ethan’s sudden attunement to the hidden sights and sounds of nature indicates not his mental collapse and alienation, but his finding of a new kind of community, albeit only within the nonhuman realm. Yet this possibility never translates into the renewal of the life at the bay, as Ethan is only able to receive, not to transmit the signals from nature.

While Ethan has throughout been associated with vision, he now begins to hear ‘a sound coming from the fissures’ which he at first tries to block out but then strains to hear: ‘And faint though it is, he recognises the sound, recognises it as a voice he knows as well as he knows his own’ (p. 130). The voice is never explicitly identified, but it seems likely that this intimately known murmur belongs to Perran, and that its emanation from the ground is conciliatory as Ethan finally bends down to listen to it: ‘He puts his ear to the ground and listens and after a while the sound of the waves ceases entirely and he is able to hear the voice from within the cracks clearly then’ (p. 131). Ethan now can hear, but as ‘there are still no words that form’ (p. 131), he struggles to express the intense feeling connected to the voice. The ground beneath his feet has literally shifted and opened up, but whether the earth’s murmuring conveys any ‘environmental wisdom’ (White, 2020: p. 3) or just white noise remains in suspension. In any case, Ethan ultimately fails to articulate whatever he has heard; he not only cannot answer Timothy’s question that has been driving the plot forward and which he now remembers, ‘Who was Perran?’, but even ‘the feeling he cannot answer this question is one he is unable to describe’ (Menmuir, 2016: p. 131). The novel, which has been offering multiple possibilities of connection throughout, finally ends on a note of isolation for both its protagonists. Timothy, who in the final chapter observes Ethan’s dive into the sea ‘as though he is both within Ethan’s body and watching him from without’ (p. 140), similarly fails to articulate his strong feelings elicited by this momentary merging of identities. As he scans the sea for Ethan’s body, ‘there is nothing’, so that he finally ‘turns away’ (p. 141).

*The Many* formally mirrors the structural qualities of littoral space. Just as the shore is constantly transformed by the movement of the tides, and sometimes completely made over by sudden storms and floods, the narrative shifts between moments of connectedness, even the fusion of selves, and the relapsing into isolation and silence. The limited storyworld it constructs, consisting of the enclosed bay, village, and shore, is mutable and elusive from the beginning. The spatial and temporal frames themselves are unstable, on a material as well as on a figurative level. The shore is polluted, but is it also haunted? To my opening question, the novel withholds an unequivocal answer. The protagonists' present is saturated with memories of the dead which Timothy, Ethan, and the villagers struggle to both recall and repress. But *The Many* replaces a linear understanding of time implied in the traditional notion of haunting with an entangled, ecospectral depiction of the past, present, and future. The coastal community thus is not the object of haunting by an external agency—from the past, from the outside—but is beset by the menace it engenders within itself. The bay's environmental pollution is the cause but also the metaphor of the villagers' stagnant, backward-looking, xenophobic, and ecophobic mindset, just as the final destruction by the freak flood mirrors the violence and disintegration of the community. However, it is less the threat, and occasional enactment, of damage that gives the novel its Gothic quality, but rather its aesthetic stance of withholding. By offering the reader a criss-crossed network of fine lines without a full articulation of their meaning, *The Many* maintains its enigmatic and disturbing atmosphere. Possible 'solutions', such as the incipient friendship between Ethan and Timothy, fade away, as connections fail to be made and questions remain unanswered. In the end, the reader is left, like Ethan, with the murmuring of a voice emanating from the ground, and like Timothy, with the view of the empty sea.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Virginia Richter** is Full Professor of Modern English Literature and Vice Rector for Development at the University of Bern. She holds a doctoral degree in English Literature from the University of Munich, where she also completed her habilitation on literary representations

of Darwinism. She was a Visiting Fellow at the University of Kent at Canterbury and at the University of Leeds, a Visiting Professor at the University of Göttingen, and a Visiting Research Fellow at the IASH, University of Edinburgh. Her most recent publications include *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures: Reading Littoral Space*, ed. with Ursula Kluwick (Ashgate 2015) and *Post-Empire Imaginaries? Anglophone Literature, History, and the Demise of Empires*, ed. with Barbara Buchenau and Marijke Denger (Brill Rodopi, 2015). Currently, she is the Principal Investigator of the SNSF-funded research project *The Beach in the Long Twentieth Century*. [virginia.richter@unibe.ch]

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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**Beaches of Bones: Non-Human Hauntings and Legacies of Animal Cruelty in Michelle Paver's *Dark Matter***

*Lucy Arnold*

**ABSTRACT**

Michelle Paver's selection of Spitsbergen, a place 'so far north that "dead things" last for years' (p. 39), as the setting for her neo-thirties novel *Dark Matter* (2010), demands of the novel's readers an immediate engagement with the environmental and ecological. A key but hitherto unrecognised element of Michelle Paver's gothicisation of this 'virile male adventurer' mode of literary engagement with the North, its landscapes, flora and fauna, are her depictions of animal cruelty, mutilation and death. In this article I argue that these moments and motifs, rather than being secondary to the implied and actual human suffering which plays out in the novel, in fact make explicit a subsumed history of violence towards the Greenlandic non-human which characterised colonial activity in this landscape for hundreds of years. Through an examination of Paver's use of the motif of the seal, a littoral creature, and the proposition that what is haunting the Greenlandic coast in this text is specifically non-human, I offer a new critical approach to *Dark Matter* which makes clear how the coastal ecogothic at work here functions to illuminate (in this landscape of semi-perpetual darkness) how sadistic acts of animal cruelty constitute an abjection of the non-human in an attempt to '[consolidate] a stable sense of self' as Nathaniel Leach (2011) puts it. In closing, I demonstrate how such an attempt is ultimately shown to be doomed by the 'nagging inconsistency of the self thereby produced' (p. 24), and the disavowed knowledge that our animal selves remain vulnerable to the claimings and maimings we erroneously assure ourselves only non-humans are at risk of.

*Key Words: Michelle Paver, Dark Matter, 'Arctic Gothic', seal, abjection, Svalbard, Arctic, littoral*



In the far-right-hand corner of the Pitt Rivers Museum is a display case containing what at first appear to be a set of three voluminous, off white, translucent garments collected from Arctic communities in the eighteen-hundreds.<sup>8</sup> In the dim light of the museum cases, mounted to appear as though they are being worn, the two parkas and a raincoat take on an uncanny, ghostly quality as they delineate the absent presence of their wearer. What makes the garments more remarkable is the fact that they are constructed, in part, from seal intestines, the animals' 'insides' adapted to clothe the human exterior in a blurring of the boundaries between human and non-human which has frequently characterised the presence of the animal within European gothic literature, despite the sometimes vehement protests of protagonists to the contrary.<sup>9</sup> Seen in their contemporary museum context, these objects gain a profoundly gothic resonance, underscored by their acquisition from indigenous communities by European explorers and collectors, and their disarticulation from the cultures and contexts in which they were designed to be used, and within which this gothic quality is absent.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, perhaps more so than fur and leather garments, the construction of the objects from intestines—material taken from inside the body of the animal and exposed to view—makes more readily legible the processes of hunting, gutting, skinning, and tanning involved in the conversion of animal into garment, in this case a prosthesis capable of allowing the human wearer to 'inhabit' the animal, and thus survive in the Arctic conditions which would normally be fatal to them.



Figure 1: Hooded seal skin jacket, Pitt Rivers Museum (1925.11.3)

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<sup>8</sup> Online catalogue records for these holdings can be found [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> This pressure which gothic writing frequently places on this 'alienation of the human from the animal' as Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson put it (2020, p. 2), forms a through line in a significant body of contemporary ecogothic criticism, as evidenced in Heholt and Edmundson's *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*.

<sup>10</sup> The catalogue records for all of these items state that they were purchased from the indigenous communities involved; however, even if this is the case, the complexity of the relationship between the European purchaser, and the communities from which these garments were obtained, must be recognised.



*Figure 2: Hooded coat made from seal intestine, Pitt Rivers Museum (1908.73.1)*

These objects sit at an intersection of European exploration of the Arctic, the slaughter and processing of animals by humans—both those indigenous to Arctic landscapes and those who are not—and a gothic aesthetic which invokes spectrally present-absences. This intersection is likewise present in Robert McGhee’s description of a visit to various shorelines along the Svalbard archipelago, an Arctic island group half-way between Norway and the North Pole. McGhee (2008) describes how:

‘Massive whale bones protrude from the muddy beaches [...]. In every valley flowers and lichen slowly cloak the fragile bones of reindeer. And then there are the walrus kills. For hundreds of meters the surface is carpeted with thick and heavy bones [...] impenetrable to decay. [...] The drifts of bones are

thickest near the beach, where the hunters created a windrow of dead and dying animals to prevent their relatives from escaping to the sea' (p. 189).

What McGhee is describing are the relics of practices of hunting on Svalbard by Danish, Norwegian, English and Russian Pomor trappers and traders, practices which were characterised by both sadism and excess. Sir James Lamont's *Seasons with the Sea Horses, Or Sporting Adventures in the Northern Seas* (1861) provides numerous anecdotes which attest to this, ranging from the minor tormenting of a pet walrus, by pulling its whiskers and threatening to hit it with a rope (pp. 26-7), through to the wholesale torture and killing of a wealth of wild animals. One of the most striking examples in Lamont's text is contained in an account given to him by one of the crew of his sealing ship, of the killing of hundreds of walrus located on an ice floe, an account characterised by gothic excess through its accumulation of synonyms linked by repetitious 'ands': 'they slew, and stabbed, and slaughtered, and butchered and murdered until most of their lances were rendered useless and themselves were drenched with blood and exhausted with fatigue'". (p. 188). The whaling, trapping and other kinds of hunting described in *Seasons with the Sea Horses* all but wiped out the profoundly abundant native mammal life in the archipelago over the course of three centuries between the early 1600s and the early 1900s.

It is in this deathly littoral landscape, 'so far north that "dead things" last for years' (2010, p. 39), that Michelle Paver sets her neo-thirties novel *Dark Matter*, which itself gothicises the 'Boys' Own Adventure' genre in its narrative of Arctic exploration thwarted by supernatural intervention. Paver's novel depicts a scientific expedition to the fictional cove of Gruhuken in the Svalbard archipelago in January of 1937, an expedition which is beset by disaster from the outset and whose team (comprised of aristocratic Gus Balfour, Algernon Carlisle, Teddy Wintringham and Hugo Charteris Black, and the lower-middle class Jack Miller) are forced to leave the archipelago one by one, until only Jack remains to face the malevolent supernatural presence which appears to inhabit Gruhuken.

On the one hand Paver's novel reproduces, through her first-person narrator Jack, the conventions of literary representations of the Arctic in the 1800s and early 1900s, 'as a space for virile, white male adventure in a harsh but magnificent, unspoiled landscape waiting to be discovered, charted, painted, and photographed *as if for the first time*' as Sherrill Grace (2001)

puts it (p. 174). On the other, *Dark Matter* participates in a trend in cultural representations of the Arctic whereby '[t]he narrative that begins to emerge [...] is hybrid, heterogenous and unstable; the historical record where it is evoked, is fragmented, questioned, rescripted' (p. 174).

McGhee's description, quoted above, and the Arctic seal skin garments on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum capture, implicitly and explicitly, the violence inherent in the interactions between the human and the non-human which have defined European colonial and expeditionary endeavours in the Arctic. Together, they contribute to an acknowledgement of the European construction of Arctic spaces as frequently finding their locus in the interactions between the human and the non-human which also preoccupy Paver's *Dark Matter*. It is important to note here that, the seal skin garments in the Pitt Rivers collection come from the Aleutian Islands and the North Baffin Islands, not the culturally and geographically distinct Svalbard archipelago, though their associations and resonances, when looked at within the museum context in which they are now held, are nonetheless pertinent to our understandings of the historic practices of hunting and trapping on the islands, and Paver's gothic treatment of them. Likewise, it should be noted that while the Aleutian and North Baffin Islands both possess indigenous populations, the Svalbard archipelago has never had an indigenous population, its remote position meaning that migrant Paleo-Eskimos didn't travel that far north. To quote McGhee (2008): 'Only Svalbard, the adjacent Franz Josef archipelago to the east, and a few of the most isolated islands of the Canadian Arctic archipelago, were not discovered and used by [the] ancient explorers and hunters of the Arctic' (p. 175). As such, Svalbard was and is not subject to an existing indigenous framework for how non-human life should be conceptualised or interacted with, only a colonial and latterly capital-driven model.

In this article I understand the haunting presence at the heart of the novel to exceed any straightforwardly human post-mortem status, instead positioning them as marking the insistent remains of the historical slaughter McGhee and others detail. I argue that a key element of Paver's gothicisation of the 'virile male adventurer' mode of literary engagement with the North are her depictions of animal cruelty, mutilation and death, depictions which confirm the ecogothic politics and poetics of Paver's novel. These moments and motifs, rather than being secondary to the human suffering, implied and actual, in the novel, in fact make explicit a subsumed history of violence towards the non-human population of Svalbard which constituted

human activity in this landscape for centuries. *Dark Matter* teems with non-human life: sea birds, polar bears, walrus, reindeer, arctic foxes, whales and as well as domestic sled dog teams, reflecting the fact that, following the archipelago being placed under Norwegian sovereignty in 1920, legislation to protect the islands' wildlife saw a modest ecological recovery. Shifting the critical focus away from the human protagonists, in this reading I recognise the significance of the animal in Paver's work, and its status within this littoral landscape defined by non-human suffering and death, in order to argue that what is haunting the coast of Svalbard exceeds the human and that this excess has specific ethical implications.

In doing so I explore how Paver's coastal gothic illuminates both how sadistic acts of cruelty towards animals constitute an abjection of the non-human other in an attempt to '[consolidate] a stable sense of self' as Nathaniel Leach (2011) puts it, an attempt doomed by the 'nagging inconsistency of the self thereby produced' (p. 21), and the disavowed knowledge that our animal selves remain vulnerable to the claimings and maimings we erroneously assure ourselves only non-humans are at risk of. Paver's use of the ecogothic mode therefore positions the suffering and deaths of animals as constitutive of these littoral spaces, beyond which her characters, and many of the historical explorers and trappers upon whom they are based, seem unable to progress. Spitsbergen's shoreline comes to act as a mass grave, and a recognition of them as such subsequently demands that we pay them sustained ethical attention, in order to more fully comprehend the ecogothic political economy of Paver's text. Two key contexts inflect this analysis of *Dark Matter*: the period of intense hunting referred to by Robert McGhee as the Rape of Spitsbergen<sup>11</sup> and the European literary traditions which have grown up around representing Arctic spaces.

The Rape of Spitsbergen refers to the process whereby the 'immense herds of walrus', 'colonies of harp and hooded seals [...], ringed and bearded seals, [...] pods of white, beluga and single-tusked narwhals', 'sei, minke, blue, humpback, right and bowhead' whales, 'white bears and black orcas' who thrived on the archipelago four centuries ago as well as herds of reindeer and flocks of sea birds, were hunted to the verge of extinction over a period of four centuries by Russian Pomors, and Dutch, English and Norwegian traders (McGhee, 2008: pp. 174-5). The scale of this economic activity and the ecological devastation it resulted in is

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<sup>11</sup> For clarity, it should be noted that Svalbard refers here to the archipelago to which the island of Spitsbergen belongs.

difficult to describe. In a single voyage to the archipelago ‘the crew of the *Amitie* killed 120 walrus, 51 reindeer and 30 bears’ (p. 178). In a period of six hours, the crew of the Muscovy Company’s *Speed* killed between 600 and 700 walrus (ibid). By the summer of 1921 Seton Gordon (1921), an early wildlife photographer, described the Svalbard he encountered as ‘so far as the eye can see, entirely devoid of life [...] everywhere was the silence that broods ceaselessly about the lands that approach the pole’ (Seton, 1922: p. 27).

In economic, anthropological and ecological terms, the Rape of Spitsbergen is well documented. What is perhaps less frequently explored is the cruelty, verging on sadism, which characterised much of this hunting activity. Stephen Bennet, master of the *Speed*, describing a 1604 walrus hunt details how:

‘Some [walrus], when they were wounded in the flesh, would but looke up and lye downe againe. Some were killed with the first shot; and some would goe into the sea with five or sixe shot; they are of such an incredible strength. When all our shot and powder was spent, wee would blow their eyes out with a little pease shot, and then come on the blind side of them, and with our carpenter’s axe cleave their heads’ (quoted in McGhee, 2008: p. 178).

Over two decades later, James Lamont recorded a further walrus hunt, a sporting trip this time:

‘Upon looking closely at the walrus when she came up to breathe, I then perceived that she held a very young calf under her right arm, and I saw that he wanted to harpoon it, but whenever he poised the weapon to throw, the old cow seemed to watch the direction of it and interposed her own body, and she seemed to receive with pleasure several harpoons which were intended for the young one’ (pp. 62-4).

Lamont’s account continues by explaining that the most effective ‘dodge’ used by walrus hunters, was to capture a baby walrus and torture it so that the rest of the adult animals would be drawn to the hunters by the juvenile’s cries of pain. He praises this strategy for its ‘*humanity and ingenuity*’ (p. 64) in a description which places significant pressure on the contemporary definition of humanity which conflates both the state of being human and quality of being



humane and constructs an Arctic ‘humanity’ around the ill treatment and exploitation of that considered ‘non-human’. These descriptions go beyond the slaughter of animals for food and resources, suggesting the scale of the violence and cruelty which was imposed on the non-human population of Spitsbergen. The legacies of this ecological violence on a mass scale, which can still be observed in the skeletal remains of the walrus kills and in the material traces of the furnaces and kettles used for rendering whale blubber, are, I argue, powerfully at work in Paver’s novel.

Likewise, Paver’s novel is informed by a number of literary traditions around representing the Arctic, both in fiction and non-fiction. First, it is important to note that Paver’s situation of the ghost story genre within the space of the Arctic constitutes a continuation of the trend in writing on the Arctic for including ghostly or spectral experiences. Shane McCorristine (2018) cites numerous examples of such hauntings in his monograph. Particularly striking incidents include J.A. Grant’s account of the ghost of a mummified Inuit woman smuggled on board the 1876 *Pandora* exhibition by its surgeon, which can only be laid to rest once her remains are buried at sea (‘Ghost Story of the Arctic’, *Western Morning News*, 1934), the spectral fiancé haunting the protagonist of Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Pole Star* (1912) and polar explorer Frederick Cook’s belief that the ghosts of deceased explorers accompanied him on his Arctic voyages (*My Attainment of the Pole*, 1911). As McCorristine argues, ‘a good part of being in the Arctic meant experiencing spectral moments, of seeing the familiar become the strange and of having to work out how absent people seemed to have presence. [...] Ghostly experiences meant a lot to explorers and their audiences’ (p. 15). McCorristine continues, pointing out how, in

‘canonical sources (like the published journals of explorers) or peripheral sources (like poetry in periodicals or pulp fiction) [...] [t]he Arctic is imagined [...] as a zone of loss, disappearance and fragility, but also of haunting, uncanny returns and frozen permanence [...]. Stories of Arctic dreams, ghosts and haunting are not just literary decorations: they force us to question who had cultural authority over the Arctic during the nineteenth century’ (pp. 4-5).

Moreover, Paver’s novel explicitly picks up on the description of Arctic landscapes as essentially oneiric, spaces of dream and fantasy. As protagonist Jack puts it: ‘There’s no dawn

and no dusk. Time has no meaning. We've left the real world, and entered a land of dreams' (pp. 18-9), a description which reproduces what McCorristine (2018) terms '[t]he widespread circulation of dreams and dream language in exploration narratives fed into constructions of the Arctic as a strange and spectral place' (p. 9).

Both of these contextual details hinge upon the human interaction with the non-human landscape and inhabitants of the Arctic, a relationship which was particularly potent on Svalbard due to its lack of indigenous inhabitants. This aspect of Svalbard's character was commented upon by Sir Martin Conway, who asserts in his 1906 study of the archipelago that it 'never had any inhabitants' (p. vii). For Conway, the implications of Svalbard's 'uninhabited' status are far reaching, going as far as to conclude that this means it can 'therefore, in a sense, can have no true history of its own' (p. 1). However, Conway's perspective here is exclusively anthropocentric, and fails to recognise the 'inhabitants' of Svalbard, and their uniquely non-human histories (or indeed to recognise the interactions between human and non-human life on Svalbard *as* history in the first place) in favour of dubbing it, as does the title of Conway's book, 'no man's land'.

Such a categorisation is borne out through the ways in which Paver's characters struggle to domesticate the wilderness and insistently refuse the claims of the animals who already inhabit it. When Paver's protagonists, Jack, Gus and Algie land on Svalbard, their attempts to fashion a reproduction of an English domestic space are detailed and extensive, having brought with them a variety of objects and provisions which bespeak a quasi-colonial importation of upper-class English values into the Arctic landscape, including 'a crate of Oxford Marmalade, and two bottles of champagne for Christmas [...] a crate of books and a gramophone player, and even a set of Royal Doulton china, donated by Algie's mama' (pp. 21-2). This domesticating behaviour is not limited to the explorer's use of specific supplies and commodities but also extends to the use of the non-human population of Svalbard. In a passage describing how the men are left alone on Svalbard for the first time, Jack describes how 'Algie clapped his hand to his forehead, then turned and raced up the beach. When he reached the bear post, he hoisted the "flag" he'd almost forgotten: a dead fulmar which he'd shot that morning. He strung it up by one wing, and the wind caught it and made it flap, a parody of flight. Out in the bay, the *Isbjørn* dipped her ensign in reply'. (p. 84) Not only does this scene see the corpse of an animal native to Svalbard substituted for a flag, an object symbolic of ownership,



dominion and in the context of the English origins of the three men and the period in which the book is set, of empire, it also sees that ‘flag’ recognised as such by the crew of the *Isbjørn*. On one level then, Algie’s clumsy ensign serves as a concrete metaphor for the kinds of human domination over the non-human world which have historically characterised the settlement and economic exploitation of Svalbard. However, the choice of the dead fulmar as the ‘flag’ for the expedition also possesses another significance, its ‘parody of flight’ hinting at a reanimation and suggesting that the true ‘banner’ under which Svalbard exists is not human but ‘no man’s’.<sup>12</sup>

This concept of Svalbard as ‘No Man’s Land’ is articulated in the novel by Jack who remarks that:

‘The books say the golden days of trapping were when Spitsbergen was a “no-man’s-land”. I still can’t get over that. The idea that until a few years ago, a wilderness not far from Europe belonged to *no one*: that a man could literally stake his claim wherever he liked, without seeking permission from a living soul. It sounds wonderful’ (p. 22).

This is a position, repeatedly articulated by Jack in the novel, which has historical precedent. As Roald Berg (2014) notes, ‘[s]overeignty over the [Svalbard] archipelago in the Arctic Ocean was granted to Norway by the great powers at the Versailles/Paris peace conference in 1920. During the preceding centuries, the archipelago northwest of Norway had been regarded as a no-man’s-land—terra nullius’ (p. 154). However, I wish to re-inflect this assessment of Spitsbergen as represented in Paver’s novel, emphasising the idea that, as Jack unwittingly acknowledges, the island here belongs to *no one*, that it is the human who is excluded from ownership and possession of this space. Such a reading is re-enforced through an analysis of Paver’s depiction of the sounds made by the sea ice surrounding Spitsbergen: ‘an odd, rapid, popping sound; a brittle crackling, very low but continuous’ which makes the ice sound ‘as if it’s talking to itself’ (p. 33), ‘weird creaks and groans, as if a giant were hammering to get out’ (p. 38). This is a landscape which speaks its narrative in languages which the expedition team

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<sup>12</sup> Such an interpretation is further strengthened when placed in conversation with Paver’s earlier description of the fulmar as ‘a serene grey bird [...] first cousins of the albatross’ (2010: p. 57), a connection which ties Algie’s shooting of the bird to that of the killing of the albatross in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1834), which brings fatal bad luck down on the entirety of the mariner’s crew.

cannot or will not comprehend despite Jack's sense that, upon seeing Spitsbergen for the first time, '[i]t made humanity irrelevant' (p. 37).

Jack's assessment is indicative of the extent to which Paver's gothic project can only be fully appreciated in the wider context of the animal life which her characters encounter on Spitsbergen. Paver accurately reflects the semi-reparative effects of laws passed by the Norwegian government following its gaining of sovereignty of the archipelago in 1920. The landscape Paver's explorers encounter is one which appears, contrary to the 'man made silence' Seton encountered in 1921, teeming with life. Jack describes

'Great flocks of gulls perching on icebergs, rising in flurries, diving after fish. An Arctic fox trotting over a green plain with a puffin flapping in its jaws. Reindeer raising antlered heads to watch us pass. Walruses rocking on the waves; one surfaced right beneath me with an explosive, spraying *huff!* And regarded me with a phlegmatic brown eye. The sleek heads of seals bobbed on the surface, observing us with the same curiosity with which we observed them' (p. 38).

During the journey to Spitsbergen, and throughout their time on its shores, the expedition team, and Algie in particular, spend time shooting or attempting to shoot the archipelago's wildlife. However, it is not only wild animals who are vulnerable to acts of human violence and cruelty in Paver's narrative. The pack of huskies who accompany the team on the expedition also attract Algie's attention, as Jack recounts:

'For days he's been trying to prevent the dogs from chewing their harnesses, and this afternoon he declared that enough's enough, and grabbed his geological hammer.

"What the hell are you doing with that?" I said.

"Don't worry, old man", he said breezily. "It's just an old Eskimo trick I know. You break their back teeth. Works a treat".

Gus and I stared at him, appalled.

Algie rolled his eyes as if we were imbeciles. "It's practically painless. You simply hang them up till they pass out, then tap away with a hammer.

They're a tad woozy for a while, but they soon pick up. Huskies are tough as steel, don't you know' (p. 97).

Algie's plan to semi-strangle and mutilate the dogs to avoid them causing him further inconvenience is thwarted by the other members of the expedition. However, his intention to do it at all, combined with his 'breezy' attitude towards such acts of violence, resonates with other historical accounts of the ease with which non-human pain, suffering and death was dispensed and responded to on Spitsbergen. Algie's attitude is underscored by the reduction of non-human life to a material resource to be exploited, present in his comparison of the dogs to inert and insensible 'steel'.

### **Phoca-lisation: The Seal as Liminal in *Dark Matter***

While various animals are subject to cruelty and violent death in Paver's novel, the animal most frequently its object, and the primary figure through which the gothic resonances of Spitsbergen's history of animal cruelty takes place, is the seal. Seals are littoral, creatures of the shoreline, bridging the sea and the land. They have other associations with liminality, too, particularly as creatures of folklore who bridge the division between the human and the animal. The narratives of 'selkies' or 'seal women' common to Ireland and the Shetland and Orkney Islands offer an image of a creature who is both seal and subject, human and non-human. Multiple strands of folk belief around seals position humans as their origin point, as Martin Puhvel (1963) points out:

'A varied body of traditions ascribes human origin to the seal. On the German Baltic island of Riigen the animal has been believed to be descended from drowned human beings. Concerning the same tradition in the Orkneys it was reported late in the last century that the belief that drowned people turn into seals is since a generation extinct' (p. 326).

Puhvel goes on to recount the Norwegian folkloric belief that seals evolved from the soldiers of the Egyptian Pharaoh, drowned by the Red Sea, stating: '[m]any thought that they were sometimes able to discard their animal form and assume human shape. A similar superstition prevailed on the Faeroe Islands, where it was thought that the seals each Twelfth Night turn

into humans' (p. 328). Setting aside the fleeting physical resemblances the seal might share with the human—the likeness which exists between seal flippers and human hands, the possibility that, as Anne Collett (2009) puts it '[a] man's head might look like a seal's head as much as a ball or kelp'—it is clear that the seal frequently forms a hinge point between the human and non-human world, 'reminders of the other bodies to which we are kin and with whom we share the bloody brine of life and death' (p. 122).

The image of the seal sinks and resurfaces at crucial points in Paver's novel. Seals slide 'through the water and [vanish] under the ice' (p. 36). Their heads bob above the surface of the water, observing the ingress of the human into the 'no man's land' of Spitsbergen (p. 38). Frequently though, the seals which the reader encounters are dead, slaughtered by the human characters and present only as an absence. The seal Algie shoots from the team's boat '[sinks] before the men [can] retrieve it' (p. 38) and the animal Algie 'bags' later in the novel, to feed to the huskies, is present only in 'the amount of blood spattered over the rocks' (p. 59). Moreover, the *Isbørn*, the ship which takes the expedition team to Svalbard, is a 'sealing sloop', on board which Jack's cabin 'stinks of seal blubber and [is] only slightly bigger than a coffin' (p. 24).<sup>13</sup> This description, in which the remnants of the dead seals appear to permeate the very fabric of the ship itself, and which substitutes Jack for the hunted seals in the 'coffin' that the sealer becomes for them, points to the ubiquity of this animal in *Dark Matter*. However, the presence of this animal in the text exceeds mere zoological accuracy, appearing at the novel's outset in a way which both adverts to the legacies of violence and slaughter that have shaped Svalbard's shorelines and confirms a confusion between seal and human.

In the first pages of the novel, Jack returns from an expedition planning meeting to see the corpse of a drowned man being pulled from the Thames:

'There was a crowd on the pavement, so I stopped. They were watching a body being pulled from the river [...] Leaning over a parapet, I saw three men on a barge hauling a bundle of sodden clothes on to the deck. I made out a wet round head and a forearm which one of the gaffs had ripped open. The flesh was ragged and grey, like torn rubber' (p. 11).

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<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, in this passage Jack compares the *Isbørn* to the ship 'in *Moby Dick*' (p. 24), invoking a further narrative in which the hunting of a wild animal results in injury, illness, madness and death, fates which come to befall the entirety of the Spitsbergen expedition.

In the description of the corpse, its grey rubbery skin and ‘wet round head’ begin to incubate a seal-like quality which is later confirmed in the text when Jack notices, for the first time, the presence of a seal’s head in the foreground of a picture from the *Illustrated London News* he has pinned to his wall:

‘Tacked above the mantelpiece is a picture called “A Polar Scene” that I cut out of the *Illustrated London News*. A vast, snowy land and a black sea dotted with icebergs. A tent, a sledge and some husky dogs. Two men in Shackleton gear standing over the carcass of a polar bear. [...] I’ve just noticed. There’s a seal in the foreground. All these years and I thought it was a wave but actually it’s a seal. I can make out its round, wet head emerging from the water. Looking at me’ (pp. 13-15).

Jack’s encounter with being ‘looked at’ by the seal, should more properly be understood as a being ‘looked at’ by the ultimate other, as Jacques Derrida outlines in his text *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (2008), wherein he states: ‘[s]ince so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us? What animal? The other’ (p. 3). It is an encounter which, when read alongside Derrida’s text, puts pressure on the apparent ‘abyss’ (p. 31) which has been instituted between the human and the animal, one which is rife with confusion.<sup>14</sup>

The confusion between seals and humans present throughout the novel is fostered in part through Paver’s return to the image of the ‘wet round head’ or ‘round wet head’. This phrase recurs on multiple occasions, with the oscillating placement of the words ‘wet’ and ‘round’ linguistically performing a destabilising ‘switching’ between human and seal. At certain points commas interpose an apparent distance between certain elements of the phrase, while at others the commas disappear, further unsettling the stability of the phrase, and the related stability of the epistemological categories of being constituted by the human and non-human, by seal and man. This confusion remains present in the scenes of animal cruelty in the novel which re-activate and recognise the cruelty which characterised human interactions with

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<sup>14</sup> The usefulness of Derrida’s thinking around the apparently entirely discrete but ultimately collapsing categories of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ for eco-gothic analysis are developed in a number of different directions in Heholt and Edmundson’s *Gothic Animals*, particularly in terms of considering the ‘real’ animal within the gothic text, rather than focussing only on the monstrous or supernatural animal (p.6).

the non-human on the Svalbard archipelago until relatively recently. Moreover, these incidents simultaneously prompt a recognition that these acts of violence are never as bounded by categories of being as they appear.

Of these, an episode in which Jack's expedition partner Algie skins a seal alive is the most resonant for the current discussion, particularly when we consider how Paver characterises the malevolent presence apparently haunting the Svalbard shoreline. Jack recounts how:

'Yesterday I went with [Algie] in the canoe, and I got lucky and shot a seal. We rowed like hell and gaffed it before it sank, then dragged it back to shore. The dogs were going frantic at their stakes. Gus ran down to help cut up the carcass. Algie was chief butcher, because of course he's the expert after six weeks in Greenland. So there he is, skinning—or I should say 'flensing' it—with his nasty great "flensing knife" (why can't he just call it a knife?). But as he's slitting the belly, the creature shudders. Its guts are spilling out, its blood soaking the snow, that hot-copper smell catching at my throat, but its eyes are big and soft as plums—*alive*. "Christ, it's not dead!" I croak as I scramble for a rock to finish it off. Gus has gone white and he's fumbling for his knife. Algie calmly goes on skinning. It's only when he reaches the bit over the heart that he sticks in his knife and ends it' (pp. 96-7).

Algie's skinning of the seal alive possesses an uncanny resonance with Lamont's description of the 'flensing' of a seal, wherein he observes that:

'The "flensing" of a seal or walrus is, in one respect, a most horrible sight, for immediately the skin and blubber is stripped off the carcass begins to shrink and quiver so violently, as even to seem as if it was struggling under the hands and knives of the operators. This shocking appearance is owing to the contraction of the muscles, caused by the sudden cold' (pp. 162-3).

In Paver's novel Lamont's imaginative reanimation of the seal post-mortem is horrifyingly literalised, in a move which mirrors the transition from a metaphorical confusion between

animal and human which Lamont indulges in<sup>15</sup> to a textual blending of the human and the animal which Paver undertakes in her construction of Svalbard's supernatural presence, who, as is explored below, hovers indeterminately between these categories of being.

Algie's calmness, mirroring his 'breezy' approach to mutilating the huskies earlier in the novel, renders the passage particularly disturbing. However, it also draws attention to the perverse littorality which characterises the fur and skin trade for which Spitsbergen was a hub. To quote Collett (2009): '[s]kin is itself littoral—the border area between worlds—that which distinguishes and separates and that which allows communion between inside and outside, seal and human, sea and land. It has a dual purpose' (p. 128). If we read Collett's statement in the context of Algie's torture of the seal then the grotesque transgression of the skin's littorality upon which the trade in skins and pelts relies becomes visible. In this passage the boundary between the self and the world, the human and the animal and between the land and the sea gain a shared bloody significance, particularly when considered alongside the way in which Paver characterises the malevolent presence apparently haunting Gruhuken.

Initially that which haunts the Spitsbergen coastline is figured as humanoid, as Jack misidentifies him at first as a member of the crew of the now-departing Isbørn: 'He turned to face me, a dark figure against the glare. Fleetingly, I saw that his hands were at his sides, and that one shoulder was higher than the other. There was something about the tilt of his head that I didn't like' (p. 82). However, a second encounter positions this being as hybrid, its crouching position and transition from the sea to the land combining with repetition of the phrase 'wet, round, head' to give the impression of both seal and man simultaneously:

'Thirty yards away on the rocks, something moved. [...] It crouched on the edge of the rocks. It was streaming wet. It had just hauled itself from the sea. And yet the stillness was absolute. No sound of droplets pattering on snow. No creak of waterproofs as it rose. Slowly. Awkwardly.

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<sup>15</sup> Lamont is guilty of this throughout his text, but a striking instance of this anthropomorphisation occurs in a passage describing how a seal appeared to watch Lamont skinning a polar bear he has shot: 'we took hold of the bear, and dragged him to an iceberg to flense him. While we were doing so a seal came capering about in the water, popping up his head close to us and looking at proceedings exultantly, as if he was thinking with Charles IX that "the smell of a slaughtered enemy was sweet". I punished him for indulging in such unchristian-like emotions by shooting him through the head' (p. 183).

It stood. It faced me. Dark, dark against the sea. I saw its arms hanging at its sides. I saw that one shoulder was higher than the other. I saw its *wet, round, head*' (p. 104, my italics).

Further appearances of the presence occur in locations with importance for the human exploitation of animals: at the bear post, a structure used to lure large carnivorous prey within the range of guns, and finally, in one of the *Isbørn*'s sealing launches. In both of these appearances though, the same phrase emerges:

'In one appalling heartbeat I took in its *wet round head* and its arms hanging at its sides, one shoulder higher than the other. I felt its will coming at me in waves. Intense, unwavering, malign. Such malevolence. No mercy. No humanity. It belonged to the dark beyond humanity. It was rage without end' (p. 171, my italics).

[T]here are seven men in the boat. Next to Gus – a *wet round head*. [...] Flailing I strike a body. It isn't Gus. My hand clutches something soft as mouldy leather' (p. 234, my italics).

This final appearance of the malevolent presence who has persecuted Jack throughout his time on Spitsbergen resurrects the rubbery flesh of the victim of drowning that Jack encounters earlier on in the novel while also removing the commas which, initially, kept the elements of this key phrase 'wet round head/round wet head' grammatically separate. The breaking down of the syntax of this phrase mirrors the profoundly gothic breakdown of categories of being at work in the novel. This breakdown reaches its apogee in the origin story for this figure, which is implied to be that of a trapper murdered by a mining syndicate who fraudulently took possession of his land.

Gus's diary reveals that Algie has been subject to intrusive thoughts and images implying the horrific fate of the trapper: '*And once, on those rocks, I had the most dreadful thought. Or rather not a thought, but an image in my head. I saw knives. I don't want to say anymore. And I smelt paraffin, I swear I did*' (p. 152). Jack on the other hand has a vivid dream in which he imagines himself in the position of the tortured man:



‘Now I’m tied to the bear post. Now I’m afraid. I can’t see. I can’t speak. I have no tongue. I smell paraffin. I hear the crackle of flames. I know that someone nearby is holding a torch. Now I hear the clink of metal dragged over rocks. [...] That’s when I remembered what I’d forgotten before: the rusty relics which we found when we first came to Gruhuken. We buried them to make the place safe for the dogs. Wire. Gaffs. Knives. Big, rusty knives: the sort you use once you’ve gaffed your seal and dragged it to shore. [...] After they’d finished with the knives, that’s when the paraffin came in, and the torches’ (pp. 218-220).

These quotations demonstrate that the implied treatment of the trapper (or the horrific shared fantasy that all of the explorers seem to access) reduces him to the status of the animals trapped, killed, skinned, rendered down, and dismembered as part of the economic activities which are undertaken in Spitsbergen. This is particularly evident both in the recognition by Jack that the knives which it is implied are used to torture the trapper are the same kind of knives designed to flense seals, and in the juxtaposition of the rendering of the space of Spitsbergen ‘safe’ for the dogs with the sadistic treatment of the trapper. The horror generated by this act of sadistic violence is not, I argue, generated through the human trapper’s treatment *as an* animal but by the fact that his treatment rehearses and underscores the cruelty and the sadism which characterised much of the human relationship to the non-human world in this Arctic context.

Having established both the cruelty and violence which shaped Spitsbergen as a location between the 1600s and 1900s, and the way in which Paver’s novel both re-activates this dynamic between the human and the non-human world in *Dark Matter*, while also constructing a supernatural presence which symbolically and syntactically disorganises the categories of human and animal, the question remains of what significance these acts of animal cruelty, and the malevolent spectres they generate in this text might have, both in the novel and beyond. The use of cruelty—towards animals or otherwise—as a way of creating and stabilising an acceptable self has been studied by Arnold Arluke (2006), who acknowledges how:

‘Using cruelty to create a self is an emergent and reflective process that often occurs in subcultures (Prus 1997) and in the course of situated activities (Blumer 1969). Unwanted identities imputed by others can be replaced when members

of subcultures assert more favorable ones. For example, people who belong to a disfavored group, perform low-status work, or commit illegal or morally questionable deeds might use an encounter with cruelty to refashion their sense of self and present it to others in a positive light' (p. 7).

For Arluke, mutilating or destroying literal animals may be undertaken in order to allow for a disavowing of the animal we repudiate in ourselves.

Bearing Arluke's assessment in mind, the significance of the violence and cruelty which pervades Paver's novel becomes clearer when we attend to the detail that the trapper who refuses to give up his claim to land in Spitsbergen, and is therefore slaughtered, is described by a fellow hunter as having in life 'that abject manner which brings out the worst in people' (p. 195). This reference to the 'abject' is key when we place it in conversation with Nathan Leach's (2011) position, that 'the abjection of the "Other" in a way that enables the consolidation of a stable sense of self' is accompanied, always, by a disavowed nagging inconsistency of the self thereby produced' (p. 24). In her writing on abjection, Julia Kristeva (1982) explores the relationship between abjection and animality, stating that:

'The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of the *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to separate it from the frightening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder' (p. 324, my italics).

Precisely how shaky these separations are, how proximate these 'fragile' animal states, is repeatedly gestured towards in Paver's novel. Following Jack's simultaneous decision to go on the Spitsbergen expedition and apparent recognition of the previously unseen seal in his Arctic image taken from the *Illustrated London News*, Jack recalls how immediately '[a]fterwards, I went back to my room and threw up' (p. 17). This literal abjection, a bodily rejection of something experienced as foreign to it, is not commented on by the narrator and this textual silence figures a rejection of the bodily, and thus the animal, in the face of the prospect of 'rational' scientific exploration. Such a rejection continues later in the novel when Jack is repulsed by Algie's body: 'Algie is using his collapsible safari bath, and I'd rather not watch,

all that wobbly, freckled flesh. His feet are the worst. They're flat pink slabs, and the second and third toes protrude way beyond the big toe, which I find repulsive' (Paver, 2010: p. 77).

Jack's reaction dramatises a tendency in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writing on Arctic exploration, acknowledged by McCorristine, to ignore or occlude the physical body of the explorer and the pain, indignity and disfigurement it was at risk of suffering in this extreme environment. As McCorristine (2018) states, '[w]hile it is dangerous to assume that all journalists and naval authorities were enamoured of Arctic exploration [...], where commentators were positive about the benefits of northern expeditions a rather disembodied mythology of heroism predominated. Less well publicised were the bodily and ignoble incidents that lurked beneath the epic stories' (p. 32). One explanation for this is that the body in its naked, ill or injured state can be considered to be occupying the kinds of 'fragile state [...] where man strays on the territories of the animal,' which Kristeva (1982) understood as provoking a compulsion towards abjection (p. 324). Furthermore, the presence of Jack and his fellow explorers on Svalbard's shoreline, and the presence of the hundreds of hunters and trappers before them, can be considered within the ecogothic political economy of this novel as precisely a '[trespass] on the territory of the animal' which renders the shoreline itself a theatre of abjection in which the human and the non-human become uncannily enmeshed. Compelled by Spitsbergen's climate and landscape to become littoral creatures in their own right, negotiating a fragile existence on the borderline between the sea and the land, Paver's explorers are repeatedly confronted by their own animality, and the collapse of the notion, articulated by Timothy C. Baker (2020), that the non-human animal can act as 'a marginal being against whom men define themselves, [. . .] through acts of violence' (p. 291).

## **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, it is productive to turn to an instance of the kinds of 'refuse and corpses' which Kristeva (1982) likewise understands as abject, as constituting that which we 'thrust aside in order to live' (p. 314), inscribed in the confusion which abounds in the novel between signifiers of economic claims, and memorials of bodily harm and death. On arrival at Spitsbergen, Jack is disappointed to see:

‘less picturesque remains. Abandoned mines, and the broken down cabins of prospectors long gone. In an inlet I saw a post rising from a cairn of rocks with a plank nailed across the top. I assumed it was a grave, but one of the seamen told me it was a claim sign’ (pp. 62-3).

However, such a confusion between graves and claims resolves itself when we recognise the overdetermined nature of these structures, as illustrated in the following passage:

‘When we got back to the hut, Gus, the inveterate biologist, paused to identify the bones. Many are scattered, the disembodied skulls of walruses and reindeer, but others are recognisable skeletons. Gus pointed out foxes, fine and brittle as porcelain; and the big, man-like frames of bears. And smaller ones with short limbs and long toes that look unsettlingly like human hands, which he said are seals. I tripped over a claim sign lying on the ground. A posh one, of enamelled tin with emphatic capitals punched out in English, German and Norwegian: PROPERTY OF THE SPITSBERGEN PROSPECTING COMPANY OF EDINBURGH 1905. “And now there’s nothing left”, said Gus, chucking the sign away’ (pp. 62-3).

The claim sign Jack trips on among the ‘man-like’ bear skeletons and the ‘unsettlingly human’ seal bones *is* a grave marker, signalling the way that economic claiming in Svalbard is inextricably linked to non-human maiming. In this context, sadistic cruelty to animals in Paver’s text is not simply or straightforwardly economically driven; it is expressive also of a desire to abject our ‘animal’ qualities, to shakily shore up our ‘human’ selves, a shoring up which *Dark Matter*’s haunting presence consistently proves always already compromised. Here, the destabilisation of the human-non-human binary takes place primarily on the littoral boundary of the shoreline, a location conventionally understood as a point of arrival, and as such an arena pregnant with the potential for cross-cultural encounters and violence. The ecoGothic treatment of this shoreline space compels the reader to recognise the specific ways in which Svalbard’s coast has historically been constructed as a landscape evocative of capitalist potential.

Moreover, Paver's novel utilises its Arctic setting in order to demonstrate that the operations of capitalism, the hunting, trapping, and mining which drew people to Svalbard over the course of four centuries, do not limit their exploitation to the non-human. Such a position is obliquely announced in the implication that the drowned man who Jack sees at the novel's opening constitutes 'another poor devil who couldn't find work' (2010: p. 11), but is overtly signalled in an encounter Jack has in Longyearbyen, prior to his arrival on Svalbard. He recounts how:

'On our way back to the ship, we passed a group of miners heading for "town". One turned his head and stared at me. His face was black with soot, his eyes angry and inflamed. He looked scarcely human. Capable of anything. I felt obscurely menaced, and ashamed' (p. 45).

This passage dramatises the ease with which the apparently abjected animal returns to look, in Derrida's sense, at the human, to provoke in them a shame and unease which is powerfully associated with the abject, the process by which, to quote Kristeva (1982), '[t]he clean and proper [...] becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame' (p. 320). Crucially, however, in the miner's interrogatory gaze is captured the integral relationship between capitalist operations at work in the Norwegian Arctic and a carefully co-ordinated slippage from the status of human subject to abjected animal which permits the resource extraction and exploitation upon which capitalism is predicated. Ultimately though, Paver's novel demonstrates how these substitutions and abjections are always inadequate, always incomplete, the 'figure' of the animal-as-other perpetually 'stands watching on the shore' (p. 234).

## BIOGRAPHY

**Dr Lucy Arnold** is a specialist in Contemporary literature, with particular research interests in contemporary gothic, narratives of haunting, contemporary women's writing and psychoanalytic criticism. Her published work to date has concerned the writing of Booker Prize winning novelist Hilary Mantel, with her monograph, *Reading Hilary Mantel: Haunted Decades*, published with Bloomsbury in 2019. She is currently working on her second monograph project—*Little Strangers: The Spectral Child in Contemporary Literary Culture*.

Outside of her research and teaching, she is presently exploring the use of psychodynamic theory in higher education teaching and has established a Homeless Reading Group project, working with individuals with experience of homelessness and precarious housing in Worcester and beyond.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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**The Horrors of Ecofeminism: Exploring the Hidden Depths of Ecophobia in Evie Wyld's *The Bass Rock***

*Kristy Strange*

**ABSTRACT**

Through the lens of ecofeminism, the permeability of the Scottish coast in Evie Wyld's novel, *The Bass Rock* (2020), explores the ways in which feminine corporeality relates to contemporary Female Gothic and how this is intertwined with humanity's exploitation of nature. The fears and anxieties experienced by feminine bodies within the coastal environment are juxtaposed against Simon C. Estok's theory of ecophobia—an idea rooted in the anthropocentric and androcentric fear of a threatening and vengeful nature. Instead, Wyld draws on the Scottish Female Gothic to reflect the blurring of boundaries between women and ecology and explores the permeable borders of both human and nonhuman through the incorporation of the haunting feminine—shown in the merging of past and present narratives in the context of continued oppression and violence towards feminine bodies by men. It is the overwhelming presence of an anthropocentric and androcentric desire for domination that results in the production of fear for feminine bodies within these ecological spaces rather than as a direct consequence of the environment.

In the twenty-first century, headlines across the globe declare an alarming progression of climate change due to the consequences of the Anthropocene—humanity's impact on the geology of the Earth.<sup>16</sup> This stark reality acts as a strong reminder to humanity of its ecological responsibilities. Simultaneously, women's rights are seemingly under constant attack by a patriarchal culture that seeks to reclaim absolute control over the female body—a counteraction to the loss of control over nature as the environment becomes unpredictable. These prominent issues signal a tipping-point in history and are deeply personal concerns for all environmentalists and feminists, and arguably for all of humanity. These are concerns that we

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<sup>16</sup> View examples of headlines here: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/14/still-on-the-road-to-hell-what-the-papers-say-about-cop26>.

all directly face as a gothic reality penetrates our daily lives due to the negative human impact on the environment, consequently resulting in threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>17</sup> The past two years have been riddled with uncertainty, bringing the liminality of the current relationship between humans and the environment into sharp focus. To observe the liminality and permeability of this unnatural, unsustainable human dependency we can look to ecofeminism for insight on how this relationship has become an increasingly toxic and violent one. Now more than ever, an understanding of gothic ecofeminism is needed to shine light on this dark reality.

Published in 2020, *The Bass Rock* by Evie Wyld is a timely novel influenced by the #MeToo movement of the twenty-first century and expresses the rising anger of women regarding the historically oppressive treatment of feminine bodies by men. Set in the Scottish coastal town of North Berwick, *The Bass Rock* is a story of three women across three different timelines. The novel tells the stories of Sarah, Ruth, and Viviane. Sarah is a young, sixteen-year-old girl accused of witchcraft in the eighteenth century, while Ruth's narrative progresses forward and is set following the Second World War, centring on her recent marriage to a formerly widowed man. Finally, Viviane, the step-granddaughter of Ruth, brings the novel into the twenty-first century. These narratives flow into each other, showing shared experiences of female subjugation and subsequent male violence that span across the centuries and continue in the modern-day. In this study, I examine the permeability of the Scottish coast in *The Bass Rock* and explore the ways in which this relates to feminine corporeality in contemporary Female Gothic. Through the lens of ecofeminism, I argue that Wyld engages with the environment, specifically the fluid space of the coast, to queer normative binary constructs of gender, challenging the categorisation of Othered bodies. This article demonstrates that the fear and anxieties of feminine corporeality within the environment differs from Simon C. Estok's theory of ecophobia, which focuses on the androcentric fear of a threatening and vengeful nature. Instead, I argue that the overwhelming presence of an anthropocentric and androcentric desire for domination results in the production of fear for feminine bodies within ecological spaces.

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<sup>17</sup> I am referring here to studies theorising that SARS-CoV-2 originated in bats before 'jumping' to human hosts. The forced proximity between bats and humans is suggested to result from habitat destruction. This is outlined further here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/17/pandemics-destruction-nature-un-who-legislation-trade-green-recovery>.

In the context of the Gothic, consideration of ecofeminism is imperative to better understand twenty-first-century society; particularly, the rapidity and severity of the current climate crisis alongside the emergence of fourth-wave feminism. Examples of the importance of this topic are demonstrated in modern-day movements such as the Women's March protests, the #MeToo movement, the United States' brief withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, climate strikes sparked by environmental activist Greta Thunberg, and in various panels and protests during COP26—the UN Climate Change Conference. Ecological disasters are also rampant such as increased forest fires, rapid animal extinction, destruction of biodiversity, the recent eruption of Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano in Tonga, and the current global pandemic caused by the outbreak of COVID-19. The prevalence of ecofeminist attitudes in twenty-first-century society is clearly demonstrated in Thunberg's speech delivered to the European Economic and Social Committee during February 2019:

'We need a whole new way of thinking. The political system that you [the patriarchy] have created is all about competition. [...] [We] need to cooperate and work together and to share the resources of the planet in a fair way. We need to start living within the planetary boundaries [and] focus on equity [...] for the sake of all living species' (p. 37).

To live within the planetary boundaries—real boundaries based on the sustainability of resources and its impact on both human and nonhuman life—humanity must acknowledge its ecological responsibilities and deconstruct the anthropocentric and androcentric ideals that have imposed the false, dualistic categorisations of (hu)man versus Other. Ecofeminism challenges these dualistic perspectives by focusing on the shared realities of abuse and exploitation experienced by women and nature at the hands of mankind. The theoretical lens of ecofeminism highlights barriers and biases that limit our current solutions for the climate crisis, which are 'too often' associated with 'unquestioned masculinist and technonormative [approaches]' that 'rely on many of the same masculinist and human-centred solutions that have created the problems in the first place' (Grusin, 2017: Introduction). Instead, ecofeminism offers a new outlook of hope for the environment by exposing, understanding, and challenging the systematic, androcentric ideals that have overwhelmingly contributed to the degradation of both women and the natural world. If we only focus on anthropocentric impacts on nature, then we are dismissing the critical patriarchal structures within our society that enable continued abuse.

Theoretically, it is important to understand the dichotomy between cis men and women and how this is presented in the Gothic. Before a binary can be broken, it must be recognised. The Female Gothic, especially in western societies, has largely been attributed to themes of domestic(ated) horrors and the overbearing power and control exercised by men over female bodies. As society has progressed throughout the years, so has the Female Gothic. In ‘Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic’ (2009), Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith provide a detailed outline of the progression and development of the term Female Gothic. They argue that the Female Gothic has largely moved beyond the original confinements of the domestic space (e.g. the home) to reflect a wider scope of experience that is influenced by the politics of a patriarchal culture. Wallace and Smith (2009) point out that the Female Gothic is—and always has been—a ‘politically subversive genre’; it challenges the normative beliefs of the patriarchy and gives voice to the dissatisfaction, fears, and anxieties of women, who are oppressed within patriarchal society (p. 2). Although these critics point out the difficult task of defining the Female Gothic, they postulate that this term’s fluidity presents ample opportunity for future research. Wallace and Smith argue that by ‘retaining the term “Female Gothic” as a broad and *fluid* category—while both interrogating it and acknowledging its many mutations’, this term will continue to provide the necessary foundation to better understand and critique the evolution of this wide-ranging topic [emphasis added] (p. 11). This is particularly important to consider in parallel to subsequent waves of feminism and how this impacts society’s thinking. The foundation laid by Wallace and Smith demonstrates the movement of Female Gothic studies away from traditional theory – as defined by Ellen Moers in the mid-1970s – of confined, domestic spaces and encourages the development of another branch of theory focusing on the expansive wilderness and how domestication is strife within natural spaces (Wallace and Smith, 2009, p. 1). This is, of course, where ecofeminism plays a significant role as mankind continues to domesticate nature, exploiting the environment for (hu)man, capitalistic profit, mirroring the patriarchal domestication of women. It comes as no surprise then that a new direction of study that continues to grow in popularity is ecofeminism in the Gothic.

The term *ecofeminism* was coined in the early 1970s by French activist Françoise d’Eaubonne. A core principle of this theory is that all human and nonhuman entities are regarded as equal; thus, disputing anthropocentrism—the belief that humans are the most

important component of life. In ‘Feminism-Ecology: Revolution or Mutation?’ (1999), d’Eaubonne briefly outlines her main hypotheses regarding ecofeminism and argues that patriarchal dominance over feminine characteristics, such as reproduction and fertility, has led to the oppression of both women and nature. Women and nature are viewed as exploitable resources that the patriarchy seeks to dominate and control, especially for capitalistic gain, which has led to present-day issues of ‘overcrowding and [the] exhaustion of resources’ (d’Eaubonne, 1999: p. 176). Ecofeminist theory proposes that to resolve the ecological crisis, the liberation of women must be addressed alongside the environment. Albeit the term *nature* must be recognised as being, in and of itself, a loaded word. The phrase expresses an essentialist perspective that harks back to anthropocentrism due to nature’s connotations of *human nature* and the natural, establishing socially constructed ideas of the opposite—the unnatural Other.

In her 2017 study, Caroline Goldblum reasons that these othered bodies—both human and nonhuman—must be nurtured out of the exploitative, oppressive societal structures established by anthropocentric and androcentric beliefs. Goldblum (2017) argues, ‘that to save humanity, we must bring together the two struggles—ecological and feminist—because the patriarchy is simultaneously responsible for ecological disasters (by overproduction and capitalistic logic) and the enslavement of women (by the appropriation of women’s bodies) [translation my own]’ (p. 194). The plight of both ecology and women is one and the same because women’s bodies are subjected to the same oppressive abuse and exploitation as that experienced by the environment. This sentiment of converging these struggles and moving away from (hu)man rationality is reiterated by Mary Phillips (2016), who argues that the material body must be embraced to deconstruct the androcentric association of the masculine, rational mind as being superior to the feminine, emotive body. Phillips echoes the foundational work of Val Plumwood’s (1993) *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* that argues ‘reason in the western tradition has been constructed as the privileged domain of the master’ wielding power and control over a ‘subordinate [Other] encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed beneath him’ (Introduction). It is this binary categorisation that continues to enable patriarchal culture to deem feminine bodies as Other and, thus, inferior. Instead, Phillips suggests that by writing the body in a creative context, the disconnect between body and nature can begin to heal. Phillips relates this idea to the work of H el ene Cixous, whose writing Phillips (2016) views as

‘[representing] a move to resist the ways which women/nature are linguistically, historically and sexually confined’ and how this contributes to the ‘undoing of binary hierarchies’ (p. 64).

Based on Phillips’ research, the term *feminine* will be used throughout this study to emphasise the socially constructed idea of femininity and how this expands beyond the confinements of the female body but remains crucial to the overall material body. This usage is further supported by Danielle Roth-Johnson (2013), who suggests it is the social constructs of femininity that enable bodies to be deemed as Other in comparison to male masculinity. These othered bodies subvert the imposed binary gender norms established by the patriarchy as well as reveal the erroneous concept of femininity being equated solely to the female and masculinity to the male. Plumwood (1993) theorises that an inclusive feminism beyond the female body is critical to ecofeminist theory noting that ‘forms of oppression from both the present and the past have left their traces in western culture as a network of dualisms, and the logical structure of dualism forms a major connection between forms of oppression’ (Introduction). Feminine corporeality viewed through the lens of ecofeminism highlights the organic fluidity of humans and nonhumans and demonstrates a material fear of anthropocentric and androcentric beliefs. Nevertheless, *female* corporeality is still a crucial component of historical oppression by the patriarchy. The female body helps build an understanding of how the othering of bodies has expanded to include many diverse groups that are significantly threatened and harmed by a dualistic, patriarchal culture—predominantly a culture governed by western, white, cis men.

This definition of feminine corporeality is preceded by Paulina Palmer (2012), who offers an important exploration of a fluid, nonbinary corporeality in *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*. Like many terms in the Gothic, *queer* is also a contested one. Palmer describes different ideas surrounding the queer and what it means; she explores both *transgressive* forms of sexuality and identity that still categorises these bodies within the realm of the Other in juxtaposition to heteronormativity, while also deconstructing these binary social constructs of gender and sexuality to suggest a fluid corporeality and identity (p. 4). In my study of Wyld, I consider the latter position in direct opposition to a heteronormative, androcentric, and anthropocentric society. I examine this position beyond human boundaries and consider the uncanny queering of human and nonhuman bodies, specifically in the context of feminine corporeality that challenges the patriarchy’s dualistic beliefs. Anyone who exists

outside of androcentric social constructs queers normative expectations and is categorised as Other. Palmer (2012) notes the significance of the Gothic mode in drawing attention to socio-political issues and suggests ‘the ability of the Gothic to transgress, in both the “itinerant” and “unorthodox” senses of the term, is particularly apparent in its encounter with the queer’ (p. 11). The expression and critique of such socio-political issues is at the very heart of *The Bass Rock*, demonstrating that this discussion remains critical to twenty-first-century Gothic texts. Rather than dismissing sensitive topics such as the abuse and exploitation of women and nature, Wyld shows that we must face these socio-political issues head on. If we do not acknowledge the othering that occurs between the rational, (hu)man mind and feminine bodies than we will forever be consumed by fear.

The domineering desire to categorise feminine bodies as the fearful, threatening Other seeps into various areas of Gothic theory, many times unnoticed. In the study, ‘Theorising the EcoGothic’ (2019a), Simon C. Estok’s theory of ecophobia is described as the crux of ecoGothic texts; Estok claims ‘no ecophobia, no ecoGothic’ (p. 39). Estok (2019a) further describes ecophobia as ‘the imagining of nature as a menacing threat [...] bent on vengeance’ (p. 41). He notes the disconnect between humanity and the environment and argues that this disconnect is rooted in anthropocentrism, but there is little to no ecological awareness, generating no impactful actions to reshape this destructive relationship between humans and nonhumans. Despite the focus on the Anthropocene, Estok fails to delve deeper into the impact of androcentrism in the production of problematic anthropocentric beliefs and how androcentric attitudes alter sources of ecophobia for othered groups. By ignoring the shared, gendered experience of feminine bodies such as women and nature, a well-rounded understanding of ecophobia is impossible. Androcentrism must be considered and criticised. Although I agree that ecophobia is a crucial component to the ecoGothic, I argue that nature itself is not the root source of horror for othered groups, especially in the Female Gothic. The idea that the environment is something to be feared, something to be conquered, only acts as justification for the abuse humanity enacts upon it and dismisses humanity’s ecological responsibilities. As argued by Sharae Deckard in ‘Ecogothic’ (2019), the Gothic mode centres on an idea of excess and the ecoGothic is no different. Within the context of this idea of excess, *The Bass Rock* suggests an organic sense of belonging experienced by feminine bodies in the environment that is only disrupted by an overwhelming, excessive presence of toxic masculinity and its subsequent aspiration for domination. The infiltration of masculine logic



for dominance—defined by Katey Castellano (2009) as ‘a web of oppressive conceptual frameworks’ that rationalise the establishment and maintenance of othered bodies as exploitable resources (p.82)—within these fluid spaces invokes fear and anxiety. Thus, this overbearing and controlling idea of masculinity is responsible for producing fear in these environments as it transforms the organic, nonbinary existence of nature.

Estok (2019a) identifies a gap in his theory of ecophobia in relation to a feminist perspective and asks, ‘how might a feminist ecoGothic respond to essentialist co-locations of women’s bodies with the natural world and its rhythms?’ (p. 45). This question is later investigated in his additional research, ‘Ecophobia, the Agony of Water, and Misogyny’ (2019b) and ‘Corporeality, hyper-consciousness, and the Anthropocene ecoGothic: slime and ecophobia’ (2020), that explores the association of the female body with the environment through the representations of slime, mud, and polluted waters—dark, murky, and mutated bodies of water that connote a negative, feminine ecological space. I aim in this study to move beyond an androcentric association of the female body with dense, disruptive, and negative ecological spaces. In contrast, *The Bass Rock* explores the vast fluid space of the Scottish coast and reveals the power women have over their own bodies and actions, as well as the expansive freedoms available by eradicating binary structures. Without consideration of the ways in which nature and women share socially constructed gendered realities, ecophobia fails to acknowledge the root problem of androcentric structures. These binary social constructs not only point to the masculine fear of a lack of control and mastery over othered bodies, but also the fear this engenders in those deemed Other and, thus, feminine.

The fear experienced by othered groups is not an unwarranted one, but one rooted in the very real danger presented principally by men towards feminine bodies. In her review for *Financial Times*, Catherine Taylor (2020) writes that when Wyld was writing *The Bass Rock*, she drew inspiration from Australia’s death map—an online mapping of ‘locations of murders of women, many unidentified’. In choosing the iconic Scottish coast of North Berwick rather than the Australian coast, Wyld draws on the Scottish Female Gothic to reflect the blurring of boundaries between women and ecology. The coast is an important point of discussion because of the permeability of its borders and the ways in which Wyld relates this to feminine corporeality. Although the coast is typically viewed as a dividing line between land and sea, Jimmy Packham (2019) describes the coast as an ‘ecotone, a term that denotes the overlapping

of two ecological zones’ (p. 206). Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland (2019) argue similarly that rather than being a stable border, the coast does not exist in a fixed state because its topography is constantly changing (p. 4). Land shifts beneath water to form the base of the sea and, just as easily, sea-levels can rise and spread to cover more of the land, subsuming the presumed permanent landscape. This coastal space exists *in-between* ecological zones; the simultaneous material and fluid physicality of this environment ‘speaks to contemporary preoccupations with the porousness and instability of supposedly fixed and firm borders and identities’ (Packham, 2019: p. 206). The idea that the coast acts as a dividing line is revealed as a social construct that denies the hybrid reality of this ecology. North Berwick is a prime example of this fluidity because the titular, iconic landmark of this coast is one of several small, uninhabited islands that jut out of the sea just off the shore.



Figure 1: Strange, K. (2020) Small, uninhabited islands off North Berwick’s coast.

The Lothians and Borders RGIS Group (2020) explains that all of these ‘offshore islands are composed of igneous rocks formed as molten rock (magma) cools and hardens underground’. This geological phenomenon is known as an *intrusion* and adds to the uncanny nature of North Berwick’s coast because these once hidden land masses are only revealed after years of erosion. They slowly transform the once familiar land and seascapes and are both literal and

metaphorical intrusions within the fluid space of the sea. There is a blurring of the feminine bodies of this text with these intrusive islands: both bodies seemingly an intrusion—a defiance—against mankind’s desire to claim and define.

In Wyld’s novel, an explicit comparison is made between Ruth’s female body and the Bass Rock, which becomes a character in and of itself – a permanent witness to the violence carried out against women over the centuries. The animism projected onto the Bass Rock is telling in that the Bass Rock itself is a result of a sudden, violent volcanic eruption. This intrusion is particularly unique in that it forms an ‘ancient plug’, which is defined as large ‘bodies of magma that solidified in the neck of a volcano’ (Lothian Borders and RGIS Group, 2020). Ruth is afflicted with an inability to look at the Bass Rock because she fears facing the ways that its violent history mirrors her own volatile narrative. Looking out to sea, Ruth muses:

‘Something about the Bass Rock was so misshapen. [...] She often found herself drifting if she stared at it for too long, unable to look away, like the captivation she felt sometimes looking at her own face in the mirror, as if to look closely would be to understand it’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 26).

She does not want to understand this reality—a reality governed by masculine dominance—nor the ways in which it has been maintained. The Bass Rock is like a rock lodged in a collective throat—a symbolic replication of the silencing of women’s voices throughout continued historical periods of relentless oppression. After all, Wyld (2020) suggests that the violence exhibited towards women is deeply rooted in this silencing act, as a man looks down at his murdered victim and concludes, ‘there was no other way and he had only meant to quiet her, but she didn’t understand that’ (p. 115). Like Ruth, Sarah and Viviane do not want to recognise the vulnerability of their own bodies within a society domineered by men, and yet all three women remain weary ‘[expecting] to see something slinking after us’ (p. 11). They must find their own voice and claim ownership over their own narratives or perish at the hands of man(kind), while simultaneously each failure to act sends a warning to those who come after. As Phillips (2016) argues, ‘in a world dominated by rationality, the realisation that we

are embodied and made of matter is threatening because the body reminds us of our material existence' (p. 65), but humans must remember. It is only through the reconnection with our material, yet fluid and permeable corporeality that we can begin to understand the interrelationships between both the environment and humanity. *The Bass Rock* reminds the reader that avoidance does not prevent further exploitation and violence, only silences the voice of its victims and enables the cycle to continue. Silence does not protect us; it only isolates us.



Figure 2: Strange, K. (2020) Bass Rock off North Berwick's coast.

Despite the Bass Rock's seemingly silent, solid stillness amongst the ever-changing sea, there is a quiet reflection of anger too. An anger that Justine Jordan (2020), in her review of the novel, suggests is a pivotal emotion of all waves of feminism and is especially significant in the twenty-first century when women are, rightfully and shamelessly, expressing that anger. The comparison between the female body and the Bass Rock also compares female corporeality with volcanic potential and points to the androcentric fear of an impending eruption in the feminine body; a fear that is reflected in Estok's (2019a) argument of nature being dangerous and vengeful. In blurring the boundaries between the feminine body of Ruth and the Bass Rock, this potential rise of anger, subsequently, exposes the androcentric anxiety of the feminine

body—the Other—and its power to invoke overwhelming change, transforming the topography of the environment. Phillips (2016) argues that ‘the manner in which nature, femininity, emotionality and corporeality are cast and represented reveals a deep anxiety around the organic materiality of the body’ (p. 62). This anxiety, rooted in the flesh, points out the androcentric fear of a loss of control over the material. Patriarchal culture deems the mind superior to the body; masculine logic regarded as rational to the irrationality of feminine corporeality and visceral emotions (Phillips, 2016: p. 60). Estok’s theory of ecophobia, unwittingly, subscribes to this idea. Estok aims to tackle the idea of a gendered ecophobia in his 2020 study, as previously mentioned, but he simultaneously suggests that the consciousness—the mind—is more important than the body and that corporeality cannot exist without consciousness (pp. 34-35). Although this produces intriguing possibilities for future discussions, the placement of the mind over the body reiterates an androcentric idea of corporeality as inferior and upholds a distinctively Cartesian placement of the mind as superior and ultimately the core component to humanity. In doing so, mankind continues to rationalise its domineering behaviour and attitudes through the (extra)ordinary capabilities of the (hu)man rational mind versus the inferior feminine body.

Instead of this rigid, socially constructed division, Wyld embraces the coast’s hybrid reality and relates it back to the feminine body; its fluid materiality reflects ‘where the human body becomes a site of the overlapping of various states of being’ (Packham, 2019: p. 217). The fluidity of the coast directly contrasts the Cartesian placement of mind over matter that Estok endorses. Instead, Wyld explores the various states of corporeality – past corporeal, present corporeal, and apparitions—that feminine bodies are presented in within the coastal geography. This is a space where liminality thrives and no one way of existing is deemed superior to another. Instead, the inhabitants within the coast must adapt to its ever-changing land and seascapes, becoming creatures of change themselves. Consider the comparison made regarding the Arctic ice caps by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013), who argue that the liminal, icy spaces presented by bodies of water such as the Scottish coast present an ‘ecological dead zone’ where ‘nature fails to signify anything other than a type of blankness which demonstrates a crisis of representation’ (p. 2). In contrast, Wyld’s exploration of the liminality of the coast emphasises the *in-between* space in which boundaries between the living and the dead, between fluid and fixed reality are unmoored, and the corporeality of humans

and nonhumans is disrupted—provoking a point of transition and change. The coast is anything but dead: it's alive with possibility.

By setting the stories of these women in an unambiguously Scottish coast, Wyld explores the issue of authorship that Monica Germanà (2017) identifies as a core principle of the Scottish Female Gothic, arguing that there is 'a distinctive anxiety about boundaries and authenticity – both authorial and historical' that lends itself to 'the question of authorship exposed by contemporary Female Scottish Gothic' (pp. 222-223). Like the feminine body, Scotland itself is reflected in the liminal space of the coast. Scotland exists in an in-between state—existing both inside and outside of the United Kingdom; it is simultaneously a sum of parts as well as a whole (Germanà, 2017). The boundaries that cast the nation into the territory of the Other are based in socially constructed ideas of authorship and ownership. Like the fragmented nation of this ethereal coast, Diana Wallace (2009) suggests that the female body is 'depicted as "ghostly", haunting in the sense that she is disembodied/disempowered through being subjected to "*male man*"' (p. 26). This idea of the haunting feminine is theorised as the ghostly presentation of women within Gothic texts; female corporeality becomes uncertain because of the lack of authorship that women have over their own bodies—their narratives—due to the subjugation enforced by patriarchal culture (Germanà, 2017). There is no greater lack of authorship over one's own body than physically losing it or giving it up to the hands of another—just as Scotland lost its independence, its land, its 'body' to the ownership of another. This loss of authorship is a reality that Wyld's characters eerily speak directly to through the acknowledgement and recognition of the women abused, exploited, and killed by men on the edge of the Scottish coast.

The dead bodies and rotting corpses that wash up along the coast show an uncanny revelation of the horrors once hidden within the depths of the sea. In Ruth's narrative, a basking shark washes up dead; in Viviane's narrative it is the dismembered body of a woman—both corpses, the human and nonhuman, rotting with decay. The choice of a basking shark is particularly poignant. As described by Eddie Johnston and Lisa Hendry (n.d.), basking sharks feed exclusively on plankton and are generally passive in behaviour, posing no threat to humans. Nevertheless, the simple categorisation of being within the species of the shark—arguably one of the biggest sources of fear for humans in relation to the ocean—invokes unwarranted fear.





*Figure 3: Alexander, M. (2022) Basking Shark Feeding. Scotland.*

Wyld's decision to include a basking shark—one of the largest sharks alive—emphasises an irrational fear of the Other. The basking shark can be considered a gentle giant; they do not bite their prey and will not attack humans. However, the sheer size of a basking shark is seen as frightening and potentially dangerous in juxtaposition to the small stature of a human, especially within the unfamiliar, vast expanse of the sea. Thus, the anthropocentric fear of 'so many big things right under the water that we can't see' is subverted by the female corpse, dismembered and stuffed into a suitcase to be made as small as possible, and Viviane's uncanny recognition of the real threat existing beyond the environment (Wyld, 2020: p. 26). It is not the creatures of the deep that have destroyed this woman's body, but a far more familiar culprit. Fear lies not in the sea itself but is rooted in the androcentric desire for absolute material control over both women and ecology.

The story of this disposed body is bookmarked by the core narratives of Sarah, Ruth, and Viviane. A young Viviane stumbles upon this suitcase—bursting at its seams with the dismembered female body, and witnesses 'peeking through the gaps between the white fingers was an eye that seemed to look back at me. [...] In the memory, which is a child's memory and

unreliable, the eye blinks' (Wyld, 2020: p. 2). This uncanny scene exemplifies the blurred boundaries of the coastal Gothic that Emily Carr (2013) suggests is critical in ecofeminist texts. It is within these spaces that 'the real and the unreal, the domestic and the grotesque, the alluring and the terrible coexist. The everyday is collapsed with the nightmarish; distortion, dislocation and disruption become the norm' (Carr, 2013: p. 164). Binary ideas of life and death, natural and unnatural are subverted. The woman is dead, literally torn apart, disembodied—only existing as a sum of parts that can no longer produce a whole. Nevertheless, in the conclusive scene of the novel, the woman's body is queerly resurrected, brought back in the form of a ghostly retelling of her final moments. Previously a corpse stuffed into a suitcase, the final scene returns to this suitcase before it becomes a makeshift coffin, 'on the bed, the girl's largest suitcase. It is not big enough to move *a whole life*, but it will have to do' (Wyld, 2020: p. 354, emphasis added). Wyld suggests an uncanny familiarity in this unfamiliar scene because it is embedded from the start in the woman's narrative—in her death. We, as the reader, know that not only her whole metaphorical life, but her actual, physical whole life—her body—will be broken and forced to fit inside. The breaking down and reassembling of female body parts through this ethereal resurrection reflects the formation of socially constructed boundaries and how this is used to control women's authorship. This echoes Phillips' (2016) argument that challenges the patriarchal, Cartesian placement of the male mind over the female body, noting that 'the recuperation of [the] body and its visceral inhabitation in the world' needs to be understood as a core component of ecofeminism (p. 58). By regaining her body, even in a liminal state, the woman in this scene reclaims her narrative. This spectral resurrection highlights the reality that 'othered bodies are uncomfortable reminders that our bodies are permeable [...] and have the potential to be disruptive, unmanageable, disordered and disordering' (Phillips, 2016: p. 62). The permeability of feminine bodies, and all human bodies, is mirrored by the coast where the woman's corpse washes up. These are bodies of both flesh and water, constantly shifting and changing, merging into one; never to remain fixed in one permanent state. This corpse's discovery opens the novel and sets the tone for the rest of the narratives regarding the seemingly disposable nature of feminine bodies by the violent rationality of mankind.

The merging of feminine bodies and the resulting transformative potential is highlighted in the narrative structure that Wyld establishes—a structure that scrutinises the authorship over female bodies, exposing and contesting both corporeal and narrative ownership



(see e.g. Campbell [2020]). Although the three main narratives exist independently, as a whole, Wyld echoes Germanà's (2017) thinking that 'authorial control is reinforced by [the ghostly] coexistence of multiple author figures, whose texts, metaphorically at least, bleed into each other' (p. 232). Each narrative is rooted in the same ecological space, overlooked by the uncanny Bass Rock. Sharae Deckard (2019) argues that:

'Such perceptual shifts enable *telethesia*—the extension of perception beyond the normal range of empirical senses to apprehend other situations in time and space. Telethesia can telescope multiple temporalities, capturing the way in which different moments of socio-ecological crisis over long historical periods are over-layered on fractured environments' (p. 175).

This overlapping of crises is shown through Wyld's inclusion of Sarah's ghost, who haunts the narratives of both Ruth and Viviane. Neither woman experiences fear in relation to this ethereal, feminine presence but, instead, finds comfort in it. This ghostly presence acts as an acknowledgement that these women are not alone in their struggles. Although Ruth does not see Sarah's ghost, 'she [can] imagine a girl just like her', recognising herself in the exploited and abandoned feminine body (Wyld, 2020: p. 49). Each of these core narratives have their own, individual crises, but like the coast itself, they blend together. The authorial control of Sarah, Ruth, and Viviane's individual stories do not solely exist separate from one another, but rather each narrative builds from the previous character—historically, progressing through a wide expanse of history. Through the evocation of telethesia, these narratives altogether speak to the consequences of overwhelming, excessive toxic masculinity and its subsequent violence against feminine bodies. The reader becomes the ultimate witness as a revelation—a change—slowly takes shape along North Berwick's coast.

Sarah's story is the earliest narrative, harking back to the sixteenth century and is not told by Sarah at all. Instead, her story is told through the eyes of man, specifically a young boy named Joseph. His initial gaze is seemingly innocent and even protective of Sarah but, unsurprisingly, this protective, watchful eye soon turns into an obsessive one as he lustfully admits, 'I am thudding to leave with her, my groin aches' (Wyld, 2020: p. 312). This quickly transforms into a dangerous, possessive desire for ownership over Sarah's body that, ultimately, results in her death at the hands of Joseph. In comparison, Ruth's story takes place

following the Second World War and is given in the third person. Although she has some authorship over her story, like the haunting feminine, Ruth exists in a ghostly manner within her own story—especially since we, as the reader, already know she has passed away years on from this timeline. Nevertheless, even within this ghostly narrative, Ruth lacks authorship as she is gaslit by her abusive, cheating husband—a man who forces his own narrative of false loyalty on her, “I have absolutely no sense of what you’re talking about. [...] I’m afraid you’ve made a mistake”. His softness was awful. His hurt at what she was *suggesting*’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 286, emphasis added). Even though the third person point-of-view is a progression from the androcentric perspective given of Sarah, Ruth is still disembodied from her narrative and without any authorship over her own story, which is largely controlled by her husband. She exists on the peripheral and as such remains ethereal to her own body.

Throughout the novel, Wyld illustrates a constant battle against man’s superficial claim of ownership over the female body and the rationalised ideology of additionally claiming authorship based on the superiority of the male mind. The predatory nature of the masculine logic for domination is exposed as a threatening and vengeful reality across all timelines as Sarah, Ruth, and Viviane are all physically hunted. The fight is brought to a climax in Ruth’s narrative where the predatory hunt is disguised as an uncanny, adult-version of a seemingly harmless game of hide-and-seek. An eerie, fictional tradition of this coastal community acted out on the shore. All the women in the community dress the same and don masks with the purpose of eradicating each of their individual identities. Ruth notices that all the women ‘were dressed exactly as she was’ and when she puts her mask on, she notes, ‘it was not comfortable, but at least she didn’t have to try to look happy to be there’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 156). In wearing these costumes, the women are meant to be merged into one, to all look the same. They become nameless and disembodied as their female bodies become indistinguishable, merely flesh—merely prey to the predators who seek to dominate and devour. The emotional response to this invisibility is deemed irrational and, thus, inconsequential. Plumwood (1993) describes the erasure of identity in the female body as ‘a *terra nullius*’, perceiving the feminine body as:

‘a resource empty of its own purpose or meanings, and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect, and to be conceived and moulded in relation to these purposes’ (Introduction).

The masks that these women wear remove the familiarity, the humanity from the view of the men. Each woman's facial expressions, their emotive responses become invisible to the men that observe them. They are simply seen as vessels to be used in order to satisfy and progress the rationality of patriarchal dominance. As argued by Phillips (2016), the 'logic of patriarchy' is implemented to remove a universal, nonbinary corporeality, and instead dualistic social constructs between masculinity and femininity are used to rationalise the dominance over feminine bodies, favouring 'idealised, hegemonic masculinity' opposed to the 'natural, nature, or the physical or biological realm' (p. 58). There is a physical difference highlighted between these men and women, between hunter versus hunted. Predictably, it is the women who hide and the men who seek. The men do not hide in any sense of the word, '[wearing] paper crowns with cut-outs of animal ears,' their faces on full display (Wyld, 2020: p. 156). This difference enables the props of the masks to more easily identify the women as Other in contrast to man, justifying the hunt as the masculine desire for ownership over these uniform feminine bodies is perceived to be the only rational response to such otherness. It is the complete domination over these feminine bodies that is seen as the ultimate prize for man's rationality.

Significantly, there is no way for the women to win; the men will not stop until all the women are found—no matter how long it takes. Authorial control is questioned and the conflict between feminine bodies and masculine logic for dominance—and, subsequently, ambition for ownership—is made explicit in this uncanny game that further normalises the oppression of othered bodies. Ruth's authorship is physically wrestled out of her; there is a loss of breath and, consequently, a loss of her voice as her body is physically pinned down by brute force. She describes the fear experienced during this moment of entrapment, 'immediately her breath was gone and the noise that came out of her was something like a wounded animal. No words formed, there was no time for them' (Wyld, 2020: p. 164). In comparing Ruth to a wounded animal within this liminal space, Wyld considers how both nature (in terms of ecology) and nature (in terms of humanity) 'becomes constituted in the Gothic as a space of crisis' (Smith & Hughes, 2013: p. 3). There are no words—no language—left in a body seen solely as a resource to be exploited. For Ruth, in this period of history, there is no hope. There is nothing she can do to win this game, she can only ever be the victim—powerless to the men who hunt her, silently pleading that they play by the rules. To regain her voice, Ruth *must* give the men her name. She must succumb to giving up her authorship—her ownership over her body—a body only seen as something to be used for the entertainment of these men. Her freedom can

only ever be an illusion. This is the reality that Wyld suggests patriarchy buries along with feminine corporeality to continue exploiting a narrative in which othered ‘bodies are seen as usable, disposable’ (Campbell, 2020).

In contrast to the ghostly women who haunt this novel, the only narrator who is currently alive—*consistently* and *entirely* corporeal—is Viviane, who exists in the present-day and who actively begins to resist patriarchal authorship as her story is told in the first person. Despite the progression of ownership over her narrative, Viviane’s story—her body of text—is still influenced by the patriarchal authority that looms over the histories of these women’s shared experiences. Viviane’s friend, Maggie, explicitly notes this influence by calling out the way Viviane uses predetermined vocabulary to create a false sense of security within spaces domineered by men, which is, arguably, the world at large. When Viviane states that a string of recently murdered women are unrelated, Maggie eerily replies, ‘listen to what you are saying. [...] Listen to how you’re using the words *they* have given you’ [emphasis added] (Wyld, 2020: p. 138). *They* being the androcentric systems and its established language, which is used to uphold a patriarchal society and its desire for domination—a system bent on maintaining conformity, submission, and silence from othered bodies. This speaks to Phillips’ (2016) argument that ‘the materiality of the world is mediated through language, and it can therefore be transformed and de/reconstructed through language’ (p. 69). The idea that these murders ‘are isolated events with no wider threat to the public’ is exposed as an inherently androcentric narrative (Wyld, 2020: p. 138). Each murder is distinct but the situation between victim and perpetuator remains the same; these women were murdered, not by the same person, but by the same social constructs and structures imposed and enforced by the patriarchy—rooted in the idea that the rational male mind has superiority over the feminine body and can do as it pleases. Simply put, the thread tying all these horrific crimes together is that the victim is killed because she is a woman and because the man *can*. By producing ‘writing that engages with matter and with bodies’, Wyld’s writing becomes a part of a creative tool of activism that Phillips (2016) claims ‘has subversive and transformative power that can disrupt binary thinking and explode phallogocentrism’ (p. 65).

By implementing such a clever use of narrative sequence to contest authorship, Wyld reveals and acts on the feminist rallying cry of the twenty-first century that encourages women to own their stories. The merging of so many female voices in this novel presents an all-

encompassing female authorship; a narrative that allows for sadness and anger rooted in the horrific realities shared by feminine bodies. Wyld calls attention to the interconnected realities of women and the environment in the uncanny animism she writes into the coast of North Berwick, and subsequently into all of Earth. Arguably the most haunting imagery of the entire novel is the description Viviane gives of the ghostly figures of women murdered and disposed of by man filling the coast:

‘They spill out of the doorway, and I see through the wall that they fill the house top to bottom, they are locked in wardrobes, they are under floorboards, they crowd out of the back door and into the garden, they are on the golf course and on the beach and their heads bob out of the sea, and when we walk, we are walking right through them’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 325).

The ethereal presentation of these women—these souls—reflects a fluid corporeality of the feminine body, boundaries blurred between human and nonhuman. As argued by Phillips (2016), in writing these bodies creatively, Wyld demonstrates humanity’s ‘organic embeddedness and materiality’ within ecology (p. 63). The spirits of these women are embedded into the coast, and likewise, the coast is forever entrenched in the narratives of these female bodies and all those who come after, walking directly through these histories. The shared feminine corporeality between the ethereal female bodies and the environment shows an all-encompassing reality that reflects the fatal consequences of an anthropocentric and androcentric society. In infusing the novel with these spirits, *The Bass Rock* echoes Germanà’s (2017) claim that ‘the haunting feminine can be read as an elusive construct that destabilises authorial control while, simultaneously, laying bare and subverting the politics of the male gaze’ (p. 234). Feminine corporeality, even liminal materiality, challenges the superficial patriarchal claim over the authorship of these bodies.

Ultimately, it is the environment of the coast that embraces the feminine bodies discarded by men. The sea ‘takes care’ of bodies and soil submerges bones (Wyld, 2020: p. 114). These murdered, discarded women become engulfed by nature, othered bodies become one but not in a way that evokes fear as suggested by Estok’s (2019a) argument that ‘the threats’ in ecoGothic texts ‘have no footing within an ecocentric ontology’ (p. 48). The women of this novel do not fear nature; they fear (hu)man *nature*—the socially constructed, binary

idea of the natural, and the ways that androcentrism and anthropocentrism have altered organic, natural spaces. They do not fear the earth that embraces their remains and immortalises them through the natural process of decomposition and renewal. One life merges seamlessly with another. Nature has not *consumed* these feminine bodies, rather it is the ideals upheld by toxic masculinity that continue to feed on these disposable bodies—feasting on feminine bodies in a relentless drive to satisfy the all-consuming desire for dominance. The real anxiety for the fluid corporeality of these ethereal women arises from this excess of desire and its intrusive imposition of dualistic categorisation. Nevertheless, the liminal nature of the coast continues to challenge the androcentric disposition of the rational mind over the emotive, feminine body. Dualisms are battered amongst the waves, crashing against a shore that refuses to surrender to masculine domination. After all, no one can control the sea. There may be attempts to claim, to control its borders, but the actions of the sea are beyond any (hu)man dominion.

Through the lens of ecofeminism, *The Bass Rock* shows that the overwhelming excess of toxic masculinity's desire for dominance within liminal, fluid ecological spaces invokes fear in feminine bodies. By setting this novel in the iconic Scottish coast of North Berwick, questions of authorship are explored and the patriarchal authority behind dualistic narratives is revealed as a social construct established to justify and maintain masculine dominance through the categorisation of feminine bodies as Other. Consequently, these bodies only exist as resources to be exploited and then are disposed of when no longer of any use. The portrayal of toxic masculinity as rooted in a predatory nature, hungry for feminine bodies, further reflects the real-life fears and anxieties of women in a time when these horrors are being exposed as women find their collective voice. Thus, the incorporation of an ecofeminist perspective challenges the anthropocentric definition of ecophobia and suggests that the anthropocentric fear of nature is not only a consequence of the Anthropocene. Instead, ecophobia in the Female Gothic is primarily and deeply rooted in the androcentric, socially constructed, binary categorisation of humans and nonhumans—feminine corporeality versus masculine logic. By addressing these binary constructs, this study shows the significance of acknowledging the shared experiences of women and nature, calling attention to the importance of examining and critiquing a gendered idea of ecophobia to develop this theory in new directions that move beyond anthropocentric *and* androcentric narratives. This novel ultimately represents the addition of Wyld's own voice to this historical moment—this *movement*, exposing the oppressive and violent realities so many women and other diverse groups have been subjected

to across the centuries. Wyld breaks through the silence and allows her anger to erupt in a rallying cry that calls others to join. She encourages us, the reader, to add our own voice to this movement and reclaim authorship over our narrative. If silence will not protect us, we must find our collective voice and call for real transformation within the current, toxic systemic ideologies for the benefit of both ourselves and those who come after us—human and nonhuman because, ultimately, we are one and the same.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Kristy Strange** is an independent researcher. She holds an MLitt in The Gothic Imagination from the University of Stirling (Scotland) as well as a BA in both English Literature and Clinical Psychology from Bishop's University (Québec, Canada). Originally from Québec, Canada, Strange lives with her husband and three cats in the Scottish Highlands where she spends most of her days working as a Children's and Families Worker. Her primary research examines the presentation of ecofeminism and the Anthropocene in contemporary Gothic texts; secondary interests include Coastal/Nautical Gothic, Climate Fiction, Children's Gothic, and the works and life of Mary Shelley.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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**‘Nature as a Secret’:**

**Alfred Döblin’s Baltic Stones and Theodor Storm’s Gothic Coast**

*Amy Ainsworth*

**ABSTRACT**

Theodor Storm’s 1888 novella *The White Horse Rider (Der Schimmelreiter)* famously dramatises the conflict between progressive, rational enlightenment and the long-held, murky superstitions tied to the sea. This article explores Storm’s representation of the Gothic coast alongside Alfred Döblin’s 1924 essay, ‘Remarks on Mountains Oceans Giants’, in which Döblin explores the crisis he faces when he begins to look closely at the intricate details of the natural world for the first time. The defamiliarising effect of Döblin’s encounter with some stones on a Baltic beach leads to a profound shift in his perception of nature and its processes, and of his own subjectivity. Storm, too, creates a sense of disorientation and instability through his use of the uncanny and the Gothic. This article investigates the ways in which perspectives on the natural world may shift when we come to focus on its intricacies, the ways these shifts may be achieved through the use of the uncanny, and how the centrality of the human subject may thereby be challenged.

**Introduction**

With raging seas, a dangerously shifting coastline and the haunting yet indistinct threat of something beyond the boundaries of the village persistently endangering its very existence, Theodor Storm’s 1888 novella, *The White Horse Rider (Der Schimmelreiter)*—frequently translated into English as *The Rider on the White Horse*—offers a striking exploration of the fractured relationship between the human and the nonhuman. This article aims to focus in on the perception of the coastal region represented in this novel by the various human characters, and the presence of an indistinct yet persistent non-human presence, or threat, within this space. Alfred Döblin’s remarks on nature connected to his novel *Mountains Oceans Giants (Berge*

*Meere und Giganten*) (1924) have remained relatively unexamined by scholars, but they raise questions about agency and nature, about the ways in which we perceive the natural world and its processes, and the potential defamiliarising effect of our perception of them. Döblin's perception of the natural world becomes unsettled, along with his sense of self as a result. The stability of his worldview is shaken as nature and natural processes which once were mundane and overlooked become uncannily unfamiliar. Storm's novella raises similar questions around stability and order, through the futile attempts of the human subjects to tame, dominate, or even simply to comprehend nature within the framework they use to understand the world. The Gothic elements of the text, from the dark and stormy coastline to the uncanny presence of the spectral rider of the novella's title, unsettle the established centrality of the human subject and its gaze. By exploring the ways in which perception of the natural world can be unsettled and the role of the human decentred, we may come to better understand the role of the nonhuman in Storm's novella and the ways in which it is perceived to be a threatening presence in the spaces represented.

### **Döblin's Baltic Stones and Perception of Nature**

Alfred Döblin's little-known 1924 essay, 'Remarks on Mountains Oceans Giants' ('Bemerkungen zu Berge Meere und Giganten'), shares some of the preoccupations of Storm's famous novella, notably a sense of instability and uncertainty concerning the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. Döblin reports suddenly finding himself forced to contend with a sense of alienation from the natural world when his attention is drawn forcibly to its intricate details which, as a self-confessed man of the city, he had previously, and happily, ignored. The world into which Döblin is drawn, of ant colonies and fungi kingdoms, proves itself to be foreign, even alien, to Döblin, whose own scientific frameworks are challenged by a natural world which persistently thwarts his attempts to truly grasp it. He focusses anew on the complex minutiae of the natural world, which comes to demand his attention in a way which arguably proves itself to be a Gothic experience for him, as his relationship with nature becomes complicated through the shifting of the boundaries between the two. At times it becomes unsettlingly unclear who is perceiving whom. Döblin comes to perceive the natural world around him more fully and in greater depth, from the ant colonies to the process of sugar dissolving in his coffee, and becomes 'physically frightened, giddy in the face of these things'

(p. 2). This defamiliarisation engenders feelings of frustration, alienation and dislocation, yet also an intense curiosity as he begins to truly *look* at what is in front of him. It is a sense of wonder, even occasional fear, about nature, especially when it is somehow ungraspable, unpleasant or dark, which illuminates elements of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in modernity.

Nature draws Döblin in an unexpected way: it is unfamiliar, and therefore not always comfortable. He states that he is ‘repelled by the search for aesthetically beautiful landscapes. It’s pathetic to look at a bank of clouds and see nothing but nice shadows. The world is not there for gawping’ (p. 2). He is drawn not to the simple pleasure of idyllic nature, but to the ordinary, the unexamined. To his own surprise, he is ‘moved’ by some pebbles he notices on the beach: ‘on a Baltic beach, I had seen some stones, ordinary pebbles, that moved me [...] Something was stirring in me, around me’ (p. 1). He notes that they are ‘ordinary’—there is nothing remarkable or even particularly attractive about these stones, yet they nevertheless take hold of Döblin’s imagination, so much so that, in a moment of almost childlike curiosity, he takes a handful of stones and sand home with him to the city. Suddenly, Döblin sees the Baltic stones as no longer quite so ordinary, mundane or familiar. It is unsettling to look closely, to truly see, stones worn to smooth pebbles over a period of time so immense it cannot be subordinated to a more limited human temporality. The defamiliarising experience shifts here into the sublime, the immensity of the geological temporality represented by the stones dwarfing and overwhelming Döblin’s human experience. He notes that ‘an autonomous Power was making use of [him]’ (p. 4). He is in fact so unsettled by this encounter that his own sense of self is thrown wildly off course. In the face of overwhelming natural forces, he states ‘I-am-not’ (p. 2). The uncanny sense of being lost in the face of the familiar made strange throws his whole world off its axis. Döblin describes his experience with the Baltic stones as ‘grabbing chunks from the jaws of habit and showing their obscurity’ (p. 1). He is drawn to the uncertainty of this new strangeness—to the unsettling and not always pleasant experience of his shift in perception. The aspect of nature which compels him, that which causes such obsession and anxiety, even fear, is the chaotic and frequently uncontrollable: nature and natural processes which are habitually ignored because they are mundane and so often figured as operating in the background, and which do not easily align with our conception of idyllic, aesthetically pleasing nature. The Baltic shoreline embodies resonances of the ‘landscape of fear’, as defined by Yi-fu Tuan (1979). For Tuan, “‘landscape’” is a construct of the mind as



much as it is a physical and measurable entity' (p. 5). The 'landscape of fear' is a manifestation of chaos which threatens the imagined sense of safety cultivated by the human, and is as much a psychological construct as it is physical. Storm's coastline in *The White Horse Rider* is a landscape of fear in this sense—the sea represents a constant, very real, threat to the local community, but it also appears as a menacing psychological construct in the town's folklore (including the legend of the Rider itself) and in the entrenched superstitions against which the protagonist Hauke battles. In Döblin's encounter with the stones, there are no human barriers or defences to protect against the landscape of fear as there are in Storm's text, and indeed Döblin finds himself embracing the experience, unsettling as it is. Describing the chaos and frightening unpredictability of nature, Döblin states:

'Every day I saw, I experienced Nature as [...] weight, colour, light, dark, its countless materials, as a cornucopia of processes that quietly mingled and criss-crossed. It happened that I would sit over my coffee and be unable to find my way to what was happening there: the white sugar grains vanished in the brown liquid, dissolved. Now how was that possible: "dissolve"? What was something flowing, fluid, hot doing to the solid to make it give way [...]' (p. 2)

In truly looking at the everyday process of sugar dissolving in coffee, Döblin demonstrates a curiosity which leads to a profound re-evaluation of his perception of the world around him—not just the more distant landscape of the Baltic beach and its stones, but the intricate details of the processes taking place before his eyes. Döblin is moved by the affective power of nature and its intricate processes to set it down in narrative form, in his detailed description of dissolving sugar. Roland Dollinger (2003) argues that Döblin's crisis and his literary attempts to avoid losing his sense of self in the face of the overwhelming, chaotic forces of the natural world culminates in his 'taking up his pen in the service of civilisation' (p. 98). Even as he does this, the sense of feeling lost and unsettled by forces external to the human and to established ways of experiencing and understanding the world is in fact an opportunity to re-evaluate our interactions with the world beyond that constructed by the human imagination.

Döblin describes nature and its processes as a 'happening' (p. 3): it is constant, lively

and vital, if not always pleasant or even endurable. The Baltic stones, in their unassuming presence on the beach, are nevertheless representative of the active, dynamic ‘happening’ of nature. Although they appear static, they are geological proof of environmental change which widely surpasses any human temporality, and they are still undergoing constant processes of change despite their apparent stillness. It is this ‘happening’ represented by the pebbles that proves so overwhelming, yet elicits such curiosity. Döblin states that he ‘had a desire to stay longer in free Nature and let these things, for once, play around [him]’ (p. 2). His crisis with nature is clearly not always devastating and is certainly not paralysing. He may describe himself as ‘physically frightened’ and ‘giddy’ when confronted with his overwhelming new outlook on the natural world, but fundamentally, his personal investigation into these ideas is a playful and a curious one. The notion of remaining with nature is one we may urge ourselves to draw on in our interactions with it. To remain with nature or a natural process is to show curiosity about what may at first glance seem mundane or unremarkable. If we prolong that first glance, we allow the familiar to become strange, perhaps uncomfortably so, and hence we challenge our own perspective on nature. Döblin embraces the unknown force which appears to overtake him, and he leans into the more unpleasant and unpredictable, potentially darker, elements of the natural world, and it is this curious appreciation for the darker side of nature which may be used as a tool to explore the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in Storm’s novella. As Elizabeth Parker (2020) observes in *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination*, ecocritical thought maintains ‘that there is a Nature “out there”, regardless of what we, as humans, think about it’ (p. 26). The ‘happening’ of Döblin’s Baltic pebbles may be read as an instance of this ‘Nature ‘out there’’. The pebbles exist whether the human is present or not. This defamiliarising experience becomes a Gothic one for Döblin as it erodes the boundary between the human and the nonhuman—a boundary he had found it easier to maintain in the urban space of Berlin. His encounter—the ‘happening’—encourages us to interrogate through the ecoGothic mode the uncertainty and fear in truly seeing nature and, more darkly, *being seen* by it. As Paul Evans (2020) states in *EcoGothic gardens in the long nineteenth century*, ‘The ecoGothic is a taking notice of Nature’s uncanny staring back’ (p. 206). In paying attention to the pebbles, Döblin experiences, perhaps for the first time, this ‘uncanny staring back’. His sense of displacement, or his feeling of being made ‘other’ in relation to the stones, represents a disruption to the hierarchy of power within this space. His experience of being emotionally displaced, of being seen, by nature represents a confrontation with the unsettling ‘otherness’ and potential of the natural world.

Döblin's essay offers a compelling challenge to a hierarchical worldview which instrumentalises or backgrounds the natural world, and although he is writing several decades after the publication of Theodor Storm's novella, we may locate in Storm's work an anticipation of this challenge, in which the sensation of being profoundly unsettled in relation to one's environment is manifested Gothically. The Baltic coast is a site of changeability for both writers, and Döblin's essay offers a lens through which to explore the shifting relationship between the human and the coastal environment in Storm's earlier text.

### **Instability, Narrative and the Nonhuman**

The central narrative of Theodor Storm's *The White Horse Rider* follows the life of dikemaster Hauke Haien and his drive to control the dangerous and unpredictable sea with new, modern flood defences. Hauke's plans for the installation of a new dike are met with suspicion and distrust, and he is drawn into conflict between his own progressive, apparently enlightened outlook and the traditions and superstitions of the local people. Ultimately, his neglect of the original dike leads to a fatal breach in the defences, resulting in a devastating flood during which Hauke's family and much of the town are swept away. This central narrative is prefaced by a second short narrative in which we see a traveller arrive in the town after an apparent supernatural encounter on the coast. These narratives are themselves bound by a further framing narrative, in which another narrator recalls reading the story in a journal. These framing devices are fundamentally aimed at drawing our attention to our perception of what is taking place in the tale—we are encouraged to challenge our sense of what could be real, and what is folklore. Christiane Arndt (2012) has labelled Storm's text an example of 'Schauerrealismus', or gothic realism. For Arndt, this 'realist aesthetic of the uncanny' (p. 144) exposes the instability of the relationship between the transience of folklore and the apparent immortality of the novel as art form, the complexity of the text's framing device offering a 'foretaste of literary modernity' (p. 145). In the context of nineteenth-century storytelling, the narratives within narratives emphasise the affective potential of stories. Hauke's tale is passed on from person to person, as each narrator is moved to carry the story along, adding their own perspective to it. Both stories and nature embody an affective potential, as we can also see beyond the nineteenth century in Döblin's encounter with the Baltic stones. Döblin confesses that 'Tears flowed' (p. 2) when he began to truly perceive the stones. Moved by their affective

power, he is driven by a profound emotional curiosity to take his encounter further—both to delve into his own suddenly fraught relationship with the world around him and to share his experience in writing, culminating in his epic novel *Mountains Oceans Giants*.

As Arndt makes clear through her notion of ‘*Schauerrealismus*’ and her exploration of the text’s aesthetic instability, uncertainty and conflict are central themes of Storm’s novella. The instability set up by the narrative framing device is exposed, too, in the chaotically shifting landscape of the coastline. The sense of instability which permeates Storm’s novella can be located throughout in the unstable, marshy landscape which forms the setting of the tale, and in the coastal village’s precarious position—both physically and in the sense of its future security in an ever-changing world. It is also present in the novella’s shifting temporality, as the narrative jumps from the travelling narrator to the tale of the protagonist Hauke years previously. Here we see for the first time in the text the fraught relationship between the human subject and an unnamed, indistinct nonhuman presence as the travelling narrator, an outsider in this space, describes an uncanny landscape:

‘The weather was abominable and for more than an hour, there had been nothing to gaze at on my left but a desolate polder, from which even the cattle had been called in. On my right, uncomfortably close, were the mudflats of the North Sea. It should, indeed, have been possible to sight several low-lying islands and sandbanks from the dike, but all I could see were the livid grey waves which beat against the dike with an angry roar and from time to time, spattered me and my horse with muddy flecks of foam. In the eerie twilight, I could not tell the sky from land, for even the half moon which had already risen was, for the most part, covered with dark, driving cloud. It was icy cold. My hands were so numb that they could hardly grip the reins and I could not blame the crows and seagulls, driven inland by the storm, for their incessant cawing and screeching. It was growing dark and I could no longer make out my horse’s hoofs distinctly when I looked down. I had not met a soul nor had I heard anything but the raging of wind and sea and the cry of the wheeling birds as they almost touched me and my faithful mare with the tips of their outstretched wings’ (pp. 1-2).

From the outset, this marshy shoreline is established as a Gothic environment, simultaneously repellent and alluring as demonstrated by the disorientating isolation the traveller experiences, as he is unable to distinguish clearly between land, sea and sky. This is not a landscape to be easily tamed—the manipulation and domination of nature by humans is challenged from the outset. Indeed, this narrator finds it impossible even to properly navigate his environment. The total absence of any human presence besides the traveller sets up in the first instance the fraught relationship between the human and the nonhuman which continues to play out through Hauke's battle with the sea. The narrator observes that 'even the cattle had been called in' from the 'desolate' landscape. Cattle, as domesticated creatures, are firmly associated with the human, cultivated to support the continued prosperity of human communities. Their having been called away from the landscape can therefore be read as the absence of the human presence. Similarly, the traveller's 'faithful mare' is an extension of the traveller. Although a nonhuman subject, she is nevertheless of the human, and not connected to this chaotic, apparently angry landscape; in service to the traveller, the mare acts as the only source of comfort in an environment which is perceived by the traveller to be hostile.

The traveller's isolated journey along the coast, which takes place half a century after the life of Hauke Haien as described in the novella's main narrative, demonstrates that this battle is one which has not been resolved with the death, or sacrifice, of Hauke and his family at the end of his tale. There is something Gothic in the exhausting persistence of predictably futile attempts to master nature. As Katie Ritson (2019) observes, reading *The White Horse Rider* as a dramatisation of the human conquest of nature is nothing new; however, it is only recently that scholarship on Storm has paid it any attention through the lens of our modern environmental awareness (p. 50). Perceiving the apparent fury of Storm's Gothic coast as a symptom of ecological vulnerability or instability, compounded if not initially brought about by the interventions of the human, allows us to counter some of the alienation associated with the enlightened male (for it is usually a male figure who features in these texts). As Elizabeth Parker (2020) suggests, 'One of the frequently cited effects of modern, enlightened civilisation is our alienation from the material natural world' (p. 4). Storm's male narrators, and Hauke in particular, are undeniably alienated from nature. Even as he spends his whole life on this stretch of difficult coastline on the edge of civilisation, Hauke's relationship with it is fraught and

disconnected, marked primarily by his drive to control it.

Storm's tale counters our alienation from nature by suggesting that there is a compelling power to it, represented through the continued apparition of the Rider on the White Horse and the implied presence of the supernatural in the landscape, which appears to be an independent force. Clearly, this is not the case in reality, with the sea throughout the text being perceived entirely from the perspective of the human narrators. As Ritson (2019) makes clear, Storm's coastal landscape is 'an actor in a human story' (p. 64), seen entirely through the lens of the human imagination. It is not a character embodying agency in its own right, yet the way it is perceived by the narrators demonstrates the fractured nature of the human/nonhuman relationship in this text. The traveller, for example, disorientated and alone, his senses overwhelmed, is disconnected from the landscape, ascribing it with a furious agency directed towards him in particular. Thus, it becomes a character in *his* story, formed out of fear. The traveller and other figures in Storm's text *construct* this frightening landscape as much as it is an objectively dangerous one in its own right, in the way in which Tuan (1979) argues 'landscapes of fear' are formed in the mind. Storm's characters call the darkness in these landscapes into being and create the tension between human and nonhuman which reveals itself through spectral shapes in the mist (p. 12), and through the ghostly appearance of the White Horse Rider (p. 3). The consistent emergence of the supernatural is here a reflection of the tension between the human and a chaotic, dangerous landscape which they wish to control and contain, and which is nevertheless an important cultural figure in the town's imagination, occupying their folklore and forming their identity as a coastal people. As Parker (2020) notes, the ecoGothic 'allows for a more complicated human/nonhuman relationship' (p. 36), in which the nonhuman world is both something to be celebrated, as it is in the folktales passed down orally between the townspeople, and something to be managed and controlled. Thus, the relationship between the townspeople and their environment is one marked by a Gothic mix of tension and fearful respect.

The passage from the beginning of the novella sets up the anxious, uncertain relationship between the human and the nonhuman, or between the human and the landscape of fear, both through the way in which the traveller perceives his environment to be angry and violent, and through the conspicuous absence of any distinct human presence in this section.

The sensory effect of the soundscape creates an atmosphere which serves to unsettle the narrator: the ‘screaming’ of the birds and the ‘roaring’ of the waves are overwhelming, and the visual is drowned out by the audible. The notion of the idyllic, aesthetically pleasing landscape is nowhere in evidence here—unpleasant sound overwhelms the sight of ‘beautiful’ nature. The narrator and the reader are forced to contend as Döblin does with nature as a potentially chaotic, unpredictable force. There is a powerful dialectic of presence and absence set up in this introductory passage. The sea is under the gaze of the traveller, and yet the traveller’s sense of self is challenged much as Döblin’s is when he is encountered by the Baltic stones. The absence of any other human figure besides himself is disorientating and isolating, and this lack only serves to highlight the presence of *something else* in the landscape. This ‘something’ is the powerful nonhuman, even if it may be a nonhuman entirely invented by the narrator. To accept a landscape entirely empty of someone or *something* else, a natural world ambivalent to the human, is itself an unsettling prospect. The traveller forms a psychologically Gothic landscape, one which appears to be angry with him in particular. Later in the text, Hauke populates the space with spectral figments of his imagination (p. 12). This indicates that even as the ecoGothic is frequently occupied with figurations of the nonhuman, the human itself and the fraught relationship between the two are nevertheless closely bound together in Gothic landscapes.

When the spectral Rider and White Horse of the novella’s title appear, the perspective shifts away from the narrator for a moment:

‘whenever the pale moon cast its feeble light, the object grew clearer and clearer until I thought I could make out the dark figure of a man. As he approached, I saw that he was riding a gaunt, high-stepping white horse and a dark cloak swung from his shoulders. He darted past me and two burning eyes stared at me out of a pallid countenance’ (p. 3).

Here, the ghostly figure turns its eyes on the traveller, and it is the traveller who is now being seen, where previously it has been his gaze which has dominated the narrative, subordinating the environment to his own ideas of vengeful nature. As Freud argues, the uncanny enters a



story when ‘the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality [...] [I]n this case he can even increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality, by bringing about events which never or very rarely happen in fact’ (p. 250). It is made clear on the first page of Storm’s novella that the storyline is firmly situated in the real world, when the first narrator comes across the tale of the White Horse Rider published in a journal (p. 1). It nevertheless draws significantly on the uncanny to generate the effect of defamiliarisation. This destabilises the centrality of the role of the human protagonists in the tale and shifts their, and our, perception of the spaces they occupy—both by making the familiar strange, and through representations of the supernatural and the spectral in environments which are otherwise recognisably real. The White Horse Rider is an example of the latter and, whether the product of the traveller’s imagination or not, it is aligned with the notion of irrational, chaotic, and unpredictable nature. Here, with the sudden apparition of the Rider, the natural world is acting on the human, and not the other way round. Döblin’s encounter with the Baltic stones, although the emotional response it elicits is of a different sort, similarly represents an instance of the human being acted upon by the natural world. The traveller’s encounter with the rider serves here to complicate his relationship with the environment. This moment generates an emotional response different to that produced by his journey along the coast, which is marked by the projection of his perceptions of uncontrolled nature onto the environment. When the ‘glowing eyes’ of the phantom Rider land on the traveller, the power dynamic between human and nature, or human and nonhuman, shifts dramatically for a moment, and the human figure as the centre of the narrative and the world is thrown off course.

### **Hauke’s Landscape of Fear**

Instability, unpredictability and disorientation characterise both Storm’s novella and Döblin’s experience with nature. Hauke, despite all his efforts to tame and even to dominate the coastline as dikemaster, is consistently thwarted by the disorientating effect of a landscape which persists in being unfamiliar. Here, the breach in the old dike, which has been neglected in favour of Hauke’s new one, leads to a devastating flood which threatens the village:

‘A fearful squall of wind greeted man and mount as they left the narrow path



and reached the dike itself. Hauke pulled up his horse with a powerful tug at the reins. But where was the sea? Where was Jevers Isle? What had happened to the opposite shore? There were only mountainous waves before him, menacing against the night sky, each vying to out-top the other in the livid twilight, before they came crashing down with the howl of wild beasts in the jungle. The white horse pawed the ground and snorted amidst the ear-splitting din. The rider was overwhelmed by the futility of human endeavour. Now must come night, death and chaos' (p. 113).

Despite his profound belief in the security provided by the new dike, Hauke is nevertheless almost as disorientated by the landscape as the traveller in the framing narrative. A shift in his perception of the space occurs. The waves themselves, so synonymous with this landscape, take on the appearance of mountains. The landscape appears unnervingly different, and Hauke experiences the defamiliarising effect of being forced to experience nature anew. The dikes, both the old one and Hauke's new and improved one, represent attempts to create and maintain a boundary between the safe, human world and the dark, irrational nonhuman one. It represents an attempt to protect the human from the landscape of fear. Storm's dike is a representation of the human attempt to defend against landscapes of fear through the construction of defensive barriers or spatial demarcations. According to Tuan (1979), the fear engendered by these spaces takes two forms: fear of the 'imminent collapse of [the] world and the approach of death—that final surrender of integrity to chaos', and 'a sense of personalised evil, the feeling that the hostile force, whatever its manifestation, possesses will' (pp. 6-7). We can locate the sense of 'personalised evil' observed by Tuan in Hauke's increasingly anxious relationship with the sea. When he notices that the old dike has been ravaged by a bad storm, having been neglected in favour of his new, more modern barrier, Hauke becomes haunted by images of death and devastation: 'In his imagination, he could see the waters bursting through the breach, covering grass and clover with salt spume and spray' (p. 102). Grass and clover are here representative of idyllic nature—comfortable, aesthetically pleasing, and physically pleasant to interact with as well as to look at. The waves here are, by contrast, a threat which must be held back, and the 'personalised evil' they represent for Hauke comes to signify a real psychological danger. The sensory effect of the 'salt spume and spray', and the violence of the 'waters bursting through the breach', reflect the powerful affective power of nature, even and perhaps especially when it is not picturesque or aesthetically pleasing. The breach in the dike

which leads to the deaths of Hauke and his family represents the collapse of the apparently stable world cultivated in the village—itsself a key feature of the Gothic (Hughes 2003: p. 89). The furious power of the waves in this passage and throughout the text, ascribed with almost-human behaviour, embodies that sense of a seemingly aware hostile force in the natural world which resists the illusory power of the human.

Tuan suggests that ‘every human construction—whether mental or material—is a component in a landscape of fear because it exists to contain chaos’ (p. 6). Everything in Storm’s novella from the physical boundary of Hauke’s dike to the recurrent appearance of the ghostly Rider forms part of the landscape of fear. Parker (2020) suggests that the construction and preservation of boundaries is central to maintaining the belief ‘that the human and nonhuman are distinct’ (p. 49). Storm erodes these boundaries violently with the collapse of the dike, and the tension between the human and the landscape is released fatally in the form of the resulting flood. With this erosion, the darker side of the human relationship with the landscape is revealed, notably in the deaths of Hauke and his family as a result of Hauke’s hubristic drive to turn that relationship to his own purpose. With the collapse of the dike, the human and nonhuman spaces become violently merged together, represented in later accounts of the tale told in the framing narratives by the figure of Hauke as spectral ghost rider who, according to local legend, haunts this fatal stretch of coastline (p. 5). Hauke’s ghostly resurrection serves as a persistent ecoGothic reminder of the fraught relationship between humans and nature. The conviction that the human and the nonhuman are, or should be, distinct from one other is here significantly disrupted.

### **The Haunting of the Breach**

The images of destruction which precede the collapse of the dike come to haunt Hauke ahead of the fatal event, and are such that he is simultaneously drawn to the spot where he noticed the breach in the boundary, whilst also feeling forced to avert his gaze: ‘[...] he found himself turning away his eyes or galloping along by the inner dike instead [...] when he had no special business there, he hurried there furtively, leaving his home on foot and alone, as if on a sudden impulse. Sometimes even then, he turned back, as if he could not screw up sufficient courage

to visit the ill-fated corner again' (p. 105). This 'ill-fated corner' which comes to haunt Hauke becomes an uncanny space, representing the return of the very real threat of devastating floods which Hauke had believed were consigned to the past thanks to his ambitious plans: 'Suppose there was a flood tide again, a great inundation as there had been in 1655 [...] Suppose it happened again as it had done in the past, and more than once at that' (p. 102). The area of damage which persistently seizes Hauke's attention is a haunting relic of the town's past which he had hoped to bury. Hauke's interaction with the broken dike sets up a dialectic of seeing and unseeing, or seeing and being seen, in which Hauke and the damaged dike, and the devastating potential the sea embodies as a result, appear to be in crisis with one another. Suddenly the human gaze which subordinates the natural world to its own perceptions of nature as idealised and controllable is weakened, as Hauke engages in a play of resolve with himself and the unassuming spot where the damage has taken place. Timothy Morton (2012), in *The Ecological Thought*, suggests that exploring the uncanny demonstrates that humans, even when in the midst of apparent desolation or wilderness, are never, in fact, alone: 'What is scary about being lost in a forest of tree upon tree [...] is catching a glimpse of yourself, from the point of view of the trees. It is the feeling of being watched, of being accompanied. And what are you seeing? What is seeing you?' (p. 83). In his interactions with the breached dike, Hauke not only perceives the space differently, but begins to truly see himself for the first time, which is one of the most unsettling consequences of his shift in perspective. From an ecoGothic perspective, something shifts here, too, in the portrayal of the landscape. Suddenly, it takes on devastating new potential. If it does not in fact embody agency itself, Hauke's growing obsession suggests that he is, if only in his mind, constructing a potentially agentic landscape. The damaged dike draws him inexorably in, so that it seems almost as though something is communicating with him: he is not alone, even if it is himself he is truly seeing. Hauke is forced to pay attention and the spot takes on new, threatening significance, drawing his attention and compelling him to engage with it much as the Baltic stones do for Döblin, dragging him backwards into a past from which he wishes to move away with recollections of the floods of previous centuries.

The affective power of the damaged spot and the implications of natural disaster it embodies for Hauke engender a feeling of 'growing disquiet' (p. 105), which itself leads to a kind of terrified curiosity. Despite desperately wanting to ignore the spot and its suggestion of potentially imminent devastation, he is drawn to it again and again, and his perception of his own once unassailable belief in his ability to control the sea shifts significantly. He admits that

‘he would have been glad to tear down the whole structure with his bare hands, for this portion of the dike haunted his mind’s eye like the embodiment of a bad conscience’ (p. 105). Hauke’s new perspective on the old dike, which has been neglected due to his enduring faith in his new, modern one, has a defamiliarising effect on him. The old dike, previously overlooked and considered of little significance, is suddenly present in his mind in ways it had never been before. It takes on an uncanny aspect: the old, long-trusted dike comforting in its familiarity is made strange, now coming to represent the very threat it has long defended the town against. Beginning to perceive the neglected dike anew, Hauke is unsettled, and his unwavering belief in himself as the modern, progressive dikemaster, the man who will drag the town and its people out of its superstitious past and into the modern world, is truly shaken perhaps for the first time. He begins to see in the broken dike and its implications of death and destruction aspects of himself with which he is unfamiliar. The uncanny, defamiliarising effect of the breach in the dike and its suggestion of natural disaster elicits a reluctant but seemingly inescapable sense of curiosity and awe in Hauke—he is unable to avoid the spot even as he desperately wishes to, persistently being drawn back to it ‘as if on a sudden impulse’ (p. 105). His hesitant curiosity itself generates a shift in perspective. Hauke is no longer unwaveringly sure of himself, and the old dike is no longer a relic of a past to be buried: it has made a haunting return in his mind.

### **The Uncanny Home**

Hauke tells his wife Elke that ‘It is no easy task to protect the community from the sea which God created’ (p. 106). We can read in this statement the conceit and the hubris which continue to exemplify Hauke’s interactions with his environment, despite his encounter with the breach in the dike. Naming himself protector of the community, Hauke aligns himself here with God as creator of the sea. He may have been forced to acknowledge the damage to the neglected dike, and thus the potential cracks in his own ambitious plans, yet his enduring belief in the centrality of his own position in controlling the sea does not change fundamentally. Nevertheless, the slight shift in perspective brought about by his encounter with the damaged dike, and the unsettling effect of defamiliarisation it generates when Hauke comes to see his own ‘bad conscience’ (p. 105) reflected in the uncanny spot, demonstrates the real weakness

of his perceived authority over this space, even as he attempts to repress this uncomfortable realisation. It is not long after Hauke's encounter with the breach that the devastating flood, whose threatening presence has haunted the tale throughout, arrives, bringing devastation to the town and its people. Hauke's wife and daughter are swept away, in an ironic reflection of the traditional sacrifice the local people make to the sea when building a new dike, and which the enlightened Hauke recoiled at earlier in the text (pp. 87-88). Witnessing the deaths of his wife and child, Hauke rides freely into the waves, no longer engaged in the battle he has fought with the sea throughout the tale: 'Again he applied the spurs and this time the horse gave a scream which could be heard above the wind and the surging waves. From the boiling torrent there came a dull thud, a brief struggle...' (p. 118). By the end, Hauke is entirely cut off from the safety and security of his home, both psychologically and physically: 'He could see the light shining from his own house, but it was meaningless to him now' (p. 118).

The collapse of Hauke's hubristic ambition is accompanied by the triumph of the unfamiliar. The defamiliarisation effect which we can locate throughout the text in moments when the familiar, such as the old, neglected dike, is made strange, and when the uncanny in the form of the spectral rider makes a sudden appearance, is what remains at the culmination of the tale. Following Hauke's death, we are left with the haunting image of a solitary light wavering above the devastation:

'The moon shone in the sky but on the dike below no living thing could be seen. Only the wild waters remained [...] The embankment on which the reeve's house stood remained unscathed, high above the flood, and the lamp still shone in the window. Up in the village the houses grew dark one by one, but the sparkling rays of the lonely light from the church tower trembled over the foaming waves' (p. 118).

This final passage of the central narrative demonstrates again the familiar made strange. The safety and security of the town have been shown to be illusory, and the houses growing 'dark one by one' illustrates the instability of our perception of the home as a place of safety and solidity. The remaining lamp shining in the window of the house guides the eye to the

surrounding devastation, bringing our awareness all the more to the ‘wild waters’ and the encroaching darkness. The lamp encourages us one final time to pay attention—to truly look at our environment and so to challenge our perceptions of it. The violent devastation of the flood, as Andrew Webber (1989) observes, leaves the home ‘evacuated of meaning’ (p. 873). It has become uncannily unfamiliar, and so has lost its associations of warmth, comfort and stability. Webber also notes that in Storm’s works, ‘the home [is] irrevocably a thing of the past’ (p. 860). There is an eerie sadness in the single light flickering in the home which is no longer. We are left with a community devoid of humans, in which ‘no living thing could be seen’, and all that remains of human life is the solitary light. Ritchie Robertson (2009), in his work on Döblin, suggests that his work ‘remind[s] us that man is not the centre of a divine cosmos but simply a phenomenon, an unruly and destructive one, within the unimaginably larger system of nature. [It] evoke[s] the possibility that human life may be destroyed...’ (p. 227). Although Storm focusses in on a small community, we can locate this idea in the novella, too. The aftermath of the flood leaves the reader with an image of a world without the human, as the village grows dark. The imagery Storm employs in this final section is shaky and unstable: the last remnant of the human ‘trembled over the foaming waves’. This reflects the instability of the human gaze which was established at the start of the text with the traveller’s encounter with the spectral Rider, whose ‘burning eyes’ shift the perspective away from the human (p. 3). Storm’s use of the uncanny and the defamiliarising sensation encourage us to challenge our perception of the natural world, and disrupts our belief in the centrality of the human.

## **Conclusion**

The presence of the uncanny in Storm’s work, in the form of the spectral or the supernatural, or in the familiar made strange, has the effect of shifting the perspective away from the human subject—of decentering the human—if only temporarily. This effect is uncomfortably defamiliarising, which encourages us to challenge our engagement with and perception of nature. Paying close attention to nature and its processes for the first time, Döblin’s perception of his surroundings shifts significantly—an experience which proves to be profoundly unsettling. In ‘Remarks on Mountains Oceans Giants’, Döblin details his crisis in the face of a natural world he had previously ignored, or even been actively repulsed by. This crisis proves

to be all-encompassing, overwhelming and even frightening, yet above all it is characterised by a profound sense of curiosity, even where nature is unpleasant or, as in the case of his encounter with the Baltic stones, simply mundane. In his interaction with the stones, Döblin truly looks at nature for the first time, focussing on the intricacies of its processes. He is moved by the affective power of the natural world, and is driven to explore his experiences in narrative form. Both Döblin and Storm encourage curiosity about nature and its processes, even when the effects are uncomfortable, unsettling, or perhaps frightening. If we look closely at the intricate details of the natural world, we encourage ourselves to shift our perspective.

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**Amy Ainsworth** is a PhD candidate at Jesus College, University of Cambridge. Her research explores representations of Gothic nature in German literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through an exploration of literary environments and their contents, including plants, icescapes and watery spaces, her PhD interrogates the relationship between the human and nonhuman in modernity.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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**Fretful Seascapes:  
Confronting Dark Ecologies in Elizabeth Bishop's Poems of the Shore**

*Karen Eckersley*

**ABSTRACT**

The word 'sea' makes a recurrent appearance in Elizabeth Bishop's poems, demonstrating how its geographies are a central concern in her work. Indeed, she spent most of her life proximate to the ocean, depicting it in poetry across all her collections. However, despite its consistent presence in her writing, the seascape registers as a problematic and provocative space that calls into question the nature of human and non-human relationships. Its constant presence in Bishop's own life is at odds with the way she forges it as an unstable and agentic realm that has the capacity to explode anthropocentric presumptions about our superior place on the planet. In this article, I demonstrate how Bishop's often entropic and metamorphic shores and oceans invoke an ecoGothic terrain that resonates with contemporary debates about our relations with nonhuman species and geographies. I concentrate upon the way Bishop conjures the seascape as an often-hostile space, as we witness in 'At the Fishhouses'. Whilst she considers its waters as 'like what we imagine knowledge to be', she translates such knowledge as 'dark' and 'drawn from the cold hard mouth/of the world'. Indeed, such dark knowledge prompts more questions than answers about the nature of the world and our relationship with it, communicated via the equivocal tones of Bishop's speakers who are frequently situated in the mist. I examine more specifically the poems 'Cape Breton' and 'The End of March', turning to Timothy Morton's concept of 'dark ecology' to argue that Bishop's seascapes register within an ecoGothic milieu. The strange oscillation between the seascape as familiar and yet austere, clear and yet opaque in these poems speaks to Morton's call for a recognition of a wider understanding of the nature of the ecological web that implicates us. In this way, we witness how Bishop broadens this realm beyond a passive and benign idyll to recognise

instead its own agentic power that has the capacity to transform the human and nonhuman dynamic.

Elizabeth Bishop's belief that we float 'on an unknown sea' (Kalstone, 1989: p. 213) is an apt introduction to her understanding of a darker ecological milieu, exhibited in her poetry of the shore. In her seascapes, we are witness to a 'cold dark deep' ('At the Fishhouses', p. 63, l.47) that speaks to her characteristic depiction of the sea as an unfathomable and hostile space, signposting an ecoGothic terrain. In her restless and agentic poetry of the shore we see how the rhythmic push and pull of the sea's machinations emphasises a cycle that implicates all beings in a strange and swirling loop. Such interconnected visions in her work, conversely, demonstrate how the more we know about our entanglements with other life forms, the more surreal they become. This article argues that Bishop's speakers navigate metamorphic shorelines and fretful seascapes which displace an abstract, anthropocentric concept of a benign 'Nature', for a more ambiguous ecology that is inherently foreboding. I propose that Bishop's shorelines present as ecoGothic manifestations that speak to the current anthropogenic ecological crisis, invoking an understanding that the 'basic mode of ecological awareness is anxiety' (Morton, 2010: p. 130). More specifically, I deploy Morton's concept of 'dark ecology' in order to show how Bishop's fretful shores have the capacity to catalyse a more urgent response to the environmental catastrophe we face. In her poetry we witness how coming 'into the *darkness* of things instead', as Elizabeth Parker (2020) proposes, '*Gothic Nature*' is 'just as valuable to seek out' as our teacher as 'Romantic Nature' (p. 14).

### **Entering a 'Cold Dark Deep' Poetics**

Bishop grew up mainly in Nova Scotia and spent much of her adult life proximate to the sea. Being close to the water, whether in Key West, Rio de Janeiro or Boston, meant that the ocean was an active player in her poetry. The word 'sea' appears sixty times in her one hundred or so poems, speaking to the fact that the seascape was never far from her mind. However, despite its constancy in her life, it appears as a provisional and perplexing presence in her poetry, at once denoting meaning if only to contradict it moments later. As Hugh Egan (2000) observes:

‘[...] the sea in Bishop’s poems is paradoxically clarifying and confounding: Its wash and rhythm can sharpen, order, and enhance the object of observation; at the same time, this accurate ‘seeing’ unsettles her speakers, leaving them afloat in a larger (and more interior) field of metaphysical indeterminacy’ (p. 47).

Such ‘indeterminacy’ is characteristic of Bishop’s understanding of the sea as a dark, unquantifiable realm, which despite her biographical connections to its geographies, is recurrently signposted as an inscrutable space. To address such ambiguities in her poetry of the sea, this article presents an ecoGothic reading of Bishop’s work, specifically employing Morton’s concept of dark ecology as a navigational tool. The way that Bishop’s troubling and precarious ocean geographies are recurrently pervaded by mist and metamorphic motifs speaks to a foreboding space, invoking a mood of trepidation that resonates with contemporary ecoGothic frameworks.

Feelings of fear and anxiety are arguably more appropriate responses to the period of environmental catastrophe than ones of resigned complacency that typify our usual reactions. The ecoGothic is therefore a mode that aptly channels such disquietude in its recurrent examination of the darker ecologies that the pastoral tradition in nature writing has, on occasion, overlooked. It has the capacity to question and oppose the affirmation of human dominion over nature and instate instead ‘an ecocritical awareness to change [...] and expose the monstrous anthropocentric gaze’ (Parker, 2020: p. 2). Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (2017) argue that the ecoGothic is a powerful tool in reconfiguring humankind’s mistaken perceptions of mastery over nature. They explain how ‘the ecogothic turns to the inevitability of humans intertwined with their natural environment—to humans surrounded, interpenetrated, and sometimes stalked by a nonhuman with an agentic force that challenges humans’ own vaunted ability to shape their world’ (p. 7). Keetley and Sivils here position the ecoGothic framework in a manner that resonates with Bishop’s own dark ecologies, where she intimates our entanglement within nonhuman seascapes whilst also signposting our comparative vulnerability within this context. Parker further highlights the ecoGothic lens as important in making the human species more mindful of the nonhuman world they share. She notes how it explores the extent to which nature perturbs us, and so her thinking aligns with Andrew Smith’s and William Hughes’ (2013) assertion that it is a mode ‘well placed to capture [...] anxieties’ providing a ‘culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism,

ecocritical theory and political process' (p. 5). Such contemporary frameworks are indicative of an increasingly antipastoral direction of travel in ecocriticism as it becomes more concerned with nonhuman agency.

Richard J. Schneider (2016) suggests, however, that while some 'ecocriticism has continued to be dominated by an essentially pastoral, conservationist, and preservationist sensibility' (p. vii), Morton's 'dark ecology' in particular signposts a path beyond such anthropocentric readings of the nonhuman world. For Schneider, dark ecology invites a wider scope for ecology and ecocriticism than even the second and third waves of ecocriticism have acknowledged' (p. xi). I posit that this 'wider scope' provokes original readings of Bishop's poetry in the way it speaks to contemporary, ecological concerns. It is a 'scope' that takes note of ecology, without mapping it as an idealised 'over yonder' called 'Nature' (Morton, 2010: p. 3).

I turn now to Morton's concept of dark ecology in order to consider how Bishop's poetry of the sea can be read within an ecoGothic context. Dark ecology argues that ecological awareness is strange and uncanny rather than conspicuous and self-evident. It has the capacity to broaden any perceptions of Nature as simply passive and benign. Indeed, recognising the presence of dark ecology includes embracing irony, ambiguity and even horror, where our entanglement with nonhumans invokes an awareness of our necessary and unsettling co-existence with them. To this end, Morton (2010) insists that 'Ecology is about relating not to Nature but to aliens and ghosts' (p. 100), as if it involves a process of being haunted by that which we cannot always explain. Moreover, he contends that by coming into the darkness of things we thus enable provocative and alternative ways of seeing which in turn have the potential to revise the typically hierarchical dynamic of human and non-human relationships. At the same time, there is the sense that the more we know about our entanglements with other life forms, 'the stranger they become' (Morton, 2010: p.17), indicative of a more ambiguous ecology that is inherently 'dark-depressing' and 'dark-uncanny' (Morton, 2016: p. 5). Crucially, dark ecology is 'about melancholy' but 'also about uncertainty' (Morton, 2010: p. 17), as Morton (2010) further underlines here:

'Dark ecology puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking. The form of ecology is that of a film noir. The noir narrator

begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that she or he is implicated in it [ ...] There is no metaposition from which we can make ecological pronouncements' (pp. 16-17).

Ideas of 'hesitation' and 'thoughtfulness' are arguably what are most required as we confront an environmental crisis of our own making. Such a challenge demands reflection to consider solutions as well as a revised approach to the way in which we see the world that we are entangled within. It requires a more tentative and respectful attitude to the nonhuman world where we take time to fully digest the fact that it is neither our possession nor a space that can ever be fully mastered and understood. Rather, Morton's reference to 'irony' makes room for an understanding that the mysteries of the nonhuman world and our relationship with it are not ones that can be fully decoded. Morton's film noir metaphor is a symbol that points to our strange and uncanny resonance with the nonhuman world we presume to be outside of. Our presumption that we are positioned neutrally within an 'external situation', as he explains it, is exploded when we adopt a darker ecological awareness (Morton, 2010: p. 17). Recognising our own implication within the ecological web invokes a surreal, and at times unsettling awakening to our own ontological makeup. We become aware of a more intimate relationship within such a web where, as Morton (2010) insists, '[s]trange strangers flow and dissimilate' (p. 100). Schneider (2016) explains that Morton's concept of 'dark ecology' invites 'the inclusion of the negative in ecological thought', and, most importantly, 'breaks down the human versus nonhuman dualism of pastoral idealism' (p. xi). His suggestion that 'we need to acknowledge their otherness [nonhumans] and their mysteries' (p. xi) speaks to Bishop's understanding of the seascape as an indecipherable and, at times, troubling arena.

Bishop's seascapes exhibit characteristically dark and unpredictable ecologies, where she forges their waters as edgy and precarious terrains that resonate palpably with Morton's frameworks. Entropic and mysterious landscapes are evoked via Bishop's recourse to sea mist in her poetry which creates a sense of ambiguity in her seaside ecologies in the way that Morton calls for. Her poetry of the sea presents an uncanny oscillation between strangeness and familiarity where speakers are simultaneously embedded within a scene, and yet seemingly estranged from it. Part of such ambiguity and 'uncertainty' is forged via Bishop's speakers' experience of the sea as both attractive and yet threatening where, in 'At the Fishhouses' (2011) for example, it is glistening like 'silver' whilst also harbouring an 'element bearable to no



mortal' (p. 62, 63, ll.13, 48). In these images she communicates the water's seeming beauty initially, only to later conjure it as not only a dark space, but a dangerous and indeed, insufferable one. Starting from a 'supposedly external situation', which Morton equates with humans' understanding of their relationship to the nonhuman world, Bishop's speakers find themselves 'implicated in it' in a way that invokes vertiginous moments of alienation and yet recognition. Such an oscillation between what is familiar and yet unfamiliar is an important part of developing a wider ecological awareness in the way that Morton outlines. His calls to reimagine a passive, and anthropocentric notion of Nature, to instead acknowledge and open our senses to a wider, and indeed darker ecology, are seemingly anticipated by the metamorphic and agentic seas we witness in Bishop's ocean geographies.

I suggest that the ebb and flow of familiarity and estrangement between human and nonhuman worlds that characterises a dark ecological perspective is precisely the dynamic we witness in Bishop's seascapes: where they can be at once inviting and yet, in the same moment, metamorphose into hostile territory. Such ambiguity is exemplified in her line 'awful but cheerful', which she uses to describe the sea's 'untidy activity' witnessed in 'The Bight' (Bishop: p. 59, ll.35-36). I suggest that such equivocation, where ecology is an austere, unforgiving force but is also one that can be joyful and signposts our coexistence with nonhumans, speaks to a profound ecological awareness that both perplexes and interconnects. Bishop invokes a complex web of interrelationships in her seascapes that embody Morton's (2010) idea of 'the mesh' (p. 94); one which characterises ecological entanglement. Whilst the concept of a mesh evokes the necessary interconnections between human and nonhuman worlds, it also forges the more negative sense of being tangled or trapped; a mode which takes account of a broader understanding of the ecological web that implicates us. Such ambiguity is manifest in Bishop's seascapes which both situate the human within its sphere but in a way that invokes a cyclical loop that ensnares us. Such a loop speaks to Morton's dark ecology as well as the fact that we are as caught within the troubles of the environmental crisis as much as the nonhuman.

Bishop's speakers' provisional descriptions and hesitant relationships with the seascapes they navigate invoke a precarious dynamic that is as mutable as the surges and swells of her poetic shores, recurrently enmeshed in an obfuscated spectral mist. As Egan (2000) further discusses with regard to Bishop's early poem, 'The Imaginary Iceberg', published in

*North & South* (1946), the figure of the iceberg is ‘attractive to the poet-observer but also convey[s] the threat of annihilation’ (p. 47). In this way, we witness how Bishop’s speakers are drawn to this watery space on account of an instinctive interconnection with it, but they also exhibit an inherent awareness of its entropic and potentially destructive powers. I show how these equivocal evocations in Bishop’s seascapes invoke dark ecologies that challenge idealised Nature, thereby speaking to contemporary ecological debates. As I will show more specifically in her seascape poems, ‘Cape Breton’ and ‘The End of March’, Bishop eschews a pervasive anthropocentric gaze, instead evoking a chaotic and perilous space that reminds the reader both of ecological agency and of our own uncanny implication within this nonhuman sphere.

### **On the Edge in Bishop’s ‘Cape Breton’**

Bishop travelled to the Cape Breton of her poem in 1947 with her lover at that time, Marjorie Stevens. Much of her six-week trip there was marred by poor health which she attributed to attempts to wean herself off alcohol. She wrote letters to her physician Amy Baumann asking for advice on how to control episodes of asthma whilst there, further explaining that she was suffering from eczema and an inexplicable rash. Despite her poor health, Bishop is quick to note the ‘mountainous scenery and the ocean’ on Cape Breton, an island with ‘just a few houses and fishhouses scattered about’ (p. 147) as she records in her letters, published in *One Art* (1994). Of most interest is the bird life on the island which she describes here in her first letter to friend and fellow poet Robert Lowell:

‘Offshore are two ‘bird islands’ with high red cliffs [...] They are sanctuaries where there are auks and the only puffins left on the continent, or so they tell us. There are real ravens on the beach, too, something I never saw before—enormous, with sort of rough black beards under their beaks’ (p. 147).

Bishop’s letter here introduces the ambiguous dark ecologies of her poem, which moves away from the island’s peoples towards an account of its nonhuman phenomena and shifting ocean geographies. Her reference to the ‘high red cliffs’ immediately etches a perilous domain and yet at the same time they are further qualified as ‘sanctuaries’, offering a vision of safety and

protection, speaking to the ambiguities inherent in dark ecological thinking. The ‘bird islands’ emphasise a disconnect from the presumed civilised space of the human world, whilst the reference to ravens with their black beards signposts an ecoGothic ecology in its allusion to Edgar Allan Poe. Bishop’s playful description of the ‘black beards’ under their beaks is suggestive of an anthropomorphised depiction which has the potential to close the gap between human and nonhuman. However, this seeming familiarity and thus lightness of tone belies the more troubling subject matter that creeps into the poem. Indeed, ‘Cape Breton’, published in *A Cold Spring* (1955), opens with a deceptively comic depiction of the nonhuman life there which swiftly gives way to an increasingly unsettling milieu, signposting the ambiguities that pervade the poem as a whole:

‘Out of the high ‘bird islands’, Ciboux and Hertford,  
the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins all stand  
with their backs to the mainland  
in solemn, uneven lines along the cliff’s brown grass-frayed edge,  
while the few sheep pastured there go ‘Baaa, baaa’.  
(Sometimes, frightened by aeroplanes, they stampede  
and fall over into the sea or onto the rocks.)’ (Bishop, 2011: p. 65, ll.1-7).

Initial glimpses of the ‘silly-looking puffins’ are short-lived in this opening stanza, which immediately evokes a treacherous cliff-face of precipices and edges. These seabirds, standing in ‘solemn, uneven lines’ staring out to sea, forge a funerary vision that foreshadows the sheep plunging to their deaths, as well as the puffins’ own imminent extinction, which Bishop alludes to in her letters. The cliff’s ‘grass-frayed edge’ invokes an apocalyptic precarity, apparently catalysed by human activity, as the sheep stampede that is triggered by aircraft noise suggests. Indeed, the image of death that creeps into the poetic scene is indicative of the ‘[u]gliness and horror’ that Morton (2010) insists we pay more attention to in order to ‘compel our compassionate coexistence to go beyond condescending pity’ (p. 17). It demonstrates how Bishop presciently adopts a dark ecology that ‘thinks the truth of death’ (Morton, 2016: p. 161). The seriousness of this nature, of a darker ecology at work, is further emphasised in the manner that Bishop presents it through jarring juxtapositions. The abrupt transition from innocent farm animals making a benign children’s storybook ‘Baaa, baaa’, to Bishop’s violent allusion to

their bodies broken on the rocks below, eschews any biophilic presumptions about the world of Cape Breton for a defamiliarised and ecoGothic one. In this way, we enter a threshing and unstable seascape; not one steeped in the nurturing folds of a kindly, pastoral nature but rather an indiscriminate force whose agentic pulse can result in an unpredictable and brutal death.

The dangers of this seascape are further intimated by the way that Bishop forges it as stealthy and insidious, as if it somehow has the capacity to enfold the onlooker into its depths. Her writing here anticipates Morton's film noir concept where the speaker at first appears to be describing the scene from an external position but realises she is engulfed within it, if only from an imaginary perspective. The sea's overwhelming ubiquity and power are captured in the second part of stanza one where the speaker zooms in upon the character of the water itself, apparently entranced by its hypnotic rhythms:

‘The silken water is weaving and weaving,  
disappearing under the mist equally in all directions,  
lifted and penetrated now and then  
by one shag's dripping serpent-neck,  
and somewhere the mist incorporates the pulse,  
rapid but unurgent, of a motorboat’ (Bishop, 2011: p. 65 ll.8-13).

Bishop captures the tenacity of the water's movements in the repetition of 'weaving', but also invokes a sense of the sea's conniving agency that may pose a threat to the human's presumed supremacy and power. Its sibilant 'silken' quality, coupled with the presence of a shag described as 'serpent' necked, speaks to a forbidden and treacherous realm where Bishop appears to draw upon Biblical allusions if only to rewrite them into a more secular and posthuman setting. In this way, Bishop depicts the ocean as a tempting milieu if only to immediately reconfigure it as a space of threat and peril; a vast nonhuman sphere that cannot be fully conceptualised or known as her pervasive mist conveys. It is a milieu that interpenetrates the speaker's imagination but also one that spills into the more conspicuous markers of human presence, where Bishop details the sea mist itself harnessing the engine sounds of a motorboat, signposting a mesh of human and nonhuman entanglements. Bishop's sea mist, which is a recurrent theme in her waterside poetry, demonstrates how it chimes with Astrida Neimanis' (2019) assertion that whilst over sixty percent of the earth is covered by

ocean more than a mile deep, ‘what lies beneath the surface of our oceans remains largely unknown’ (p. 84). I suggest that Bishop’s frequent recourse to the shoreline as a realm of mist and sea-fret is one redolent with her own ecological awareness; one that is ‘intrinsically dark, mysterious, and open’ in the way Morton insists ecology is understood (2010: p. 16). Her mist thereby signposts seascapes that are resonantly ambiguous, both ‘a half-open door, or an unresolved chord’ (p. 16). Such opacity invokes the dark ecology which challenges concepts of nature as a simple and benign space, replacing such notions via writing that foregrounds the unknown mystery of the ocean.

In the second stanza we are immersed in this mist that does indeed pervade the whole poem, speaking to an unknowable ecology that cannot be epistemologically mapped in the manner that the anthropocentric eye/I would presume. Humans are conspicuous by their absence, peripheral even in the voice of the speaker who documents the scene without betraying any overt emotion. Rather, we appear to sink deeper into a spectral and haunted terrain that is indifferent to man’s presumed claims to mastery:

‘The same mist hangs in thin layers  
among the valleys and gorges of the mainland  
like rotting snow-ice sucked away  
almost to spirit; the ghosts of glaciers drift  
among those folds and folds of fir: spruce and hackmatack—  
dull, dead, deep peacock-colors,  
each riser distinguished from the next  
by an irregular nervous saw-tooth edge,  
alike, but certain as a stereoscopic view’ (Bishop, 2011: p. 65, ll.14-22).

The ghostly overtones of this second stanza persist, established in the ‘mist’ as well as the glaciers which Bishop suggests ‘drift’ aimlessly, surging in sinister and unpredictable sea swells among the ‘folds and folds of fir’ which intimate a disorienting and unsettling watery labyrinth. Here we witness this seascape as not a static background nature but instead one that is ‘monstrous and mutating’ (Morton, 2010: p. 61). The spectral milieu invoked here speaks to a landscape haunted by its ancestral past but also spooked by the dangers to come, where even the mist itself is precarious in its ‘thin layers’. Bishop conjures an atmosphere of supernatural

whisperings in this stanza via the sibilant ‘snow-ice sucked away/almost to spirit’ as if ushering the reader into a ghostly terrain. Importantly, the mark of humanity appears to be in recession in ‘Cape Breton’, as though an anthropogenic exodus has taken place or is at least in process. As Bonnie Costello (1991) observes, the poem exhibits an oneiric atmosphere of ‘the ancient chill’ but also conveys ‘the sense of apocalyptic expectation, accented in harsher consonants’ (p. 105). In stanza three, lines 29-30, the speaker explains that ‘Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been/abandoned’ as the road itself has. All human mappings have become peripheral, appearing as mere ghostly relics of a past long gone. Human life is seemingly incidental to Cape Breton, slipping to the edge of its concerns. In the same way as the roads have been abandoned, so too are the trails now ‘disused’ as Bishop forges an increasingly apocalyptic and thus ecoGothic milieu as we are left to ponder where human life in this waterside geography has gone:

‘and miles of burnt forest standing in gray scratches  
like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones—  
and these regions now have little to say for themselves  
except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward  
freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing  
in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets’ (Bishop, 2011: p. 66, ll.35-40).

Human activity is documented as either damaging, seen in the fishing nets, or as in the penultimate stanza, transitory and fleeting. In the later vision of a man with a baby we are directed once more to humanity’s vulnerability within the dark ecology of Bishop’s shoreline where the ‘snowfall of daisies’ (p. 66, l.51) and the ‘invisible house’ (p. 66, l.52) beside the water evoke a further supernatural space. Human meaning and significance have been lost it seems: the schoolhouse and the road are closed whilst the flag does not fly, further eschewing empty symbols that attempt to signpost human mastery and control. By foregrounding a darker ecology in this poetic seascape, Bishop presciently foreshadows our intrinsic coexistence with the nonhuman world, forging a world that exists beyond us should we continue to act against it.

In a letter to Jerome Mazzuro, an author and literary critic, Bishop responds to his observations that her poem ‘The End of March’ contains literary allusions, arguing that most

importantly, her writing is grounded in observation. In this way, she demonstrates how this later poem exhibits her preoccupation with capturing the detail at hand, as witnessed in ‘Cape Breton’, rather than prioritising pastoral aesthetics and ideology:

‘It takes an infinite number of things coming together, forgotten, or almost forgotten, books, last night’s dream, experiences past and present—to make a poem. The settings, or descriptions, of my poems are almost invariably just plain facts—or as close to the facts as I can write them’ (Giroux, 1994: p. 621).

Bishop’s insistence that her work is propelled primarily by what she sees rather than be skewed by aesthetic practice and biophilic tendency, speaks to her wish to eschew an idealising pastoral method and aptly introduces ‘The End of March’. Whilst it is from a later collection *Geography III* (1976), the poem contains spectral echoes of ‘Cape Breton’ in the manner that she evokes a shifting seascape that appears to withdraw from the human eye—and influence—as it reaches towards its equivocal conclusion. In this poem, we step further into an approach that exhibits the dark ecology that Morton calls for in order to acknowledge and respond to the metamorphic web with which we are entangled co-existents. In this way, it is a poem that similarly anticipates an ecoGothic confrontation with ecologies in the manner that ‘Cape Breton’ does, where an anthropogenic presence is one that is also apparently slipping away. The fact that the drama of this poem plays out so emphatically upon the seashore emphasises the push and pull of an agentive ecology where the surge of the waves that Bishop’s speaker tracks upon her walk marks its irrepressibility. Importantly, it is a poem that situates the shoreline as a threshing and chaotic space, one that is synonymous with the mood of a text that details how the prospect of a dream house in the future is similarly ungraspable. On this beach Bishop performs a slippage between land and water, tracing an unstable and unpredictable line between the speaker’s initial daydreaming and the visceral, ecological truth of her future life. As a result, we witness how the poem plays out a vision which anticipates Morton’s (2010) call for the ‘ecological thought’ which ‘subverts idealism’ (p. 96), thus signposting the markers of human and nonhuman coexistence.

## **Navigating Liminal Space at ‘The End of March’**

‘The End of March’ is dedicated to both poet, critic, and biographer John Malcolm Brinnin as well as the author Bill Read. The poem is set in Duxbury, Massachusetts: significant as it is where Bishop stayed for a month with her then lover, Alice Methfessel, in a house that Brinnin owned. Bishop describes in a letter how it is a house situated ‘right on the bay’ and speaks amusedly of how Alice planted tomatoes there that they had since been ‘swamped’ by (Giroux, 1994: p. 587). However, her seeming fondness for the bay of Duxbury is abandoned in the austere tones of her poem which, like ‘Cape Breton’, evokes themes of human withdrawal, set as it is within a dark milieu. The poem describes a walk along the shoreline towards what the speaker imagines will be her ‘crypto-dream house’, only to discover that it is an abandoned dwelling and a mere shell in the context of her expectations. Lurking ominously upon the horizon, its vision shifts as the speaker imagines going inside, realising the illusory nature of her ambitions. From the beginning it foreshadows the shift in mood that overhangs the landscape of the poem in a way that speaks further to Morton’s ecological thought, as described here: ‘Like a shadow of the idea not yet fully thought, a shadow from the future [...], the ecological thought creeps over other ideas until no where is left untouched by its dark presence’ (Bishop, 2010: p. 2). ‘The End of March’ is a poem haunted by such shadowy, of inarticulable thoughts which slowly seep to the surface of the speaker’s consciousness as it reaches its dark and antipastoral conclusion.

The arrival at this place is no less important, however, than the journey there and back, where we witness the typically nomadic quality of Bishop’s speaker who is as restless it seems as the sea itself, speaking to their uncanny entanglement. Significantly, the poem’s title echoes the themes of liminality that we witness in ‘Cape Breton’ where we appear to arrive at the brink of something imprecise. We are indeed at the end of March: once again upon an edge that marks both a conclusion but also implies a move into new territory as one season finishes and another looms, entangling temporalities. It is also indicative of a cusp, where we are poised upon a verge as the sheep and auks are in ‘Cape Breton’; an ominous line drawn that uncannily anticipates a world contemplating a sixth extinction caused by the machinations of our own species. The opening stanza establishes an ambivalent and equivocal landscape that is in flux; one that, as the speaker suggests, is not an obvious one for a walk and, like ‘Cape Breton’, is seemingly indifferent to human presence:



‘It was cold and windy, scarcely the day  
to take a walk on that long beach.  
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,  
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,  
seabirds in ones and twos.  
The rackety, icy, offshore wind  
numbed our faces on one side;  
disrupted the formation  
of a lone flight of Canada geese;  
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers  
in upright, steely mist’ (Bishop, 2011: p. 199, ll.1-11).

The mist is a presence in this poem as it is in ‘Cape Breton’, bringing the reader back into a fretful seascape that obscures human vision and has a dizzying effect, defamiliarising it further. Interestingly the mist in this bay is ‘steely’, suggestive of its tenacity and agency, a force that cannot be penetrated or overcome by human mastery and one that in Gothic tales typically invokes fear and confusion. Whilst the speaker is detailing her walk along Duxbury beach, it is clearly not an activity that was planned or intended with any real purpose, situating it as taking place upon a day that was highly unsuitable and seemingly inhospitable. Indeed, this landscape is immediately conjured as an austere one; a seascape that numbs the faces of the walkers and most significantly is indifferent to their presence. More so, it is a shoreline that withdraws, that is recessionary, creating the vertiginous effect according to the speaker of an ‘ocean shrunken’. This upsetting of scale and perspective ruptures any picture postcard visions of a romantic walk along the beach, replacing it with a vista of dislocation and fragmentation, where even the flight of geese is ‘disrupted’ by the harsh ‘offshore wind’. The ominous mood of the opening stanza continues into the first line of the second, where we learn that the ‘sky was darker than the water’, speaking to the obfuscated themes generated by Bishop’s mist and foreshadowing the ecoGothic subject matter to come. We move deeper into the indeterminate territory of Bishop’s shifting shoreline where the speaker details the wash of waves that land endlessly upon the beach before her in a spectral manner:

[...]‘Then we came on  
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,  
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,  
over and over. Finally, they did end:  
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,  
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,  
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost....  
A kite string?—But no kite’ (Bishop, 2011: p. 199, ll.16-23).

The cyclical activity of the waves surging backwards and forwards speaks to a temporal overlap where the thrust of the past collides with the present in what Bishop details as a ‘sodden ghost’ manifested upon the beach. Bishop’s poetic gaps, via ellipsis and dash, invoke a hesitancy and uncertainty that reimagines the humans’ hierarchical reign over nonhuman space. Indeed, the expansive presence of these waves in perpetuity signposts the human speaker as a mere microscopic presence in its wake; a minor player in a watery world that continues in its cycle ‘over and over’. The waves’ movement uncannily symbolises the cycle of contact and disconnect captured in Bishop’s ‘wet white string,/looping up to the tide-line’ before falling back ‘to the water’. This image mirrors what Morton (2016) describes as ‘Knowing in a loop’ that characterises ‘ecognosis’; a surreal form of knowing where ‘becoming accustomed to something strange’ is not to be mistaken for a gradual ‘acclimation’ (p. 5). Rather the loop image, as he explains it, ‘means we live in a universe of finitude and fragility’; an endless circle of coexistence that is always ‘contingent, brittle, and flawed’ (Morton, 2016: p. 6), speaking to Bishop’s fractious and cyclical tides. Indeed, Bishop oscillates between moments of contact between speaker and sea, and a palpable disconnect, further speaking to the precarious and looping nature of this entanglement. She intimates a further detachment in the image of the string with no kite that she imagines representing the swirls of whitewash that crest upon the beach. Its image resonates with a landscape that Bishop has already established as ‘withdrawn’ and ‘indrawn’; a space that the speaker is implicated within whilst also apparently estranged and isolated from. Like the flagless post in ‘Cape Breton’, it is rendered meaningless, an incomplete and fragmentary shard upon an already austere landscape that embodies a dark ecology and therefore an ecoGothic response to the natural world. Bishop’s questioning ‘A kite string?’, characteristic of a poet who typically employs epanorthosis in her work, further distances the speaker from any claims of human mastery over this landscape; rather she is lost,

confused and questioning of this space that envelops her. In this way, she further invokes a hesitancy that is characteristic of a dark ecology; one where the sea itself is a manifestation of such flux and ambiguity in its metamorphic nature. We therefore witness in Bishop's seascape, how 'Place doesn't stay still, but bends and twists' (Morton: 2016, p. 11).

A further description of this whitewash as a 'white snarl' evokes this seascape as an aggressive force that is hostile in response to human presence, where its cresting movements towards the speaker create the sense, in some moments, that it is ushering her away. Bishop's reference to 'giving up the ghost' may at first seem playful, connecting to her reference to a kite, but the resignation and withdrawal that it signals speaks to a more foreboding milieu. In 'giving up the ghost' there is the suggestion that the spectral is allowed to emerge in the space of this poem and this beach where it is no longer repressed but instead surrendered and made visible in this ecoGothic terrain. As a space of constant movement and returns, marked in the cycles of waves that repeatedly wash up upon the sand, Bishop harnesses the beach as a suitable site to explore a haunting, speaking to a dark ecology of aliens and ghosts. The way the speaker is situated in this liminal space, caught between the traces of water that went before as well as contemplating the ocean surges to come, symbolises the environmental conundrum of our times: on the one hand clinging to past ways of doing things whilst at the same time haunted by the terrifying inevitability of a nature that is clearly coming for us.

The fragmentary pieces that collide in 'The End of March' are evoked most emphatically in Bishop's construction of the 'proto-dream-house' (p. 199, l.34) that emerges in the third stanza, its description stretched out like the walk towards it that the poet documents in stanzas one and two. The speaker's so-called 'crypto-dream-house' (p. 199, l.35) proves to be anything but and as such is forged like a fragmented collage, recalling Bishop's earlier more surreal poem 'The Monument'<sup>1</sup> from her first collection *North & South* (1946):

'I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,  
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box  
set up on pilings, shingled green,  
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener  
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),  
protected from tides by a palisade

of—are they railroad ties?

(Many things about this place are dubious.)’ (Bishop, 2011: p. 199 ll.24-33).

Here we witness this house as one that has been surrendered to the seascape; a metamorphic and ‘dubious’ entity that has fused with the ecology in which it is set. It has become a hostage to an agentive sea forcing anyone presuming that they can colonise it to think again and speaking to the pervasive shadow of a dark ecology that permeates all. Bishop captures its fragility, its mutability in the manner that she evokes its frailties and vulnerabilities, thus reconfiguring the illusion of the natural world’s benign constancy. It is a mere ‘crooked box’ with foundations that amount to little more than pilings. Now its colour has amalgamated with the shades of the beach, ‘shingled green’ to the point that the poet suggests it invites comparison with an ‘artichoke’. Thus, it has become an organic phenomenon beyond the bounds of human choreography, no longer a fixed, stable structure but a mobilised phenomenon that shapeshifts in a supernatural manner. In this way, this dream house perched upon a horizon, this human symbol of sovereignty, is dissolved into the remnants of the sea; an abandoned house that is a spectral trace of the speaker’s dreams but also one that has been ingested and spat out by the sea itself to form a new ecoGothic and posthuman incarnation. This abandoned house in many ways has become a haunted space: haunted by the sea that repeatedly casts a shadow at its doors but also representative of the way in which the speaker is haunted by a future that has failed to materialise. The speaker’s attempts to find evidence of its potential as a place to retire to, searching for the warm domestic familiars of stove and chimney, prove fruitless. Rather such items are askew as Bishop forges it as the very symbol of a haunted house, overcome by its exposure to the seascape. The chimney, when she does locate it, is ‘braced with wires’, invoking a fragility and perhaps suggestive of its potential dangers, unsafe for human occupation (Bishop, 2011: p. 200 l.42).

We learn that ultimately the speaker does not even reach this dream destination because of the hostile wind which was ‘much too cold/even to get that far’ (p. 200, ll.48-49). In the final line of the penultimate stanza, Bishop bluntly delivers the news that ‘of course the house was boarded up’ (p. 200, l.50), recalling the seemingly redundant ‘invisible house’ briefly mentioned in ‘Cape Breton’. It is the end of the line: a false promise of what cannot be in a poem that evokes not a human-centred pastoral idyll but rather a sparse, confrontational and

unforgiving space that chills the human speaker and her companion as they return along the sand:

‘On the way back our faces froze on the other side.  
The sun came out for just a minute.  
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,  
the drab, damp, scattered stones  
were multi-colored,  
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,  
individual shadows, then pulled them in again’  
(Bishop, 2011: p. 200, ll.51-57).

In the act of returning there is a sense that they are receding from this world, retreating and thus not adhering to Humanism’s great ambition for progress, but rather caught in ecology’s uncompromising loop. The speaker’s lofty aspirations for retirement, iterated at the start of the poem, are grounded by the haunted shores of the house’s metamorphic environs; a space that is austere and uncompromising, unyielding to her wishes. She is forced to turn back on them, ostracised from this seascape in a manner that human life is similarly side-lined in ‘Cape Breton’. Instead, grandiose plans slip to the periphery as the speaker’s focus moves to the molecular and microscopic, dark ecological foundations that underpin this landscape. Idealised pastoral description is eschewed for the raw detail at hand where Bishop records instead individual ‘scattered stones’ and even the ‘bezels of sand’, recalling the spaces of sand that the sandpiper watches in her poem ‘Sandpiper’<sup>2</sup> where ‘no detail is too small’ (2011: p. 129, l.12). This is not a sun-kissed landscape. Indeed, the sun appears ‘for just a minute’ in this space where it is the grey and ‘drab’ that the speaker is drawn into, chilling her face. In this final stanza there is the returning sense of the agency of this environment where its entropic and metamorphic force demonstrates a posthuman ambivalence to our species that is indifferent to our desires. As we witness in ‘Cape Breton’, the seascape and so this nonhuman milieu has the final word as the human species is ushered to an edge by an autonomous and austere shoreline; one where a dark ecology, rather than aestheticised Nature prevails, taking us with it.

## Conclusion

To read Bishop's poetry of the shorelines is to peer into the darkness of things in the way that Elizabeth Parker proposes. The precarious and often ambiguous shorelines of Bishop's poems examined here upset human presumptions of mastery and instead invoke a mood of ecoGothic fear that is stirred by a confrontation with the mutable, unknowns of the nonhuman world. Bishop's waterside geographies conjure a churning space that threatens the stability of human culture, where dark ecology is the ruling principle. The hint that we are agents of our own demise is an eerie detail that lingers in Bishop's haunted seascapes, where the vision of a plane forcing sheep to their deaths off the cliffs in 'Cape Breton' and the redundant house amidst the rising shoreline in 'The End of March' foreshadows the dangers of human impact. Significantly, I have argued that Bishop's presentation of an austere seascape that shapeshifts regardless of the machinations of human control points to a world beyond anthropogenic mastery, looking instead towards an ecoGothic cartography, signposted via her dark ecologies. Bishop etches misty and perilous terrains suggestive of an anthropological exodus; a sphere where nature is not a benign idyll but rather a space that we are implicated within. In this way, Bishop's shorelines are not spaces that can be tamed and choreographed but rather are spheres that rise up and speak back, potentially forcing the human species into a recessionary position as we witness in both 'Cape Breton' and 'The End of March'. They demonstrate most importantly the way in which an ecoGothic mode has the capacity to forge a path out of anthropocentric habit by confronting the dark ecologies that Bishop's fretful seascapes recurrently etch. In this way, Bishop's evocation of a darker nature, unleashed in her metamorphic and misty shorelines, renegotiates human and nonhuman relations in a way that signposts our uncanny co-existence together. As a result, we witness how the 'unknown sea' of her haunted and haunting seascapes demonstrates its capacity to contribute to contemporary and environmental debates of today; where an ecological awareness that registers our weird and looping entanglements with nonhuman space has the potential to catalyse a more connected, cross-species relationship.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Karen Eckersley** is a final year PhD student at Nottingham Trent University and is a recipient of the university's Vice Chancellor's studentship funding award. She researches the

intersection between Women's Surrealism and Posthuman Feminism focusing on the work of Elizabeth Bishop, Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning. Her studies are concerned with the extent to which these artists and writers anticipate contemporary ecological debates in their surrealist oeuvre. Karen has published articles in the peer-reviewed academic publications *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings* and *Transpositiones* with book chapters forthcoming on Carrington. These include a study of human-animal hybridity in Carrington's short stories to be published in *Beastly Modernisms: The Figure of the Animal in Literature and Culture* by Edinburgh University Press. Karen has delivered academic papers at conferences including a presentation on EcoGothicism in Tanning's novel *Chasm: A Weekend* (2004) at the International Society for the Study of Surrealism Conference (2021).

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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**EcoGothic Doubles:**

**Ocean and Hell in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*<sup>18</sup>**

*Madeline Potter*

**ABSTRACT**

Can landscape be monstrously doubled? In Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), the ocean doubles as hell: the infernal geography prefigured in Melmoth's dream of damnation perfectly overlaps the natural scenery. Yet while it might mirror hell, the ocean remains part of this world. It is God's creation, a fruit of his love. Its contemplation can bring forth an eco-theology—a means of glimpsing, in awe, fragments of the postlapsarian realm through the beauty of nature. But the ocean remains physical, and Christianity, in Maturin's Protestant worldview, is a 'spiritual system'. This renders materiality intrinsically dangerous. It means that landscape and humanity alike were affected by the Fall from grace. In its inescapably material essence, then, the ocean remains bound to the postlapsarian world. Hence awe dissolves into fear; we 'plunge', as Maturin puts it, 'from paradise to hell', and the eco-theological impulse fails under the weight of sin. If 'hell never materialises', as Ashley Marshall (2008) suggests, then what better way to coax us into imagining what it may look like, than through the prism of the irretrievably fallen world? Maturin directs our intuitive, primeval knowledge of the ocean's movement—its rocking, repeatable, push-and-pull of the waves—to conjure images of eternal torment in infernal, fiery waters. In this context, my essay asks: what theological anxieties does this eco-doubling engender in Maturin's imagination? The ocean, I argue, remains a threshold space: haunted by God, but claimed by the devil, who drags Melmoth, through its waters, to his final place of damnation.

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In Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), the non-human world emerges as an uneasy, threshold space where theological realities find physical manifestation. Infernal realities reveal themselves to us through images of landscape—in particular, hell itself is reflected in the ocean. As I demonstrate in this article, the relationship between the natural world, humans, and hell dissolves the logic of what might initially appear to be binary oppositions into a sense of uneasy identities, which allow both hell and the human condition to be engulfed by images of the ocean. Using the Gothic double, Maturin paints the ocean as an untamed space, which he construes at the intersection of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. The trope of the Gothic double gains new value as an ecoGothic trope: one which repositions the environment as an active force shaping human existence in the world, and, in Maturin's novel, also the theological position of humans in the logic of creation. The ecoGothic double collapses the distinctions between humans and environment, and reimagines the power dynamics between them. In doing so, I argue, he voices his theological belief regarding the dangers of the world's materiality, and of humanity's corporeal existence in a realm removed from divine grace.

This article provides the first ecocritical reading of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, demonstrating how Maturin's theological vision locates the ocean at the threshold between humanity's experience of the non-human world, and the ocean's own autonomy as God's creation. Criticism on the novel has so far considered broadly Maturin's richness of religious thought, the intricacy of his narrative structure, and his relationship to Irish culture and history. In *Charles Robert Maturin and the Haunting of Irish Romantic Fiction*, Christina Morin (2011) theorises Maturin's use of paratext in the novel and its effects on the allegorisation of Ireland (p. 129-54). Alison Milbank (2018) in *God and the Gothic* reads the theology of the novel as linked to a sacrificial logic of substitution (p. 189-204). Jim Kelly (2011) looks at how Maturin negotiates 'the relation between eye-witness accounts and historiography', arguing that 'oral tradition' plays a complex role in Maturin's building of historical memory, and provides an enlightening analysis of his use of 'folk beliefs' (p. 150-6). Kelly explains that Maturin is using allegory to think 'through the relation between eye-witness accounts and historiography, and the relationship between agency and suffering in historical conflict' (p. 150-1). In the same vein as Kelly, I want to argue that the figure of Melmoth allows Maturin to negotiate the relationship between sacred history and secular history, and that this further enables him to consider the dual role played by the environment in the world's history.

I therefore provide the first ecocritical perspective on *Melmoth the Wanderer* and, in doing so, my reading affords new insights into Maturin's novel, explaining the duality of his preoccupations with the environment, and demonstrating, for the first time, how ecocritical concerns pervade his theology, and how he tackles them in his fiction. At the same time, this essay re-positions *Melmoth the Wanderer* as a central novel to the development of Gothic ecocriticism in the Romantic era. Particularly, Maturin's focus on the ocean as a space which mirrors hell is crucial. As Emily Alder (2017) has argued, a nautical Gothic perspective can help us understand the sea as a space freed from the 'landward' perspective which we have often attributed to texts (p. 1). Alder's theorisation of the oceanic Gothic emerges against the background of work in oceanic studies championed by Hester Blum (2013), who stresses the new perspectives opened up by abandoning a 'land-bound' (p. 152) lens. Blum close-reads passages from the chapter 'A Squeeze of the Hand' in *Moby-Dick* to demonstrate how 'forms of human or extra-human relations are dissolved and reconstituted into a fluid medium' and how therefore 'modes of relation [...] extend into a register impossible to conceive of, much less occupy, while land-bound' (p. 152).

Alder (2017) explains that 'Gothic thinking [...] possesses oceanic qualities', for it 'is good at challenging reifying perspectives, prising open fractures in dominant narratives, and embracing what is unspeakable or transgressive' (p. 7). And this is precisely what Maturin's account of the ocean does: it challenges our land-based perspective, forcing us to dwell on the ocean's intrinsic qualities, its rocking waves, its unbridled rippling. Maturin's ocean in the novel also prises 'open fractures in dominant narratives' and reveals to us the very epitome of 'what is unspeakable' and 'transgressive': hell, and its vision of damnation.

While this unspeakability reaches its apogee in Maturin's overlapping of hell and ocean, it is a mood which underpins much of the narrative in *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Indeed, discussing the problematics of excess in Maturin's novel, Nathaniel Leach (2011) argues that its staging of binary oppositions reveals one, fundamental opposition, 'between eloquence and unspeakability' (p. 21). This logic of binary oppositions is inflated by what Victor Sage (2001) has identified as Maturin's tendency to 'hyperbolize the already hyperbolic Gothic genre' (p.

82), a tendency which creates a vision of Manichean antagonisms in the novel. In weaving together Biblical and secular narratives, ecocentric and anthropocentric perspectives, and the dramatic effects of Romantic Gothic, *Melmoth the Wanderer*'s ending is a crucial illustration of emerging ecocritical concerns in the Romantic era.

Studies on the relationship between ecocriticism and the Gothic have looked at the Romantic period as an era of emergence for ecological concerns which overlap with Gothic sensibilities. In their introduction to *EcoGothic*, Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013) bring to light 'synergies' which had been, prior to the publication of the volume, 'overlooked': although, they explain, the Gothic is not merely 'an offshoot of Romanticism', the two share 'critical languages' (p. 1). And, as Smith and Hughes demonstrate, shared languages also exist between Romanticism and ecocriticism, a critical perspective which has been formulated by Bate (1991), who argued that 'if one historicizes the idea of an ecological viewpoint [...] one finds himself squarely in the Romantic tradition' (p. 9). Nonetheless, Smith and Hughes show that what the Gothic provides is its characteristic ambivalence, an ambivalence which can often end up positioning the natural world in an awkward position, between 'estrangement' and 'belonging', and which is characterised by fragmentation (p. 2).

Tom J. Hillard (2019) draws on a discussion by Greg Garrard of a chapter from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, in the context of ecocriticism, and finally links Carson's use of 'supernatural and [...] malevolent forces' and how she explains them 'with something more mundane and prosaic' to the 'type of storytelling' favoured by 'iconic Gothic novels' (p. 23), most notably Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), therefore tracing ecocritical concerns all the way back to Gothic Romanticism. Interestingly, Olivia Murphy (2019) considers the relationship between 'Nature' and the Romantic imagination, and identifies a 'Romantic fallacy', particularly when 'the conceit of "Nature" [...] is contrasted with civilization, or seen as fundamentally distinct and distant from human life' (p. 3). 'Nature', she adds, 'partakes of patriarchal assumptions that it is [...] passively nurturing', always '[p]ersonified as feminine', and hence leading to an interpretation of what is 'unwelcome to humans' as an 'aberrance' (Murphy, 2019: p. 3). In his use of the ecoGothic double, and of the coastal space as a space of intersection between the human and the non-human, and between the physical and the metaphysical, as well as in his construal of humanity itself as deviant,

indeed aberrant, in its fallen condition, Maturin eschews precisely this fallacy. Rather than a dichotomy, he presents us with a complicated duality, and in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the ambivalence, the fragmentation so characteristic of the dialogue between the natural world and the Gothic, translates into that tension between ‘eloquence’ and ‘unspeakability’ identified by Leach. However, at the end, in ‘The Wanderer’s Dream’, and in the final scene which follows, Maturin collapses Biblical and secular history into each other, challenging the binaries and effacing borders between humans and the natural world and its ecosystems: between physics and metaphysics. The result is a renegotiation of the place both of human beings and of the natural world in the economy of creation, salvation, and damnation. By forcing Biblical strands of history into the plane of secular history, the ending of Maturin’s novel repositions it at the heart of Romantic ecocritical debates.

Maturin was a clergyman in the Church of Ireland, and his fiction reflects his theological vision. *Melmoth the Wanderer* is a fable allowing Maturin to express what he views, according to his Protestant doctrine, as the dangers of the world and the path to salvation; the novel’s preface includes a quotation from one of his sermons, affirming that no living being would willingly exchange destinies with Melmoth, and therefore setting the theological tone of the narrative. The reading of Maturin’s projection of hell onto the ocean which follows aims to elucidate how his theology informs the way he looks at landscape in terms of a fraught negotiation between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Therefore, as I demonstrate, a theological scrutiny of the novel is crucial in fully understanding his use of Gothic hyperbole which permeates his descriptions of the natural world, in particular of the ocean.

If at first we meet Melmoth laughing devilishly at the two lovers’ powerlessness in the face of the sea-storm, during his last night on Earth, we find him, in his dream, in a similarly powerless position, as he awaits his doom:

‘He dreamed that he stood on the summit of a precipice, whose downward height no eye could have measured, but for the fearful waves of a fiery ocean that lashed, and blazed, and roared at its bottom, sending its burning spray far up, so as to drench the dreamer with its sulphurous rain. The whole glowing



ocean below was alive—every billow bore an agonizing soul, that rose like a wreck or a putrid corse on the waves of earth's oceans—uttered a shriek as it burst against that adamantine precipice—sunk—and rose again to repeat the tremendous experiment!’ (Maturin, 2008: p. 538).

Melmoth is on the threshold of the earth, on the coastal precipice, watching as the human and the non-human blend in an infernal image. He is right on the edge, and the coast doubles as a space of uncertainty and anxiety as he gradually steps away from the world of humans and moves towards being engulfed by the ocean and its Gothic double: hell. Recent studies on coastal environments have studied the ‘sea spray effect’, looking into how ‘ocean-derived strontium’ affects coastal systems (Alonzi, et al., 2020, p. 1). It is almost as if this correlation is intuitively there in Maturin’s novel, when the fiery ocean sends its ‘burning spray far up’, claiming Melmoth as its own.

The Wanderer’s dream prefigures his inevitable damnation—and Maturin garners the image of the ocean, wild, unbound, to attune our imagination to what hell might look like. As Jimmy Packham and David Punter (2017) have noted, the ocean is primordially an unknown space not simply because of its vastness, but especially because of its depth, which has remained underexplored, mysterious, and terrifying (p. 17). Drawing on Philip Steinberg, they argue that the deep remains a space ‘which we can’t [...] think about’ because ‘we can’t represent’ it (Packham & Punter, 2017: p. 17), and propose that it is through literary texts that we primarily grapple with it. Because of its inscrutable depths, the ocean remains a space of the imagination, exciting images of sea-monsters and other fantastic creatures which lie within. Like the ocean, hell is also a space which the Western Christian imagination has traditionally conceived of in terms of depth. Christian Scripture often describes hell as a ‘pit’ (see, for example, Psalm 28:1), while Dante’s *Inferno* is perhaps the most influential text responsible for shaping our image of hell as a deep, descending space. This concentric structure is made clear by Dante throughout, such as, for example, when he descends from the first circle to the Inferno to the second, its space narrowing down: ‘Thus I descended out of the first circle / Down to the second, that less space begirds, / And so much greater dole that goads to wailing’ (Alighieri, 2005: p. 25).

Packham and Punter's assertion that literary texts allow us to confront the deep is certainly true for Maturin. But in the novel, it is not only the ocean's depth that he explores, but also hell's own depth, each incorporated into the other. Such doubling evidently reinforces the idea that the ocean is really a fearsome space, with evil forces lurking in its depths. However, despite both hell and ocean being great, unknown spaces, the powerful mirroring mechanism between the two is made possible by recognition. Precisely because we recognise the natural movement of the ocean, its push-and-pull of the waves, its repetitive swirling, sweeping, and whirling, we also recognise the inherent fear it instils. This uneasy relationship between recognition and fear underlies the idea of the Gothic double, which we so often see manifested in the relationship between characters in Gothic novels.

Almost eight decades after the publication of Maturin's novel, Bram Stoker published his famous *Dracula* (1897), which, as Patrick O'Malley (2006) notes, appears to be governed at a first glance by a logic of 'Manichean [...] oppositions' (p. 160). However, O'Malley (2006) goes on to argue that this seeming chain of oppositions—'Catholic/Protestant, vampire/mortal, defender of normative gender roles, violator of those roles' ends up dissolving 'into a logic of mirrored reversals, where the enemy or the opposite can turn out to be hidden not only inside the nation but also inside the self' (pp. 160-1). The collapsing of boundaries described by O'Malley, which locates the other inside the self, is not unlike the mirroring of ocean and hell in Maturin's novel. There is no clear opposition between the actual space of the ocean and that of hell as there is between, for example, Jonathan Harker and Count Dracula in Stoker's novel. But the 'enemy'—hell, and its eternal torment—lies hidden deep within a worldly space, one which we know as part of our world—the everyday, habitual world of humans, not the supernatural, metaphysical realm of demons and hellfire.

Through the image of the ocean this underworld rises to the surface, and becomes part of the ordinary reality of the world. Hell unfolds before the Wanderer's eyes in a picture which perfectly overlaps that of the natural world: the ocean's thisness, its haecceity, perfectly transfers to that of the blazing, hellish, 'fiery ocean' which Melmoth looks upon. Like the duality between self and other, the relationship between physical geography and the underlying

metaphysical space suggests that hell is somehow contained within the world, and this overlap between ocean and hell reflects Maturin's theology. This collapsing of boundaries puts humans and the ocean on the same plane, at once challenging anthropocentric interpretations of the ocean, and reaffirming such perspectives, in an ambivalent tension between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism.

Maturin employs the imagery of the ocean as both deep and wide to envision the human condition in a postlapsarian world. As Packham and Punter (2017) have explained, engaging with Phillip Steinberg's argument in 'Of other seas', the ocean has broadly been construed, surprisingly, as 'flat' (p. 17) in critical accounts. Steinberg (2013) illustrates this through a pragmatic example: on maps, 'the ocean appears as blue, flat, and unchanging'; it is 'stable in both space and time' (p. 160). This, Packham and Punter (2017) contend, is linked to a 'fundamentally anthropocentric (and so surface-bound)' experience of the ocean (p. 17). At the opposite end, we get the deep: a Gothic, unknown space, one where 'spatiality and temporality become unmoored from and exceed their traditional (or terrestrial) qualities' (Packham & Punter, 2017: p. 18).

The deep, then, is a space inhabited by traces of human history, alongside the shadows of the 'uncanny nonhuman forms' (Packham & Punter, 2017: p. 18) which lurk beneath the surface. To Maturin, this tension between haunting history and permanence, between the imprint of human existence and the nonhuman, between the knowledge of experience within the world and the uncharted deep, is the key to overcoming the distinction, articulated by Leach (2011), between 'eloquence and unspeakability' (p. 21). Steinberg (2013) identifies the human interpretation of the sea as a 'partial' experience, which creates 'gaps', where 'the unrepresentable becomes the unacknowledged and the unacknowledged becomes the unthinkable' (p. 157). And yet, because the hidden history of human presence is concealed within the deep, it is within this space that the backlog of human experience encounters the unthinkable, the unspeakable, and the unacknowledged.

The Wanderer's dream shows us a space where 'eloquence' and 'unspeakability' come together—and the gap is filled through recourse to metaphysical, Biblical history. The chasm

which cannot be filled by natural human knowledge and experience is instead closed by tapping into theological history, the one which weaves together all human experience, and the natural world, through the narrative of the Fall. To those who only see what lies before their eyes, Maturin (1819) maintains in a sermon preached in 1809, but do not ‘look upward or beyond’ (p. 79), everything appears to be enveloped in a state of darkness. In contrast, he explains, those who believe can perceive the world as ‘luminous’ (Maturin, 1819: p. 79); he associates this perspective with the apprehension of ‘the truth of revelation’, which further allows the individual such inclined to become an ‘*interpreter* of the universal testimony of nature’ (p. 79). Maturin (1819) stresses the importance of interpreting the ‘testimony of nature’ (p. 79) through the prism of divine revelation. For without revelation, Maturin explains, the only reality we can witness and understand is that of the Fall.

Maturin goes as far as to equate the human condition with the natural world itself, both tragically marked by Original Sin. Taking famine as an example of the Fall’s consequences, he illustrates its effects by drawing a parallel between humans and the natural world:

‘When famine hovers over the land, drying up the very springs of human nature along with the fruits of the earth [...] could he not by a word strike the earth, which he has hardened into rock, and make the waters of abundance flow forth?’  
(Maturin, 1819: p. 78).

And while this flowing, watery holiness has been dried out by the Fall, the world—the whole environment—is part of God’s creation, a fundamental participant in natural law. It now tragically bears the imprint of humanity’s sin, which renders it sinful, like the fallen human condition itself, in Maturin’s theological vision.

On the one hand, the theological perspective reaffirms anthropocentrism precisely because the natural world—the ocean here—has incurred fallenness due to man’s sin. Biblical history also recalibrates our relationship to the deep, which is now no longer a space of the unknown. In the Wanderer’s dream, we face a topography which brings to the forefront the

ocean's depth. And it does so by bringing it into focus through Melmoth's threshold, coastal position; the duality of the negotiation between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism at play in the novel is itself replicated symbolically, through the coastal landscape, the quintessential space of in-betweenness.

When we first learn that Melmoth dreamt that 'he stood on the summit of a precipice' (p. 538), Maturin (2008) once again draws on dramatic contrast, a contrast, established, in this case, between the height of the summit and the 'downward height'—the depth—of the precipice, at the bottom of which lies the roaring hellish ocean. At the top of the summit, we find Melmoth standing, upright: as we zoom in on the singular figure, standing on an elevated plane, we are reminded of the image of Christ standing on the Mount of Olives, right before His ascension into heaven. Biblical imagery, as Kathleen Fowler (1986) has argued, unifies the novel: although Fowler does not expand on each image's individual signification, she mentions the 'storm' and the 'shipwreck' as notable examples of Biblical imagery (p. 523), which, I propose, suggests that Maturin was concerned with the threshold space between human experience and the unbound forces of the environment, in a Christian theological context, a threshold position which is eminently transferred to the ecological space of the coast itself. To Ashley Marshall (2008), the novel discovers a mode of 'Puritan Gothic' whereby private, 'personal [...] belief' clashes with the threat of 'external forces' (p. 123); and she reads Melmoth's affirmation, '*I believe in a God [...] you have heard of those who believe and tremble—such is he who speaks to you*', as a 'biblical allusion' by which Melmoth aligns himself with the devil (p. 136).

But Melmoth, as a 'symbolic Satan' (Faxneld, 2007: p. 172), as an anti- or counter-Christ, will descend instead of ascend, as clearly emphasised by the contrast between the high summit and the deep precipice, which doubles with the depth of the ocean. His way up seems literally blocked: upon raising his gaze, he only perceives 'the upper air', which 'showed only blackness unshadowed and impenetrable' (Maturin, 2008: p. 539), and a gigantic clock arm, announcing that his time is up. Melmoth's movement, therefore, is inescapably downward—towards his certain damnation, but at the same time, towards the ocean. His plunging towards the oceanic inferno is a literal fall, a re-enactment of the Biblical Fall:

‘In the effort he fell, and falling grasped at aught that might save him. His fall seemed perpendicular—there was nought to save him—the rock was as smooth as ice—the ocean of fire broke at its foot! Suddenly a groupe of figures appeared, ascending as he fell. He grasped at them successively;—first Stanton—then Walberg—Elinor Mortimer—Isidora—Monçada—all passed him,—to each he seemed in his slumber to cling in order to break his fall—all ascended the precipice. He caught at each in his downward flight, but all forsook him and ascended’ (Maturin, 2008: p. 539).

As Melmoth plunges towards the waters, there is no hint of God, either physical or symbolic, and no hint of heaven in the landscape. The coast is again a place of threshold and brief intersection between Melmoth, descending towards hell, and those he attempted to damn but failed, passing him by as they ascend.

Positioning Melmoth on the coast, which weaves together the human and the non-human, as we anticipate his dreadful damnation but never actually witness it, Maturin mobilises our fear of the deep. His mechanism of Gothic fright is rooted in an understanding that we have traditionally interpreted the ocean anthropocentrically, exploring its surface. But in weaving in Biblical history with the quotidian secular history, he replaces that diffuse fear of the unknown with a very specific fear: that of hell. In a sense, the anthropocentric standpoint is deepened, reaching downward from the surface, and into the ocean’s depth, claiming it as a human space, both in terms of how the deep is used to outline the very human fear of eternal torment, and in the way in which the darkness of the unexplored unknown is illuminated through the imposition of this metaphysical image of hell. This kind of illumination is made possible due to the use of the Gothic. As Packham and Punter (2017) have noted, the Gothic is a genre concerned with ‘making visible the unrepresentable, unacknowledged, and unthinkable, of making present what is absent’ (p. 18). And it is exactly this process which governs the doubling between the image of hell and that of the ocean in *Melmoth the Wanderer*; but at the same time, the Gothic, alongside the imposition of a clearly articulated vision of hell onto the ocean, renders the surface itself uncanny and monstrous. If traditionally the surface has been the space of

anthropocentrism—the dimension of the wide sea which human presence has dominated, and which stood in contrast to the inscrutable deep—it is now transformed into a space where we can witness, in plain and full view, the torment of the damned. The agonising torment of damned souls is construed as an ever-repeating movement of sinking and rising on a ‘billow’ of fire, and crashing against the precipice, only to start the infernal ride all over again. There is a perfect symmetry now between the deep and the surface, each in concord with the other, and each indispensable in forming this eternal instrument of torture. What is underneath is perfectly doubled by what is above: we know the hidden torment through mirroring symmetry of the surface torment. And the rise of these damned souls on hellish waves, from the deep, shows us that the perceived safety of the surface, of the known world, is a mere illusion.

This is a striking ecological application of the Gothic double; writing about the Gothic double trope, Dale Townshend (2016) explains how Maturin picks up on ‘the Faustian echoes of earlier treatments of the literary double’, including *Frankenstein* (1818), and constructing a web of doublings between Melmoth and his potential victims (p. 396). The same Faustian echoes, I suggest, undertow his ecoGothic doubling, therefore enabling him to place damnation’s torment at the forefront of an equally tormented and tormenting landscape; at the same time, this symmetry, as well as the coastal setting with its intimations of in-betweenness, remind us of the intersection between the anthropocentric and the ecocentric lenses. The coastal setting places Melmoth at the edge of the earth, both physically and metaphysically: physically because he is on the last bit of land before the ocean begins, and metaphysically because he is on the last bit of land before hell starts. The coastal space is border space, where these manifold facets of the double converge: human and landscape, physics and metaphysics, earth and water, human and demonic. The coast is pre-eminently the place where the double lingers and flourishes—and hence where the dramatic staging of damnation is most compelling, since it can harness the two conflicting perspectives (human and non-human) to foster an uncanny recognition: the horror of the fiery ocean works because it still bears the imprint of the human, because it is by the coast, and Melmoth can recognise these signs, yet see them so infernally transformed.

A theological reading of the scene allows us to perceive hell physically seeping into the world through the coast, rising up from the hidden, underworld dimension the Western

collective imagination has attributed to it, and bursting out, in fiery waves, into our known reality. Significantly, through this process, Satan continues to remain hidden; and up until this point, Faxneld's (2017) reading of Melmoth as symbolically taking on his role is self-evident (p. 171), for we know that Melmoth has wandered the earth with the sole purpose of finding someone to take on his curse, and therefore seeking to damn, to spread sin. But can we still read the Melmoth who looks down towards the ocean at the bottom of the precipice, in horrified anticipation of his own damnation, as a symbolic devil?

We find, at this stage, a Melmoth stripped of all his agency, including his power to damn others. 'He dreamed' sets the tone: Melmoth does not autonomously control his position there: he is in a dream, over which he has no control. Yet we know this is real in light of the doubling between the dream landscape and the physical one; like the threshold space of the coast, Melmoth's dream is also a threshold. Both the coast and the dream suggest his transitory lingering state on Earth before he is doomed. He 'felt himself' (Maturin, 2008: p. 539) plunged again strips him of autonomy, as indicated by the use of the passive rather than the active 'he plunged', emphasising that he is at the mercy of landscape, with its metaphysical hyperboles here, as we zoom in on to the ecocentric lens. As he watches the clock hand indicate the passing of the 150 years of existence he has obtained through his pact, he transforms, from an active subject who seeks to deal out corruption, into a passive object falling into demonic waters, to meet his final punishment. While Melmoth is no longer in control, there is a switch in agency from himself to the ocean, which appears now to take on the role of the symbolic devil which Melmoth had fulfilled over the course of the novel. The fiery ocean is not simply a space of punishment, but an enactor of it, and therein lies the powerful ecocentrism of the novel, as Maturin frees the ocean from human domination and reframes its metaphysical and eschatological position independently. 'The whole glowing ocean below was alive' (p. 538), Maturin (2008) writes, depicting it almost as if it was a sentient being, performing the frightful but just task of eternal torment of damned souls. If the non-human world, here represented by the sea, suffered the consequences of Adam and Eve's Fall, and continued to suffer exploitation at the hands of humans, now its autonomous position in the created order is re-established.

At the same time, those souls, presumably once human agents, are now, like Melmoth, reduced to objects, deprived of any means of controlling their fate, as they are being borne on



fiery billows. Maturin (2008) magnifies the image of the ocean as a live, independent agent just as Melmoth is held by the gigantic arm above the precipice, facing his final fall, and the eternal clock rings its 'awful chime': 'Room for the soul of the Wanderer!' and to this, the voice of the ocean's burning waves answer, 'There is room for more!' (p. 539).

The clock and the ocean echo each other, overtly disregarding the Wanderer himself—although it is his fate that is ultimately decided, he can but listen and watch in horror as the enigmatic clock and the fiery ocean pronounce their decree regarding his damnation. As he draws nearer to his doom, his very identity is effaced: if he was once Melmoth, the clock refers to him as 'the Wanderer', making his Faustian pact (for he became the Wanderer in its consequence) central to his existence. And when the hellish ocean professes that there is room for his soul, and for many others, even his Faustian identity fades, as if vanishing into the deep, and he is simply lumped up with the many, unknown, and unnamed souls who will meet the same destiny in its tormenting waves.

It is as if the anthropocentric lens itself has been subjected to what Patrick O'Malley (2006) has called, in connection with *Dracula*, the 'logic of mirrored reversals' (p. 160). If an anthropocentric interpretation fosters an experience of the ocean through the lens of human activity, and as a space which humans can, and have historically explored and exploited, Melmoth's vision filters all human experience through the active force of the infernal ocean. This ocean is no longer a space of human commerce, voyage, or even imagination. Instead, it is a space which has, albeit monstrously, reclaimed its autonomy, reversing the power dynamics between itself and humanity. Paradoxically, looking at the deep through the lens of humanity's Biblical narrative, the ecocentrism of the ocean is also affirmed, as it gains an active role in the logic of creation, dealing out God's just punishment against the sins of humans. If in the Creation narrative, Adam and Eve were given primacy over their surroundings, this is now reversed, as the smouldering ocean gains its own autonomy and primacy, ablaze with human souls. According to Biblical story,

'And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea,

and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth' (Genesis 1: 28).

At the same time, it is due to a transgression not only against God but against nature, in its prelapsarian state, that Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden, for they ate the forbidden fruit. As God voices His indictment of Adam for his sin, he explains that his postlapsarian suffering will happen '[b]ecause thou [...] hast eaten of the tree' (Genesis 3: 17). At this same moment when Adam is banished from Paradise, the natural world incurs his sin, as God utters: 'cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shall thou eat of it all the days of thy life' (Genesis 3: 17).

There is, therefore, a dual relationship between humans and environment traceable, in the Christian worldview, to the very beginning of time. Tempted by the devil, Adam ate of the apple of knowledge: a fruit, an organic product of the earth. Even Satan appeared to him under the guise of a snake, thus masquerading as an animal. Therefore, humans and landscape both played a role in each other's fall: Adam because he listened to the snake and ate the apple, and landscape because of Adam's sin. When Steinberg reads the ocean's deep as resisting the anthropological interpretation through which we have often read its surface, he is engaging within an earthly, secular, socio-political, and anthropological sense of history. When Maturin weaves in the Biblical thread of history with the ordinary, worldly timeline, the effect is itself double: on the one hand, as we have seen, it deepens and reaffirms an anthropocentric reading of space by providing a human-focused explanation of what lies hidden inside the deep and subsuming it into his eschatological narrative. But on the other hand, in giving life and a voice to this fiery ocean, and in making it the active force which exacts divine justice onto sinful, damned humans (who are now passive), it turns the relationship between object and subject upside down, construing humans suffering at the hands of the natural world which they have exploited and dominated since the beginning of time. Although this is not its sole association, anthropocentric perspectives foster a link between the ocean and sea-faring, including merchant ships. This balance is now reversed, and the humans are the goods, carried over and over again by the waves which are 'freighted' (Maturin, 2008, p. 539) with their weight. The novel, then, displays an intricate network of doublings and reversals, through which Maturin gradually destabilises our perception of boundaries between humans and the natural world, between the natural world and the hellish world of demons, between secular and Biblical

history, and between the physical reality before our eyes and the hidden metaphysics underlying it.

I have so far discussed the intricate network of doublings occurring between ocean and hell, between humanity and the environment, and implicitly between the human and the demonic in the context of the Wanderer's dream. The dream scene might suggest that a symbolic reading of such doublings would suffice. And while suggestions of metaphorical imagery abound in the scene, from the celestial clock to the dramatic flames of the ocean, it is important to remember Maturin's emphasis on the danger of materiality. In his sermon on charity, Maturin (1819), referring to kindness and love, points out the tragedy of the fact that, for every meagre act of charity, there are 'ten thousand substantial and permanent evils inflicted' (p. 76). His choice of words is significant here: 'substantial', the adjectival form of 'substance', links to the idea of heaviness, materiality, and corporeal presence. It is associated with Luther's formulation of human sinfulness as *homo incurvatus in se*—man bent upon himself, and away from God—in an image of the human body stooping, gravitationally, towards the earth and curving back onto itself and towards the body's and the world's pull. That Maturin is intending to hint at the evils of physical existence within the world and as part of it is soon confirmed. Where might one find real kindness, he asks, retorting:

'Is it in the physical state of man, whose body is liable to a thousand external dangers and internal mischiefs, who is menaced with death by the very air that gives him life, and the earth that grants him subsistence—whose best-constructed frame lasts but seventy years, till its strength is turned into "labour and sorrow", while half the bodies in the world scarce totter through half that time, trembling with infirmity, or tortured with pain?' (Maturin 1819, p. 76).

This passage shows that what concerns Maturin is not a metaphorical dramatisation of the natural world for thrilling effects. Instead—and it is important to bear in mind that the context of a sermon is that of a liturgical discourse, explicitly meant to guide and teach—he is at pains to draw attention to the threat posed by physicality to salvation. We find replicated in his sermon the very duality between humans and the natural world from his novel: it is not only an

imaginary, infernal ocean which tortures us, but in fact also air itself, the most ubiquitous and perhaps most natural of elements. It is the very fact of organic existence which menaces us 'with death', because the very premise of corporeal existence within this world is that of an existence removed from God. And we recognise the same mirroring between self and other, human and landscape, and natural world and hell which we find in *Melmoth the Wanderer* in his discourse here, when he draws attention to manifold threats lurking about, both as 'external dangers and internal mischiefs' (Maturin 1819, p. 76). Interestingly enough, modern critical accounts of the relationship between ecocriticism and Christianity focus, as Timothy J. Burberry (2012) does, on the 'doctrine of the Incarnation', which 'inculcates a deep respect for the materiality and essential goodness of creation' (p. 194). In this respect, Maturin is not aligned with this trend of ecocritical Christian scholarship: his account draws the danger of materiality into attention. The parallelism of Maturin's syntax, residing in the symmetry between 'external' and 'internal', coupled with the fact that all these dangers and mischiefs are all thrown in, together, under the category of the 'thousand' things which are in some way or another perilous, suggests the fluidity between the two dimensions, internal and external, of the natural world and of humanity itself. In other words, the human body is as threatened by the natural world—by the air which gives us life—as it is by itself. In his insistence on the reality of physical death, on the actuality of infirmity and pain, and on the body's irrevocable decay, Maturin indicates that this is not a matter of metaphor. And this world of material decay and degradation is intrinsically linked with a world lacking in real kindness, for it is lacking the real presence of God.

In this light, what might be interpreted as metaphor presents itself instead as a hidden layer of reality. Physical death is not appalling simply because it is physical, but rather because, if it follows a life spent focusing on the material, in other words a life bent towards the self, and therefore a life of sin, it will result in permanent separation from God. To be damned, then, is not to enter a completely new state of being, but instead to continue in the same vein as on Earth, in a state of existence devoid of God's presence. In this sense, hell is a making permanent of earthly life. Therefore, in Maturin's Protestant consciousness, a consciousness deeply afflicted by anxiety regarding the material, it is not that images of the natural world are useful symbolic props for painting hell. Rather, they are features which are already hellish and dangerous in significant ways. Like air, water gives us life—but it also menaces us 'with death', as we have seen in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, not only in the dream sequence, but also, physically,

in the image of the shipwreck at the sight of which Melmoth laughed. The picture of the ocean as a space of damnation and death is then not a metaphor, but a reality; Hester Blum's (2013) assertion that the ocean is not just an 'organizing metaphor with which to widen a landlocked perspective' (p. 151) can help us retrospectively understand how Maturin uses the ecocritical perspective to write the ocean as autonomous from human existence.

That the dream sequence is not a mere metaphorical scene, where the ocean symbolically stands for hell, but rather an actual, physical doubling, is reinforced as we move to the end of the novel. At night, John Melmoth and Monçada are shaken by frightful sounds of 'indescribable horror' (Maturin, 2008: p. 541) coming from the Wanderer's chamber. Only with the advent of the morning do the sounds cease, and John and Monçada enter the Wanderer's room but find it empty—they see, instead, some eerie footprints 'that appeared to be those of a person who had been walking in damp sand or clay' (Maturin, 2008: p. 541). Around the coastal space of the shore, signs of Melmoth's presence linger hauntingly, just as the proximity of the ocean makes itself known ethereally on the shore, through sea-spray, oceanic breezes, and sea smells. As we follow the two friends on their quest to find—or to understand what happened to—the Wanderer, the thought that the devil has come to claim Melmoth grows impossible to ignore. If we could dismiss Melmoth's dream as perhaps a manifestation of his own guilty conscience, now the hellish reality has materialised, penetrating our world, in all its materiality. But it materialises not through images of hideous, gargantuan monsters—instead, the traces of the demonic are subtle, articulated materially through the natural, through sand and clay, and through the shapes of the footsteps they outline. In view of my discussion of Maturin's understanding of the natural world as inextricably interwoven with the underworld, it is hardly surprising that he would choose to construe the devil's own presence retrospectively, through recourse to natural imagery. The story of the struggle between Melmoth and Satan is told through the language of the organic, unfurling through imprints left upon landscape. Footprints through a 'gravel walk' and through a 'heathy field' (Maturin, 2008: p. 541) speak of the direction in which the two travelled, as Melmoth was being presumably dragged towards hell.

Yet what is particularly striking as John and Monçada follow Melmoth's tracks on the path is that they notice a 'rock whose summit overlooked the sea' (Maturin, 2008: p. 541). At

this point it becomes clear: the geography unfolding before their eyes is the exact one from the Wanderer's dream. They climb up the 'summit', and looking down, they gaze upon 'the wide, waste, engulfing ocean' (Maturin, 2008: p. 542). The contrast between the high summit and the wide ocean beneath recalls the very scenery of the dream, when Melmoth 'stood on the summit of a precipice' looking at the ocean which 'roared at its bottom' (Maturin, 2008: p. 538). And Maturin carefully draws the two scenes together, and step-by-step, the oneiric ocean gains real physicality, as its image morphs into that of the natural ocean. The repetitiveness of Maturin's vocabulary reinforces the idea that the two geographies perfectly overlap each other: as fishermen try to accompany John Melmoth to the summit, he 'waved back' those who wanted to join him to 'the precipice which over-hung the sea' (Maturin, 2008: p. 542). The definite article 'the' in 'the precipice' may be simply the qualifier for 'which over-hung the sea', but it can also be read as linking back to the precipice which we already know, and recognise immediately from Melmoth's dream. Through the eyes of John Melmoth and Monçada we learn what happened to Melmoth, and we discover that his final moments on earth mimicked those from his dream:

'Through the furze that clothed this rock, almost to its summit, there was a kind of tract as if a person had dragged, or been dragged, his way through it—a down-trodden track, over which no footsteps but those of one impelled by force had ever passed. Melmoth and Monçada gained at last the summit of the rock. The ocean was beneath—the wide, waste, engulfing ocean! On a crag beneath them, something hung as floating to the blast. Melmoth clambered down and caught it. It was the handkerchief which the Wanderer had worn about his neck the preceding night—that was the last trace of the Wanderer!' (Maturin, 2008: p. 542).

Once again, Maturin emphasises how material traces of Melmoth's presence linger: the handkerchief now occupies the uncanny border between sea and land, hanging precariously from the crag, reminding us of Melmoth's fate as if in an apocalyptic warning. It seems as if Melmoth has vanished through the ocean, dragged to the summit and then left to fall down into the 'wide, waste, engulfing' void of the sea beneath. It is evident, then, that the ocean in the Wanderer's dream is the same ocean in the waters of which he finds his end. Ashley Marshall

(2008) has suggested that the novel's ending casts some doubt over his final fate, with the certainty of his damnation being brought into question (p. 144). However, I want to suggest that Melmoth's scene of damnation is indeed depicted—we just see it in the dream sequence, in anticipation of its actualisation. By presenting it to us so, Maturin uncovers the theological dimension of the natural world—of the ocean—which would customarily remain hidden from our eyes, but which he presents to us visually, in all its monstrosity. And in our recognition of the two sides of the ocean—the physical and the metaphysical—resides Maturin's sheer force of theological shock, for the image of hell contained within the ocean's deep suggests that hell is in fact an immediate reality, one which is concealed within our world.

Upon the publication of a new edition of *Melmoth the Wanderer* in 1892, a review called Maturin 'the last of the Goths', acknowledging Maturin's pivotal role in the development of Gothic literature (p. 335). While his famous Gothic romance has been read as central to the genre, his intricate use of the Gothic double in connection to landscape and the natural world has received virtually no critical attention. As this article has shown, by forcing a theological narrative into the secular, linear understanding of time and geography, Maturin creates a complex layer of symmetrical correspondences; and at the heart of this chain or mirrored symmetries lies the collapsing of boundaries between categories. This means that humans and the environment, in particular the ocean, exist as one, within each other, but also, through the doubling between ocean and hell, that hell and humans also exist as one, within each other. It is almost as if the ocean, in this sequential doubling process, becomes a buffer zone between humanity and hell, as Maturin uses its physicality to jolt his readers into the realisation of the satanic power of their own corporeality, and of the world's materiality, and hence positioning *Melmoth the Wanderer* at the centre of ecocritical concerns. Yet paradoxically, through his emphasis on the ocean's hidden hellish qualities, Maturin reinforces its autonomy, liberating it from the anthropocentric lens of interpretation to which it has been subject throughout history. Its active role in enacting the divine punishment, its representation as being alive, its painting as an eternal, metaphysical space, albeit an infernal one, and the very blurring of boundaries between human and non-human, all these allow the ocean to reclaim an independent status in the economy of creation, to rise up and emerge in its own agency, its 'sulphurous rain' (Maturin 2008, p. 538) spraying up in a mirrored symmetry of Melmoth's fall down the precipice, and of the Fall of all humanity.

As I have shown, the present reading of the ecoGothic double in *Melmoth the Wanderer* re-contextualises the novel against the backdrop of the emergence of ecocritical concerns in the era of Romantic literature, while at the same time uncovering the complicated relationship between ecocritical readings and the use of the Gothic in the novel, thus aligning it with the tradition of ambivalence identified by Smith and Hughes, and re-framing it as a crucial but often overlooked text in the formation of Gothic ecocriticism.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Madeline Potter** is a BARS/BAVS ‘Nineteenth-Century Matters’ postdoctoral fellow at Edge Hill University’s EHU19, working on the project ‘Blood at Heaven’s Gate: John Keble and Bram Stoker’. Her research investigates the theological implications of monstrous figures in Irish Gothic writing during the nineteenth century. Her work explores the intersection of literature and theology, and she is interested in questions of theodicy, as well as the changing relationship between aesthetics and morality in works of fiction. She is currently editing a volume on vampires and theology.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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## The Trouble with EcoGothic Wilderness:

### The Extinction Stories of the Great Auk and Steller's Sea Cow

*Jennifer Schell*

#### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the problems inherent in the representations of littoral wilderness appearing in two 1960s-era environmentalist texts: Allan Eckert's *The Great Auk* (1963) and Corey Ford's *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back* (1966). Though stylistically and generically different, both books employ ecoGothic tropes in order to elaborate extinction stories that take place on remote volcanic islands in far flung northern latitudes. I argue that these books are troublesome because they are thoroughly enmeshed in certain ideological constructions of wilderness that circulated throughout American culture in the 1960s and served to define wilderness as an environment untouched by humans. Thus, they ignore the pronounced impact of anthropogenic activities on the organisms and ecosystems of the North Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. As I stress, the ecoGothic aspects of these ideologies—and their manifestation in the books—exacerbate these representational problems.

Between 1930 and 1970, American environmentalists produced numerous texts dedicated to promoting certain highly problematic and culturally dominant ideologies of wilderness.<sup>19</sup> The list includes popular publications, such as Robert Marshall's 'The Problem of the Wilderness' (1930), Aldo Leopold's 'Wilderness' (1949), Sigurd Olson's *The Singing Wilderness* (1956), Mardy Murie's *Two in the Far North* (1962), and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968). It also includes less familiar books, such as Allan Eckert's *The Great Auk* (1963) and Corey Ford's *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back* (1966). In their various writing projects, all of these authors ignored the profound impact of humans—Indigenous and otherwise—on North

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<sup>19</sup> Although the term is imprecise, I describe the citizens of the United States as Americans, because they appropriated this descriptor for themselves early in their national history.

American ecosystems, electing instead to describe wilderness areas as pristine, untouched environments that operated according to natural laws and scientific principles. As Marshall (1930) put it, wilderness is a ‘region which contains no permanent inhabitants’ and retains the characteristics of a ‘primitive environment’ (p. 141).

Most of the aforementioned authors also stressed that North America’s wildlands needed to be preserved in perpetuity for their relevance to Euro-American settlers, who benefited from their economic, scientific and recreational importance, as well as their aesthetic, spiritual, and philosophical significance. To accomplish this goal, they engaged in activist activities, providing support for the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964, a law which sought to ensure that ‘an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States’ (Dilsaver, 2016: p. 246). Perhaps not surprisingly, this legislation contained a definition of wilderness very similar to that endorsed by Marshall and his contemporaries: ‘A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor and does not remain’ (Dilsaver, 2016: p. 246). Through both their art and activism, then, American environmentalists helped to enshrine wilderness ideologies in both the nation’s collective cultural imagination and federal legal system.

Although they bear some similarities to other twentieth-century wilderness texts, *The Great Auk* and *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back* possess distinctive characteristics that render them worthy of further scrutiny. Most strikingly, they address coastal, not terrestrial, environments.<sup>20</sup> Set on Iceland’s Eldey Island and Russia’s Bering Island, respectively, these books describe subarctic littoral ecosystems as untenanted wilderness surrounded by frigid water, pounding surf, strong currents, and treacherous reefs. As I demonstrate, these texts succumb to many of the same ideological pitfalls as their contemporaries. In so doing, they reveal that these formations possess both the ability to adapt to various terrestrial and aqueous environments and the capacity to undermine important conservationist and preservationist

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<sup>20</sup> A quick survey of American environmental history indicates that this terrestrial bias is more than just a literary one. Although the first national parks and wilderness areas were established in the 1870s and 1920s, the first national seashores and marine sanctuaries were not designated until the 1950s and 1970s. Tellingly, the first maritime wilderness area—Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve—was not created until 1980.

initiatives. Because these two books define wilderness as a place untouched by humans, they ignore the devastating effects of anthropogenic activities—especially Russian and American resource extraction endeavours—on the great auks (*Figure 1*) and sea cows (*Figure 2*) inhabiting the coastal ecosystems of the North Atlantic and North Pacific. As I argue, the ecoGothic aspects of their depictions of wilderness only exacerbate this problem, because they serve to characterise some places on the planet as particularly hostile to humans and impervious to their influence.



*Figure 1: Great Auk*, Peter Schouten (Flannery & Schouten, 2001: p. 35). Reproduced courtesy of the artist.



*Figure 2: Steller's Sea Cow*, Peter Schouten (Flannery & Schouten, 2001: pp. 6-7).  
Reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Another key difference between these books and their contemporaries has to do with their anti-extinction advocacy. More interested in preserving biodiversity than wildlands, *The Great Auk* and *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back* represent examples of what ecocritics call ‘extinction stories’—narratives that witness and document anthropogenic species loss. According to scholars, some extinction stories possess problematic features that threaten to interfere with their environmentalist goals. For Ursula Heise (2016), ‘stories and images of decline only go so far’, because they fail ‘to move beyond mourning, melancholia, and nostalgia’ (p. 13). Meanwhile, for Thom van Dooren (2014), stories of human exceptionalism position humans ‘as fundamentally set apart from all other animals and the rest of the “natural” world’; thus, they depict ‘extinction as something that happens “over there” or out in “nature”’ (p. 5). As a consequence, they misapprehend ‘the diverse ways in which humans...are implicated in the lives of disappearing others’ (p. 5). Importantly, *The Great Auk* and *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back* fall into both of these categories, for they tell ecoGothic tales of death and destruction that invoke dark emotions and embrace troublesome wilderness ideologies that promote human exceptionalism.

As an extinction story, *The Great Auk* aims to tell a cautionary tale, inspiring sympathy for endangered species in the present by narrativising an environmental catastrophe from the past. Although perhaps not intended to be an example of ecoGothic horror fiction, this novel certainly takes that form, for it depicts the auks’ habitat as sublime wilderness, where forbidding cliffs are cloaked in eerie mists, swept by banshee winds, and pummelled by relentless storms. It also emphasises other fearsome aspects of the environment, such as epidemic diseases, killer whales, and human beings. Over the course of the novel, these various adversaries take their toll on the flock, whose population numbers plummet until the species is rendered extinct. As I demonstrate, Eckert is committed to his preservationist advocacy, but he is blinded by the wilderness ideologies circulating throughout American culture in the 1960s, and so he fails to recognise the definitive role that Euro-American hunters and collectors played in the extermination of these birds (Thomas, *et al.*, 2019). Instead, he mislays much of the blame on nonanthropogenic factors.

Much like *The Great Auk, Where the Sea Breaks Its Back* represents an extinction story, which discusses historical events in order to address current environmental problems. Though it also has ecoGothic overtones, it has a more anthropocentric focus, describing in graphic detail the hardships experienced by the sailors on Vitus Bering's Second Kamchatka Expedition (1741-1742). Of note, this historical narrative is framed by two chapters in which Ford describes his personal experiences, working in the Aleutians with the U. S. Air Force and the Alaska Game Commission during the 1940s and 1950s. The first describes the land and seascapes of the archipelago as sublime, ecoGothic wilderness, while the last criticises the colonial-era exploitation of marine mammals in the Aleutians. These portions of the book describe the extinction of sea cows and the subsequent decline of sea otters.<sup>21</sup> As I contend, Ford is so affected by 1960s-era wilderness ideologies that he attempts to portray the Aleutians as a place that has remained unaltered over time, despite long-term human habitation, anthropogenic species loss, wartime military conflicts, and post-war nuclear testing.

### **The Trouble with EcoGothic Wilderness**

Since the 1990s, one of the most trenchant critics of American wilderness ideologies has been environmental historian, William Cronon. In his famous essay, 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature' (1995), he argues that wilderness is the 'creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history' (p. 69). First, he elaborates that history, highlighting the 'sea change' that occurred in the mid nineteenth century as Euro-American settlers came to appreciate their wildlands (p. 71). Then, he examines the problematic aspects of that shift, paying special attention to its effects on the environmental movement in the U. S. As he does so, he advances a hierarchy of criticisms, at the top of which he positions his contention that 'idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home' (p. 85). For Cronon, then, the primary issue with wilderness is that American environmentalists tend to focus their attention on it, as opposed to the urban and suburban spaces in which they spend most of their time.

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<sup>21</sup> Though scientific evidence indicates that Steller's sea cows began to decline prior to the arrival of humans in Beringia, they managed to survive into the eighteenth century, when they were exterminated by Russian fur traders and their employees (Sharko, et al., 2021).

Elsewhere in the essay, Cronon raises several other issues with wilderness that I regard as far more important than the one described above. The first has to do with what he calls its ‘flight from history’ (p. 79). Citing as an example the U. S. government’s theft of Indigenous land for the creation of national parks, Cronon observes that ‘one of the most striking proofs of the cultural invention of wilderness is its thoroughgoing erasure of the history from which it sprang’ (p. 79). To put it another way, wilderness areas might seem pristine and timeless, but they often possess deeply problematic cultural and environmental histories of exploitation and degradation. Since they appear to be untouched by humans, they obscure the violence enacted upon them by such anthropogenic activities as settler colonialism, resource extraction, industrial pollution, and climate change.

Another related issue has to do with human exceptionalism. Drawing on various definitions advanced by environmental advocates, Cronon observes that ‘wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural’ (p. 80). Invested in philosophical issues, he argues that this idea is troublesome because it leaves humanity with ‘little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, *honorable* human place in nature might actually look like’ (p. 81, original emphasis). I appreciate this claim, but I have more practical concerns. I regard this notion as problematic because it fails to recognise that humans—Indigenous and otherwise—have lived in North America for thousands of years. Puritan colonist William Bradford (1981) might have regarded the ‘New World’ as a ‘hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men’, but it was actually a place marked by the long term inhabitation of Indigenous tribes, whose members possessed complex cultures and sophisticated epistemologies (p. 70). According to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2014), the members of these groups ‘occupied and shaped every part of the Americas’, ‘adapting to specific natural environments’ and ‘adapt[ing] nature to suit human ends’ (p. 27). As the preponderance of historical and anthropological evidence indicates, North America was never wilderness, not even during the initial stages of colonial invasion and settlement. Time and industrialisation certainly did not increase the continent’s wild acreage.

Coupled together, these two aspects of wilderness—its apparent lack of history and inhabitants—help to explain why Eckert and Ford fail to recognise the changes wrought by Euro-American colonists on the seemingly pristine, littoral ecosystems of the North Atlantic

and North Pacific. As I observed above, the ecoGothic characteristics of these environments exacerbate this problem, because they make these places appear especially hostile to humans and resistant to change. Admittedly, Cronon never discusses the fearsome features of wilderness in light of the Gothic or the ecoGothic. A number of other scholars have done so, however. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler (2003) highlights the longstanding importance of ‘the heathen, unredeemed wilderness’ to American authors working in the Gothic tradition (p. 160). Meanwhile, David Mogen, Scott Sanders, and Joanne Karpinski (1993) draw attention to the ‘gothic power of the wilderness images projected in American writing’ (p. 15). Summarising roughly fifty-five years of scholarship in an essay for *The Gothic World* (2014), Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock explains that American Gothic fiction tends to represent ‘wilderness and the frontier as spaces of danger, savagery, and violence’ (p. 28). Though important in terms of establishing connections, much of this scholarship was published prior to the emergence of the environmental humanities as a field; thus, it tends to focus on the psychological—not the material or the ecological—importance of wilderness to American Gothic imagination.

In his influential essay, “‘Deep Into that Darkness Peering’: An Essay on Gothic Nature’ (2009), Tom Hillard adds an ecocritical dimension to the conversation, positing that employing a ‘Gothic lens’ could help scholars better understand early American attitudes toward wilderness and how they ‘subsequently shaped interactions with place’ (p. 692). Kevin Corstorphine (2013) takes up this challenge, drawing on aspects of environmental history to examine the forms of ‘wilderness Gothic’ that appear in nineteenth-century American fiction (p. 120). Meanwhile, Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (2018) emphasise that ‘American gothic...has long been as good as defined by its representation of a haunting “wilderness”’ (p. 6). To clarify the ecological aspects of their claim, they add that this “wilderness” was psychologized, turned into a “moral” wilderness by writers and critics’, but ‘the stubborn materiality of land, trees, swamps, and vegetation has meant that American gothic literature has always been ecogothic’ (p. 6).

Taken altogether, this evidence attests to the importance of wilderness to literary critics interested in the Gothic and ecoGothic aspects of American literature. As I would emphasise, though, almost all of this scholarship addresses terrestrial not oceanic or coastal wilderness

environments. One of the essays in Keetley and Sivils' *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2018) examines representations of the sea, but the rest explore depictions of the wilderness regions of the continental interior.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, most of the pieces included in Andrew Smith and William Hughes's *EcoGothic* (2013) express a bias toward the land. While this tendency is difficult to explain, it likely stems from the increasing prominence of the American West in the U. S. cultural imagination across the twentieth century, a development which affected authors, scholars, and activists, alike. It also likely stems from the roughly contemporaneous industrialisation of the nautical sector, which prompted the ocean to lose some of its romantic appeal for those interested in sublime wilderness.

As environmental historian Roderick Nash (2001) observes, though, wilderness 'also designates other non-human environments, such as the sea and, more recently, outer space' (p. 3). Furthermore, American environmental literature is rife with examples of nautical writing that depict the ocean in this way. In addition to *The Great Auk* and *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back*, examples include Owen Chase's *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex* (1821), James Fenimore Cooper's *The Sea Lions* (1849), Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), Henry Beston's *The Outermost House* (1928), Rachel Carson's *Under the Sea Wind* (1941), and Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* (1997). In many of these texts, pelagic and littoral forms of wilderness possess the same physical and ideological characteristics as terrestrial ones. Just like wild lands, wild seas and shorelines possess sublime mountains, deep canyons, dense forests, and dangerous organisms lurking beneath the surface. They also seem timeless and immutable—perhaps even more so than their continental counterparts—though they are just as socially constructed, historically bounded, and ecologically precarious.<sup>23</sup>

Given these material and representational similarities, I argue that it is important to pay special attention to Gothic representations of oceanic wilderness environments—both coastal

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<sup>22</sup> A portion of Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's 'Hyperobjects and the End of the World: Elemental Antagonists of American Naturalism' (2018) examines Stephen Crane's 'The Open Boat' and its depiction of the Atlantic Ocean.

<sup>23</sup> A number of scholars have commented on this problem of perception. In *The Novel and the Sea* (2010), Margaret Cohen observes, 'what seems like the elemental ocean, deriving from nature, is in fact a socially constructed ocean' (p. 117); in 'Ocean's Depths' (2010), Helen Rozwadowski contends that 'oceans have been perceived as ahistoric but, of course, they are susceptible to history' (p. 524); and in *The Ocean Reader* (2020), Eric Roorda maintains 'the Ocean is changeable, and it has a history' (p. 1).

and deepwater—in American environmental writing. Another important factor to consider is that these representations tend to position marine ecosystems as impervious to human influence, thereby obscuring their vulnerability to the various forms of anthropogenic degradation that Callum Roberts describes in *The Ocean of Life* (2012). As he explains:

‘The last two hundred years have seen marine habitats wiped out or transformed beyond recognition. And with an ever accelerating tide of human impact, the oceans have changed more in the last thirty years than in all of human history before. In most places the oceans have lost upward of 75 percent of their megafauna—large animals such as whales, dolphins, sharks, rays, and turtles—as fishing and hunting spread in waves across the face of the planet. For some species, numbers are down as much as 99 percent as is the case for oceanic whitetip sharks of the high seas, American sawfishes, and the “common” skate of Northern Europe. By the end of the twentieth century, almost nowhere shallower than three thousand feet remained untouched by commercial fishing and some places are now fished to ten thousand feet down’ (Roberts, 2012: p. 3).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the severity of these environmental issues pales in comparison to those that Roberts discusses later in the book, namely the devastating effects of dead zones, plastic pollution, and climate change. The latter is especially concerning for it involves decreasing salinity and increasing acidity, not to mention rising waters. Significantly, ecoGothic wilderness ideologies tend to promote denial and inaction as opposed to recognition and action; thus, they tend to perpetuate—not ameliorate—these problems.

### ***The Great Auk: Anthropogenic Species Extinction in the North Atlantic***

As an environmentalist novel and an extinction story, *The Great Auk* relies on certain ecoGothic tropes—gloomy settings, persecuted protagonists, monstrous predators, and graphic violence—to inspire sympathy for the auks and, by extension, other endangered organisms.

Insofar as location is concerned, the auks spend most of their time on their breeding grounds on Eldey Island off the coast of Iceland. Influenced by 1960s-era wilderness ideologies and their attendant notions of human exceptionalism, Eckert depicts this volcanic outcropping as a sublime, unspoiled place. Referring to a particularly striking sunrise, he declares:

‘The austere cliffs of the island were softened by the light of first sun, and the salt-slick of sea water on its lower surface turned soot-colored rock into a magical mirror which caught and reflected the early sun. At this time of day the island was no mere tangle of tumbled rock and cliff, but a vivid flashing fire rising mysteriously from the sea’ (p. 3).

In these sentences, Eckert embraces Gothic language having to do with the mysterious and the magical. Note, too, that he also trades in the uncanny, transforming a familiar natural setting into an unfamiliar supernatural place. A bit later in the book, Eckert describes the island as repellent to Europeans, observing that the ‘hardy sailors of Icelandic ports’ hardly ever visit the place, because they regard ‘it as a hazard not to be lightly or carelessly approached by any man’ (p. 4). For him, then, Iceland—or at least some portions of it—possesses all the characteristics of ecoGothic wilderness, despite the fact that it has hosted human settlements since the late ninth century.

If the setting of *The Great Auk* is remarkable, then so is the protagonist, the anonymous, eponymous auk. Importantly, Eckert chooses to narrate the novel in the third person from the perspective of this bird to encourage readers to identify with him and empathise with his situation. In this respect, *The Great Auk* is similar to the animal stories published in the early twentieth century by a number of popular North American authors, including Ernest Thompson Seton, Charles G. D. Roberts, and William J. Long. Unlike the nonhuman animals in those tales, though, this auk is special, for he is an endling, the last of his species.<sup>24</sup> He is freighted

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<sup>24</sup> According to Jørgensen, in 1996, workers in a convalescent centre suggested the word ‘endling’ as a designator for the last surviving person of a family lineage. Although the medical community did not adopt it, it eventually made its way into the broader cultural lexicon when the curator of the National Museum of Australia used it to refer to the last thylacine. Since then, endling has become the preferred term in popular culture for the last extant member of any nonhuman plant or animal species (p. 119).



with what environmental historian Dolly Jørgensen (2017) calls ‘cultural power’, because he ‘puts extinction on a human scale’ (p. 120-21).<sup>25</sup> Hatched from the ‘most important egg ever laid by a great auk’, he enables readers to appreciate him as an individual, who experiences exciting adventures and great joys, as well as tremendous hardships and painful losses (Eckert 1963: p. 19). Given the Gothic aspects of the novel, it is important to stress that as an endling, the auk is also ‘liminal, offering a viewpoint on the transition from life to death happening all around...out of sight’ (Jørgensen, 2017: p. 134).

After establishing the atmosphere of his wilderness setting and the cultural power of his main character, Eckert proceeds to enumerate the various forces of nature that threaten the survival of the auk and his flock. Thus, he describes the savage storms that pummel the North Atlantic, especially in the wintertime. These passages, too, invoke the sublime. As he articulates the auk’s response to the storm, Eckert explains:

‘This storm was not quite the same as those he’d already been through. The clouds were more ominous and the wind had sprung up so swiftly that surface swimming now became a matter of pumping laboriously to the crest of a wave and then bursting up, over and down into the deep trough on the opposite side. He felt suddenly very weak, very insignificant and impotent’ (p. 48).

Insofar as this passage is concerned, I want to highlight the anthropomorphic moment at the very end in which the auk recognises his insignificance as an individual in the grand scheme of the universe. Not only does this sentence humanise the auk—making it easier for readers to relate to him—it positions him as an American wilderness philosopher in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson, Herman Melville, and Henry David Thoreau. Just like the auk, these men

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<sup>25</sup> Though nonhuman, endlings represent the latest entry in a long line of ‘last men’, such as Lionel Verney in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) and Chingachgook in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). In much of early American settler colonial writing, these individuals are depicted as stereotypical ‘Vanishing Indians’, men doomed to disappear from the continent along with the wilderness they inhabit (Brantlinger, 2003).



report experiencing existential crises when confronted by the sublime features of terrestrial and oceanic wilderness environments.<sup>26</sup>

A bit later in the novel, Eckert describes a mysterious outbreak of epidemic disease that erupted sometime in last decade, decimating the population of great auks living in Labrador's Hamilton Inlet.<sup>27</sup> Apparently, the illness was so virulent that it 'virtually wiped out' the entire flock of 'five hundred thousand' birds over the course of just one breeding season (p. 90). According to Eckert:

'Less than two hundred birds of that massive population survived the great plague which swept like fire through it, leaving the corpses of the birds scattered over the islands, and even now, years later, the bleached bones and skulls of tens upon tens of thousands of these birds still littered the island like brittle driftwood' (p. 90).

In addition to statistics, this passage employs a hefty amount of Gothic imagery, all of its graphic depictions of the dead, diseased carcasses and scattered, skeletal remains that lie about the shores of the inlet. Here, the bodies and bones serve as ecological *memento mori*, reminders of the inevitability of death. They also gesture toward the powerlessness of individual animals—and species—to confront and survive certain forces of nature.

Of course, the auks also have nonhuman animal predators, and so Eckert describes several brutal assaults upon the flock by marauding killer whales. In one particularly horrific and emotional scene, the protagonist witnesses one of these 'monsters' devour his father, after the elder bird attempts to distract the cetaceans away from his progeny (p. 60). Later, he watches a pod of these 'black-and-white sea wolves' slaughter a bowhead whale by 'ripping great chunks from its lips' (p. 72). Toward the end of the novel, he and his mate barely escape

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<sup>26</sup> I refer to Jefferson's (1982) description of his encounter with the Natural Bridge; Melville's (1988) articulation of the view from the masthead; and Thoreau's (1985) comments upon climbing Katahdin.

<sup>27</sup> I have not been able to locate any scientific evidence that suggests that auk populations plummeted as a result of illness or disease.

the onslaught of these ‘masters of the sea’, who chase, catch, and consume all of their companions (p. 189). At every turn, Eckert casts these whales as dangerous and malevolent antagonists, ‘frightful terrors’ who ‘fear nothing’ and ‘attack anything that swims’ (p. 61). Just their physical appearance is enough to inspire terror, for they possess ‘insatiable appetites’, dorsal fins that resemble ‘dreadful scythes’, and ‘huge, viciously toothed jaws fixed in perpetual rapine’ (p. 189).

Though he spends most of his time describing nonanthropogenic threats, Eckert illustrates the toll that nineteenth-century human hunters—both capitalists and scientists—exact upon auk populations. In the following passage, he describes a typical hunt: ‘Now the wretched carnage began in earnest. Fifty-five men there were and fifty-five clubs, and the clubs rose and fell almost methodically, and each time they fell another great auk died, its skull shattered’ (p. 145). Other portions of the book more graphically depict the horrors that humans visit upon the auks. At one point, two men—symbolically named Gunnar and Christian—tire of the work of killing and pause to play games with the vulnerable fledglings, terrorising them by tossing them in the air and kicking them after they plummet to the ground. Although money is ostensibly their motive, these men do not just hunt for profit; rather, they take pleasure in torturing the birds until they die, ‘laughing uproariously’ as they do so (p. 148). All told, they kill ‘over forty-eight hundred adult great auks’ in just one day (p. 150).

Because of these various factors, the great auk population steadily diminishes over the course of the novel. Eckert calls attention to this problem by providing readers with constant numerical reminders about the status of the flock. About halfway through the book, he explains that ‘there were along this desolate coastline a total of five thousand and two great auks (p. 104). Some seventy pages later, he observes that the number has decreased to ‘one hundred and fifty-six’ (p. 170). Shortly thereafter, he comments that the population has plummeted to seven (p. 182). Coupled with the unending assaults on the birds, the relentless countdowns transform the novel into something akin to a slasher film, with the titular auk representing the evolutionary equivalent of Carol Clover’s (1993) ‘Final Girl’.<sup>28</sup> Unlike the vast majority of his

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<sup>28</sup> This comparison is not perfect, for the auk is neither female, nor a survivor. I am not sure these objections necessarily undermine my observation, though, for some horror films feature ‘Final Guys’. See *The Hitcher* (1986), *Final Destination* (2000) and *Hostel* (2005). Also, some Final Girls/Guys do not survive their trials. See *Candyman* (1992), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *Open Water* (2003).

cinematic counterparts, however, the bird does not survive his ordeal, and the novel ends with a poignant description of his death: ‘A film had formed over the once bright eyes and the rapid heartbeat slowed. At last, with the cries of the injured and anguished birds still ringing in his ears, he closed his eyes for the last time and released a final wheezing breath’ (p. 201). Of note, Eckert elects to conclude this scene with a simple statement separated from the rest of the text with a paragraph break. Employing words that apply to both ending and species, he observes, ‘The great auk was dead’ (p. 201).

Highlighting the numerous threats to great auks—most of which are endemic features of the ecoGothic wilderness environments in which the birds live—serves to create narrative tension and suspense in the novel, but it leads Eckert to downplay the definitive role that humans played in the extinction of the species. Admittedly, he did not have access to twenty-first-century historical scholarship and scientific research, which prove that Euro-American hunters and collectors exterminated the great auk from the planet (Gaskell, 2000; Thomas, *et al.*, 2019). He did have access to historical archives and scientific publications, though. So he could have known—or learned—that authors began to blame humans for the extinction of the auk in the 1840s and that they continued to advance such claims well into the 1950s. Richard Bonnycastle (1842) attributes the elimination of the bird from Newfoundland to the ‘ruthless trade in its eggs and skin’ (p. 232), and Symington Grieve (1885) declares that humans waged a ‘war of extermination...until no Penguins were left to kill’ (p. 5). Meanwhile, Arthur Sowerby (1923) and Devereaux Butcher (1955) conclude that auks went extinct as a direct result of ‘human agency’ and ‘human ruthlessness’ (p. 123; p. 302). As these examples indicate, some authors did not fall prey to wilderness ideologies that perpetuated the idea that the North Atlantic’s pelagic and littoral regions were resistant to the influence of Euro-American resource extraction activities. As such, they were able to pinpoint more accurately the anthropogenic factors driving the extinction of the auk.

### ***Where the Sea Breaks Its Back: Anthropogenic Species Extinction in the North Pacific***

Though it possesses similar environmental concerns about endangered species, *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back* is a far more ironic extinction story than *The Great Auk*, for it characterises the

Aleutian Islands as a timeless, tenantless wilderness, and it documents the anthropocentric history of Euro-American resource extraction activities in the region. Moving back and forth between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, it condemns Russian and American fur traders for their rapacious overharvesting of marine mammals. As it does so, though, it falls prey to wilderness ideologies and their notions of human exceptionalism, emphasising the immutable aspects of the Aleutians and its wildlife populations. Given this latter detail, it is perhaps not surprising that *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back* employs a number of ecoGothic and ecohorror tropes, most of which have to do with establishing the sublime aspects of the Bering Sea's coastal ecosystems.

In the first chapter of the book, Ford reminisces about his personal experiences as an employee of the Alaska Game Commission, hired to collect data on sea otter populations in the Aleutian Islands in the 1940s. Drawing on memory, he describes the view from the deck of his research vessel the *Brown Bear* in vivid, ecoGothic prose:

'Dim eldritch forms would loom without warning out of the fog, their rocky promontories boiling with surf, the cliffs spattered with the lime of a million sea birds and carved into fantastic arches and grottoes by the ceaseless abrasion of the waves. Sometimes a half-submerged reef would bare its teeth for a moment in the trough of a swell; sometimes, when the *Brown Bear* entered a hidden bay, a number of weird mushroom-shaped rocks would appear solemnly on all sides of us, like a troop of goblins come out from shore to inspect this intruder in their solitary domain' (p. 4).

Above, Ford employs Lovecraftian phrases—'eldritch forms', 'fantastic arches and grottoes', and 'weird mushroom-shaped rocks'—which serve to highlight the numerous eerie features of this coastline. They also invoke that sense of cosmic dread so common to weird fiction, characterising these wild waters as filled with terrifying entities that defy human comprehension. As this passage makes clear, the terror stems from the fact that certain material aspects of the environment, the rocks that threaten to sink Ford's vessel, possess a mysterious, malevolent agency.

After establishing the fearsome attributes of the Aleutians, Ford highlights what he regards as the archipelago's imperviousness to the ravages of time. Toward the end of the chapter, he introduces readers to Georg Steller, Vitus Bering's irascible naturalist, and announces, 'The islands had not changed since he saw them; the same rugged promontories and hidden reefs, the kelp-strewn beaches, the interminable rain and fog and mystery' (p. 17). Blinded by American wilderness ideologies, Ford ignores the significant toll taken on these ecosystems by Russian and American fur traders. Historically speaking, these hunters slaughtered untold numbers of sea cows and sea otters, exterminating the former and almost exterminating the latter. In so doing, they caused trophic cascades that radically altered and degraded the food webs in Aleutian ecosystems (Estes, 2016).<sup>29</sup>

As the chapter advances, Ford also spends a good deal of time elaborating ecoGothic descriptions of the geological history of this Bering Sea archipelago. Addressing the unpredictable volcanic and tectonic forces that shaped the region, he explains that the Aleutian Islands were once a 'majestic range' that linked North America and Asia, but then they 'foundered and sank in some cataclysmic upheaval' (p. 5). Clearly influenced by George Cuvier's theory of catastrophism—both its language and its terrifying import—Ford lingers a bit longer in the world of Deep Time, imagining the 'former verdant valleys buried under tons of green water' and 'populated by shadowy popeyed fish, which cruise their drowned and silent forests' (p. 6).

In these geological passages, Ford also indulges in unsavoury representations of the Alaska Game Commission's 'discovery' of prehistoric Unanga (Aleut) remains, buried in caves and mummified by ground-source heat. To create suspense and intrigue, he narrates this event from the perspective of the scientists. First, he describes the eerie setting, emphasising the 'sulphurous odor of the fumarole' and the 'curious death smell which issued from the mouth of the cave' (p. 8). Then, he relishes in the literary equivalent of a jump scare, explaining:

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<sup>29</sup> Trophic cascade is an ecological term used to describe the ramifications of a change in the status of a predator in a food web.

‘It was uncomfortably warm in the cave—the dirt in places was actually too hot to touch—and the strange fetid smell gagged them. They crawled in single file on their hands and knees, hugging the wall for guidance in the pitch blackness. Abruptly the leader halted with a gasp of fright. A hand reaching from the wall had raked its fingers across his cheek’ (p. 8).

Here, Ford employs colonialist imagery that turns the occasion of anthropological ‘discovery’ into a sensational, racist scene from an H. Rider Haggard novel or an Indiana Jones movie. As the passage progresses, he continues to revel in this kind of imagery, noting that one of the mummies ‘had been partly dug out of its earthly tomb by the ravenous foxes; the exposed portion of its leathery face had been eaten away’ (p. 8). Ford concludes by drawing attention to ‘one wrinkled monkey-face’ with ‘a jaunty feather stuck through the lobe of his left ear’, who later was put on display at the Smithsonian Museum (p. 9). Insofar as they contain a hefty amount of Gothic imagery, these passages contribute to the book’s eerie mood and tone. As Renée Bergland (2000) might put it, they also serve to ‘spectralise’ the Indigenous inhabitants of the Aleutians, positioning them as ghostly relics of the distant past (pp. 4-5). In so doing, they reinforce the erroneous idea that these islands are depopulated wilderness areas.<sup>30</sup>

After foregrounding the ecoGothic aspects of Aleutian environments and ecosystems, Ford segues into his historical narrative, a retelling of the events of Vitus Bering’s eighteenth-century voyage from Kamchatka to Alaska and back again. As he explains, the sailors managed to reach the Gulf of Alaska on 15 July 1741 without incident, but they decided not to overwinter on North American soil. Instead, they immediately departed for Russia. Soon their situation turned desperate, for they began to experience severe navigational problems that were exacerbated by tumultuous seasonal storms. They also sighted unsettling, unfamiliar creatures, including something that Steller called a ‘sea monkey’ that has never been encountered since.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In 2019, Unanga̋ tribal leaders negotiated a plan with the Smithsonian to repatriate the remains of their ancestors over the course of three years. The process is still ongoing (DeMarban 2021: para. 1-10).

<sup>31</sup> At the time, Steller (1988) recorded detailed observations of the sea monkey in his journal, noting that:

‘The animal was about two ells long. The head was like a dog’s head, the ears pointed and erect, and on the upper and lower lips on both sides whiskers hung down which made him look almost like a Chinaman. The eyes were large. The body was longish, round, and fat, but gradually became thinner toward the tail; the skin was covered thickly with hair, gray on the back, reddish white on the belly, but in the water it seemed to be entirely red and cow-colored. The tail, which

Although the animal is not described as large or aggressive enough to be dreadful, this scene echoes the Lovecraftian overtones of the first chapter, for it testifies to the weird aspects of the North Pacific realm. Note, too, that throughout these portions of the book, Ford maintains an eerie atmosphere, observing that the rocky shorelines of the Aleutians ‘seemed to pursue them, looming perversely out of the fog in their direct path’ (p. 88). Later, he adds that the sailors ‘thought of themselves as forgotten ghosts, doomed to haunt these lonely seas forever’ (p. 93).

According to Ford, the crew eventually wrecked their ship on Bering Island, where they were forced to spend the remainder of the winter, plagued by scurvy and harassed by scavenging foxes. They survived by killing and eating sea otters and sea cows, then unknown to the Western world and abundant around the island. Ford’s horrifyingly vivid descriptions of the experiences of the men speak for themselves:

‘The sick lay on the open beach under rags and bits of canvas, sometimes half buried by the drifting snow. When a man died, his comrades were too weak to remove the body, and it remained alongside the living. At night, they could hear the foxes gnawing at the corpse’ (pp. 126-27).

With the arrival of winter storms, the situation worsened, for ‘winter closed in with its brief gray days and interminable nights’ and ‘banshee winds screeched through the narrow valleys between the mountains, the terror of the sound enhanced by the reverberating thunder of breakers on the rocky shore’ (p. 142). Meanwhile, Ford’s depiction of the sea cows as ‘strange monsters’ and ‘fabulous animals’ only contributes to the strange, supernatural atmosphere of this portion of the book (pp. 159, 161).

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was equipped with fins, was divided into two parts, the upper fin being two times as long as the lower one, just like on the sharks’ (p. 82).

Because no one has been able to identify this organism, some historians have dismissed it as a figment of Steller’s imagination. Others, such as O.W. Frost, have insisted that the sighting be taken seriously, because Steller was a respected scientist, who spent significant time watching the animal (Steller, 1988: p. 199-200).

As he concludes his historical narrative, Ford indicates that the survivors reached Kamchatka the following spring, after building a new boat from the wreckage of the last. He adds that Bering's expedition launched a wave of resource exploitation that lasted well into the twentieth century, and he laments the destructive toll of colonisation upon the Aleutians' nonhuman animal inhabitants: 'Little more than a decade of ruthless hunting had been enough to wipe out the entire population. Twelve years later, in 1768, the last sea cows on Bering Island were killed, and the species exterminated forever' (p. 191). Perhaps because these marine mammals went extinct in the eighteenth century—and Steller was the only scientist to see or study them—Ford spends significantly more time detailing the decline of sea otter populations, explaining 'Each year the otter count grew smaller....In 1925, an exhaustive survey failed to detect a single otter' (p. 198). As he indicates, a later inspection of Amchitka Island by the Alaska Game Commission revealed the existence of a tiny, remnant population hiding in an obscure cove surrounded by boulders on the northern shore.

Importantly, the extant status of the otters inspires Ford to conclude with a few optimistic paragraphs in which he describes a recent visit to Amchitka Air Force Base on a post-war tour. Shortly after landing, an airman tells him that the island abounds in sea otters, especially near the garrison, and he takes him to see these animals for himself. Overwhelmed with joy at the resurgence of the population on Amchitka, Ford ends the book with an expression of hope for the overall future of the species, opining:

'Its food supply still exists in abundance. Its original habitat in the Aleutians is virtually the same as in Steller's time. Perhaps for once, with proper conservation measures, we can reverse our long sad history of despoilation and plunder, and restore this shy and beautiful animal' (p. 204).

Here, as he does elsewhere, Ford highlights the immutable aspects of Bering Sea wilderness areas, and he ignores the profound impact that humans have had on these places and their nonhuman inhabitants. This blindness is not insignificant. Although no one knows much about the effects of the loss of the sea cow, scientists have learned what happens when Bering Sea coastlines are depopulated of sea otters. As ecologist James A. Estes (2016) explains, these



marine mammals have a disproportionately large effect on North Pacific littoral ecosystems, for they consume sea urchins, keep their populations in check, and prevent them from destroying giant kelp plants. Scientifically speaking, they are a keystone species. Thus, those islands with sea otters are surrounded by healthy kelp forests teeming with life, while those islands without sea otters are surrounded by ‘urchin barrens’ (Estes, 2016: p. 79). Of course, Ford could not have known this information, because it was discovered ten years after the publication of his book. It seems reasonable, though, to expect him to recognise that the loss of the sea cow and the sea otter from the Aleutians might have affected—even in some small way—the archipelago’s ecosystems.

Throughout the final chapter, Ford credits the Air Force with saving sea otters from extinction, declaring ‘The military, so often accused of despoiling a countryside where it is based, had brought back this shyest of wild creatures to something like its former numbers on Amchitka’s serrated shores’ (p. 203). As an expression of confidence, this statement is odd, because it fails to take into account the fact that the Department of Defense viewed the Aleutians as a vacant wasteland, perfect for the dumping of chemical munitions and the testing of nuclear missiles. According to historian Dan O’Neill (2007), in the 1940s, the Army disposed of two million pounds of chemical weapons—mustard gas and similar agents—secured in containers in the waters off Attu Island. Although Ford may not have been aware of this practice, he probably did know about the nuclear testing conducted by the Atomic Energy Commission on Amchitka, since it took place around the time he published *Where the Sea Breaks Its Back*. These explosions had a profound and horrific impact on the island and its inhabitants:

‘the Cannikin blast lifted the earth over ground zero with such violence that shorebirds standing on the beach above had their legs driven up into their bodies. Overpressures in the ocean caused the eyeballs of sea otters and seals to burst through their skulls. On the island, rocky bluffs and sea stacks crashed into the water, lakes drained, and at surface zero the land collapsed into a subsidence crater’ (O’Neill, 2007: p. 314).

Given that these tests were highly controversial and eventually inspired the creation of Greenpeace, Ford's failure to mention them represents a monumental oversight. It also showcases the significant ideological blind spots caused by American conceptualisations of wilderness.

As evidence from these extinction stories indicates, both Eckert and Ford regard the littoral zones of the North Atlantic and the North Pacific as ecoGothic wilderness zones, timeless, ahistorical places that are hostile to humans and resistant to their influences. The fact that they persist in this view despite significant evidence to the contrary testifies to the strength of the American ideologies of wilderness described by William Cronon in his essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness' (1996). As I would emphasise, though, the problem is not that these authors fail to appreciate the mundane natural environments near their homes; rather, it is that they are so blinded by notions of human exceptionalism that they fail to recognise the full extent of the impact of anthropogenic activities on the Northern Oceans. As a result, they undermine their environmentalist messages about the importance of protecting biodiversity and preserving endangered species.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Jennifer Schell** is Professor of English at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her specialties include North American literature, animal studies, Arctic writing, and blue humanities. Her book, *'A Bold and Hardy Race of Men': The Lives and Literature of American Whalemen*, was published in 2013 by the University of Massachusetts Press. She has written numerous articles on ecoGothic themes, many of which involve endangered or extinct species. The list includes, among others, killer whales, polar bears, mammoths, megalodons, and velociraptors. She is working on a book manuscript on these subjects entitled, *Ghost Species: North American Extinction Writing and the EcoGothic*. She also serves as the Past President of the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (ALECC).

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# **REVIEWS**

## **BOOK REVIEWS: CRITICAL**



# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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# REVIEWS

## BOOK REVIEWS: CRITICAL

**Elizabeth Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic:***

***The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination***

(Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

Jennifer Schell

Elizabeth Parker's *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (2020) represents the first book-length study of the forest as 'an archetypal site of dread in the collective human imagination' (p. 1). Although it builds on ideas expressed in such books as Sara Maitland's *Gossip from the Forest: The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairy Tales* (2012) and Bernice Murphy's *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture: Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness* (2013), it occupies a niche all its own, for it is especially invested in transnational, ahistorical, and ecoGothic modes of analysis. As such, it represents an insightful contribution to environmental humanities scholarship focusing on the darker aspects of the natural world.

Overall, *The Forest and the EcoGothic* is both cogent and well organised. In the introduction, Parker establishes her goal of examining 'twentieth- and twenty-first-century Anglophone representations of the Gothic forest in popular culture [...] in order to explore the significance and resonance of this enduringly ubiquitous Gothic landscape' (p. 5). As she argues, Gothic forests abound in contemporary novels and films because arboreal ecosystems possess certain attributes that inspire fear, loathing, and desire in those humans who encounter them. Adopting a strategy reminiscent of that employed by Jeffrey Cohen in 'Monster Culture' (1996), Parker lists these attributes in the form of seven theses:

- ‘1. The forest is against civilisation.
2. The forest is associated with the past.
3. The forest is a landscape of trial.
4. The forest is a setting in which we are lost.
5. The forest is a consuming threat.
6. The forest is a site of the human unconscious.
7. The forest is an antichristian space’ (p. 47).

More than just an homage to an influential predecessor, these theses neatly summarise the importance of forests to the Western imagination, even in the contemporary moment. They also form the organisational framework of the book, for Parker consistently returns to them in subsequent chapters as a means of analysing primary texts.

Because the ecoGothic is a key term for Parker, she provides readers with a comprehensive overview of recent attempts to define it. She begins by discussing foundational essays written by Simon Estok and Tom Hillard, before segueing into examinations of various edited collections, journal articles, and book chapters. These passages neatly summarise extant scholarship and situate *The Forest and the EcoGothic* with respect to it. They also advance Parker’s conceptualisation of the ecoGothic as both a mode of analysis and a genre of writing:

‘the ecoGothic is a flavoured mode through which we can examine our darker, more complicated cultural representations of the nonhuman world—which are all the more relevant in times of ecological crisis. It is concerned with texts with a pervasive sense of ecocentric ambience independent of human presence. Transhistorical in its approach, it explores our ecophobic anxieties, our fears of Nature which are so often tinged with desire. The primary and consistent concern of the ecoGothic is with the deliberate interrogation of the Gothic nature of Gothic Nature’ (p. 36).

This conceptualisation sutures two divergent approaches to the ecoGothic, creating a definition that takes advantage of aspects of both. Parker's emphasis on fear *and* desire is especially important to highlight because it helps to explain why the humans in the texts she discusses are so often repelled by and drawn to forested environments.

The remainder of the chapters in *The Forest and the EcoGothic* progress thematically, focusing on particular issues as opposed to time periods, nationalities, or ecosystems. The third addresses examples of fiction and film that represent forests as living entities, exploring the 'tension between the forest as victim [...] and the forest as irredeemably monstrous' (p. 94). The fourth takes up texts that depict wooded realms as places that harbour monsters, including witches and wolves; and the fifth examines books and films that involve forest-dwelling humans, including hillbillies and cannibals. The latter also explores texts—*The Hunger Games* (2008) and *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011)—that position forests as constructed environments, 'intended as sites of trial, terror, and violence' (p. 253). The conclusion describes the ecoGothic aspects of current ecological crises and suggests directions for future research.

Like all forms of literary criticism, archetypal approaches possess certain advantages and limitations. One of their advantages is that they take a broad view, encouraging critics to explore large archives of texts as they search for archetypes that persist across cultures and chronologies. As an example of archetypal criticism, *The Forest and the EcoGothic* is particularly noteworthy for the disparate array of textual artifacts that it analyses. Each chapter includes a survey of relevant texts and genres, before advancing close readings of particular examples. Thus, Parker demonstrates her familiarity with numerous fairy tales, slasher films, and animal horror movies. She also furnishes detailed examinations of such disparate texts as Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows* (1907) and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), as well as David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) and Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018). By juxtaposing these texts, Parker provides new insight into human apprehensions toward forested environments in the Western imagination.

Insofar as their limitations are concerned, archetypal approaches tend to be ahistorical and ageographical. They ground their interpretations of cultural artifacts on psychological constructs and mythological structures—often drawn from the writings of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell—as opposed to historical events or scientific information. In *The Forest and the EcoGothic*, Parker describes the Puritan-era contexts of such films as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *The VVitch* (2015), but she is more interested in foundational mythologies than she is colonial history. Note, too, that these films and many of the others mentioned in the book are set in specific biomes—North America’s Eastern deciduous forests and Western Europe’s broadleaf forests, for example—but Parker does not discuss them as such. Instead, she treats all of the forests in the book as generic environments, similar because of the emotions they inspire in humans, not different because of the species they contain or the geography they encompass.

Ironically, though, Parker’s characterisation of forests as generic sites turns out to be one of her most significant insights. As she observes, ‘there is a common, if largely undiscussed tendency to talk about the Gothic forest in decidedly *vague* terms’ (p. 3). Although this quotation refers to the horrors that the woods contain, it also applies to the forests themselves, for many of the texts discussed in the book—including *The Evil Dead* (1981), *Red Riding Hood* (2011), and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012)—could take place in almost any forest biome in the world. In these films, atmosphere and mood matter far more than geography or species. Given the importance of place and place-based writing to many ecocritics, this revelation is an interesting and important one, indeed.

Intellectual achievements aside, what also makes this book such a pleasure to read is its writing. Parker’s prose is clear, concise, and legible, but it is not dry, dull, or lifeless. It balances playfulness and whimsy with thoughtfulness and insight. And it contains such creative turns of phrase as ‘terrifying arboreal’, ‘predacious greenery’, and ‘arboreal menace’ (pp. 2, 80, 170). All in all, *The Forest and the EcoGothic* represents an excellent opportunity for ecocritics and Gothicists alike to linger in the deep dark woods and explore its shadowy nooks and crannies. Just remember that, sometimes, ‘the very foliage is fearsome’ (p. 71).

## BIOGRAPHY

**Jennifer Schell** is Professor of English at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her specialties include North American literature, animal studies, Arctic writing, and blue humanities. Her book, *'A Bold and Hardy Race of Men': The Lives and Literature of American Whalemen*, was published in 2013 by the University of Massachusetts Press. She has written numerous articles on ecoGothic themes, many of which involve endangered or extinct species. The list includes, among others, killer whales, polar bears, mammoths, megalodons, and velociraptors. She is working on a book manuscript on these subjects entitled, *Ghost Species: North American Extinction Writing and the EcoGothic*. She also serves as the Past President of the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (ALECC).

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(Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020)

Shelby Brewster

As climate crises continue to compound—wildfires, floods, heat waves, earthquakes—so too have works of ‘cli-fi’, literature depicting, exploring, and imagining the planetary present and future. The genre of cli-fi has unsurprisingly ballooned in recent years. As Jonathan Elmore, editor of the new collection *Fiction and the Sixth Mass Extinction: Narrative in an Era of Loss* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), explains in the volume’s introduction, ‘by the second decade of the twenty-first century, cli-fi titles were (and still are) appearing so thick and fast that it is impossible to know how big the genre has become, and scholarly articles and books, mainstream news stories, and social media posts are quickly catching up’ (p. 2). This collection represents a valuable contribution to this burgeoning archive, one with a particular focus on the phenomenon of extinction: what it means for and to humans as we witness (and participate in) the erasure of nonhuman species. Elmore acknowledges that, while it is connected to climate change, the current so-called sixth extinction is also unique, ‘a remarkably singular event in the entire history of this planet’ (p. 4). The collection rests on the contention that narrative serves an important function in light of the sixth extinction, echoing the work of Elizabeth Kolbert, Ursula K. Heise, Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, and Matthew Chrulew, among others, ultimately arguing that fiction can articulate ‘what kinds of humanity caused this event and what kinds may live through it; what cultural assumptions and values led to this event and which ones could lead out of it; what relationships between human life and this planet allowed the sixth mass extinction and what alternative relationships could be possible’ (p. 6).

Although not explicitly framed as such, the volume focuses largely on works of science fiction (the exception being, perhaps, the novels of Thomas Pynchon). This emphasis is not surprising, as the speculative mode provides opportunities to engage with extinction and its

attendant ideas—science, technology, temporality, species, the nonhuman. While generally sidestepping questions of defining ‘sci-fi’ or ‘speculative’, (What is the difference between the two? Are they genres or modes? What determines whether a work is sci-fi?), the essays demonstrate the variety of ways such works explore extinction as both a concept and a material reality.

The essays collected here are a rich variety of topics, approaches, and theoretical influences. Michael Fuchs offers a reading of three of Pynchon’s novels that reveals the ways extinction is always present—if latent—in these works. By considering the three novels as a ‘mega-text,’ Fuchs argues for an ‘Anthropocene ethics’ that must begin with the reduction of the human planetary population (p. 15). However, Fuchs seems to conflate Western history with that of the human species more broadly (p. 19). In his editorial introduction, Elmore similarly accepts the premise of the Anthropocene, in which ‘man is indeed the measure of all things’ (p. 2). Considering the meaning and role of humanity-as-species in the face of extinction is both valuable and necessary; as Elmore also writes, ‘to face the sixth mass extinction is to face humanity’s actions and inactions, to face humanity’s social structures, moral codes, greed, consumption, industry, and accomplishments. To face the sixth mass extinction is to face the ontology of humanity itself’ (p. 5). While this may be the case, in order to foster more ethical relations—with humans and nonhumans—recognising the ways both ecological responsibility and ecological violence differentiate across communities is vital.

Both Bridgette Barclay and Erin DeYoung examine these specificities in their essays. Barclay looks to Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) for the connections between reproduction, gender, and (human) extinction. As the Indigenous characters in Erdrich’s novel come to realise, ‘neither religion nor science offers answers alone, they must be woven together’ (p. 77) to manifest new forms of kinship. DeYoung outlines the ways familial and cosmic sacrifice are interwoven in N.K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–17). DeYoung’s analysis of the novels’ familial dynamics shows the ways trauma, which is both gendered and racialised, affects both humans and planet on an intergenerational scale.

Christina Lord's contribution, 'The Tragic Comedy of Humanity: Life after Species Extinction in Éric Chevillard's *Sans l'orang-outan*,' offers a refreshing analysis of the potential of the comic mode in extinction stories, which overwhelmingly tend toward the tragic. As Lord explains, tragedy focuses on humanity's overcoming of climate obstacles and ultimately triumphing. Because comedy 'demonstrates our irrationality and reveals our ignorance, thus challenging humanity's superiority [and] does not focus on humanity's triumphs but rather on survival and the continuity of life' (p. 134), it has the potential to combat and displace anthropocentric narratives that have played a role in bringing about extinction in the first place. Through her analysis of Chevillard's novel, in which the last orangutans succumb to a virus, prompting a zookeeper to attempt their revival by training humans to ape their simian relatives, Lord provides a truly post-humanist perspective on (human) extinction, exposing the ways received narratives participate in extinction.

Similarly, Allan Rae shows the value of fiction that truly destabilises anthropocentric frameworks, specifically China Miéville's short fiction collection in *Three Moments of an Explosion* (2015). Rae deftly parses the distinctions between the uncanny, the eerie, and the weird, which are often conflated but embody important differences. Rae also reminds us that disrupting anthropocentric frames entails the unsettling of narrative itself: 'These texts function by problematizing notions of pure anthropocentric agency and the hierarchical relations between human and nonhuman animals, and therefore they also place the transparency and comprehensibility of literary object into question' (p. 126). When considering the role(s) of narrative in (re)imagining species' relationships in the sixth extinction, the foundations of narrative itself should come into question.

As Elmore describes, these essays catalogue the rich variety of ways fiction works to tell what Bruno Latour calls 'our common Geostory' (p. 3). They remind us that humanity's existence is linked with that of our planetary cohabitants. As we collectively face the difficulties of climate change broadly, and of the sixth extinction specifically, narrative can illuminate the present and reimagine the future.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Shelby Brewster** is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Michigan State University and part of the editorial team of *Public Philosophy Journal*. She received her PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Pittsburgh in 2021. Her scholarly interests include environmental humanities, theories of (post)humanism, and editorial theory and practice. Her work has been published in *Performance Research*, *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, and *Theatre Journal*, in addition to several online venues.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Simon Bacon, *Eco-Vampires: The Undead and the Environment***

(Jefferson: McFarland, 2020)

Jack Hunter

Simon Bacon's *Eco-Vampires: The Undead and the Environment* (2020) is an innovative study of the figure of the vampire as an embodiment of un-tamed wild nature and as a counterpoint to civilisation, technological development and ecological destruction. The first chapter begins with an examination of the ecological credentials of the epitome of the modern vampire archetype—Dracula—and makes a convincing case for the Count's deep entanglement with the natural world. Far from being a *supernatural* entity, in the sense of something existing or originating outside of the realm of nature, Dracula might best be understood in Jeffrey Kripal and Whitley Strieber's titular terms as *super natural*—emerging from, and part of, the natural world (Strieber & Kripal, 2016). Dracula is presented in this book, along with vampires more generally, as a force of nature restoring ecological balance and threatening the destructive dominance of humanity. Bacon essentially makes the point that Dracula is the apex predator of his ecosystem, modulating population dynamics in the environment around his castle and ensuring ecological sustainability:

‘It is worth noting that the Count does all he can to maintain an ecological balance within his domain, actively discouraging modernity and consumerism from entering and influencing his realm and also limiting the effects of the human population on the environment [...] carefully controlling the size and numbers of local businesses as well as discouraging overpopulation and excessive tourism in the area’ (Bacon, 2020: p. 15).

Dracula's role as an apex predator is vividly expressed by his bodily transformations into different animals ‘such as wolves and bats [that] are well known for their impact on the ecosystem as a whole’ (p. 16). Bacon goes on to suggest an even deeper connection between Dracula, place, and natural processes—indeed, Dracula is understood as existing in a ‘symbiotic relationship’ with his homeland, even to the extent of needing to sleep in crates of ‘his home soil, or the soul of his home’ (p. 15) in order to sustain himself during the daylight hours. Bacon also adds that Dracula's connection to natural processes is expressed in the way



that ‘he can not only become mist or cause it to form around himself but [can] also control the weather’ (p. 16). Understood from this perspective, the vampire seems to be an iteration of the idea of a ‘spirit of the land’, defined by medievalist Claude Lecouteux (2015) in the following way:

‘The term “land spirit” is my translation for the Latin *genius loci*, “place spirit”; in other words, a *numen*, a *daimon* attached to a specific place that it owns and protects against any incursion. By “place” I mean an uninhabited land that is still wild and uncultivated’ (p. 3).

Although Bacon does not make the association between vampires and spirits of the land explicit, it is this re-framing of the vampire as an agent of the wild and the natural that underpins the discussions presented in later chapters of the book. The first chapter also incorporates a discussion of the role of the landscape in F.W. Murnau’s illegitimate 1922 *Dracula* adaptation *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Terrors*, and a discussion of the vampires of *The Forsaken* and *From Dusk Till Dawn 3: The Hangman’s Daughter*, whose ecological context has shifted from the untamed wilds of Transylvania to the desert wildernesses of Mexico and central America. As Bacon suggests: ‘[...] the vampire, as a symbol of difference and otherness, is always associated with the alienating and alien nature of the desert’ (p. 27). Examples are also given of cinematic depictions of vampires as the embodiment of other ecosystems, including arctic tundras and watery depths.

The next chapter takes this idea a step further with an examination of films in which nature itself performs the role of the vampire, putting forward the interesting suggestion that ‘in being representative of [an ecosystem], the vampire is actually constituted of those animals and creatures so that it not so much transforms into them but allows aspects of them to come to the fore’ (p. 48). There is a discussion of vampire bats in movies (which are far removed from the reality of real-world vampire bats), of ‘undead environments’ that feed on the energy of victims passing through, and landscapes and gardens as vampires in their own right. Chapter 3 takes on the theme of the ‘Undead Eco-Warrior’, and examines films such as *I Am Legend*, inspired by Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel of the same name, which imagines the apocalypse as a ‘vampiric plague aimed at humans to reset the ecosystem’ (p. 83). Chapter 4 then continues with this theme, but with a shift of emphasis to ‘the ways in which industrialisation and

consumerism become sources of their own destruction’ (p. 118). In this context, the vampires inadvertently created by the processes of industrialisation and consumerism ‘ultimately assist in repairing/restoring the ecosystem they were trying to exploit’ (p. 118).

The final chapter—‘Vampire Ecosystems’—takes the themes explored in the previous sections to the cosmic scale, with examples of vampiric entities in science fiction literature and film. Movies like *Event Horizon* and the *Alien* franchise, *The Thing* and *The Day The Earth Stood Still* are all discussed, where vampire-like entities descend from a frighteningly vast cosmos to disrupt the comfort of our perceived anthropocentrism. Bacon suggests that the vampire functions to remind us that:

‘[...] the Earth is not ours to do with as we please. We must earn our place within its ecosystem. Vampires serve as a timely reminder to keep both the world and ourselves alive into the future, we do not need to accept the vampires but recognise them for the existential threat they are [...] and accept their challenge to be more at home in the world we live in’ (p. 192).

In this way, literary and cinematic encounters with vampires—much like other kinds of extraordinary experiences, from alien abductions to near death experiences (cf. Hunter, 2019)—serve to remind us that we are a part of the world, but that our dominance is only perceived. There are strange things lurking just beyond the comforting threshold of human culture—a *supernatural* world that is radically alive and often radically other, with its own motivations and desires. There is much to ponder in this fascinating book...

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Dr. Jack Hunter** is an anthropologist exploring the borderlands of consciousness, religion, ecology and the paranormal. He is an Honorary Research Fellow with the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, and a tutor with the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, where he is lead tutor on the MA in Ecology and Spirituality and teaches on the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Eduardo Valls Oyarzun, Rebeca Gualberto Valverde, Noelia Malla García, María Colom Jiménez, Rebeca Cordero Sánchez (eds.),**

***Avenging Nature: The Role of Nature in Modern and Contemporary Art and Literature***

(Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020)

Victoria Greenwood

The defiant title of this impressive recent addition to ecocritical scholarship, *Avenging Nature: The Role of Nature in Modern and Contemporary Art and Literature* (2020), leaves no doubt about the ideology informing the collection: Nature has been grievously wronged by humankind, the *res cogitans* of Cartesian ontology who have long believed themselves separate from, and superior to Nature, and she deserves her revenge. The agent of this retributive justice is both Nature herself, and the authors of the assembled chapters and creators of the texts examined, acting on her behalf.

Across this ambitious volume, editors Eduardo Valls Oyarzun, Rebeca Gualberto Valverde, Noelia Malla García, María Colom Jiménez, and Rebeca Cordero Sánchez, and sixteen contributors interrogate representations of natural violence and environmental dystopia from a corpus of literary fiction and non-fiction, poetry, film, and art, but also make clear the collection's activist proclivities through a call for 'the realignment of ideological values' (p. 3). Throughout Valls Oyarzun's introduction, Nature is capitalised, perhaps to recognise the difficulty in ascribing meaning to such a fluid and contested term, but also to personify, empower, and allow Nature to '(re)gain stage-center' in her own story, another key concern of the book (p. 1).

*Avenging Nature* is comprised of three sections, each a selection of chapters with an organising principle less like a thesis, and more akin to aims of a manifesto: to move toward a new ecocritical ethics, to (re)centre Nature in her own story, and to reconsider and challenge Nature's rendering as monstrous in dystopian narratives. Indeed, one of the great strengths of this volume is its sensitivity and tentativeness in offering questions and possible directions,

puzzling in new and interesting ways through ecocritical problems. Part One, entitled ‘Towards a New Ecocritical Ethics’, is composed of five essays covering topics as diverse as slipstream fiction and Spanish modernist painting. Whether they do point to a new ethics may depend on the reader’s disciplinary background, but certainly each is elegantly expressed and thought-provoking. Frank Izaguirre’s chapter, for example, revisits Peter Matthiessen’s travelogue *The Snow Leopard* (1978), arguing (and celebrating) that the titular cat becomes a ‘binary-breaking disruption of the literary imagination of wildlife’ (p. 26). By evading the human gaze, the leopard proves itself difficult to declare either extinct or commodifiable by the ecotourism industry.

Part Two, ‘Empowering Nature’, features five papers that ‘challenge anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene as privileged dynamics of representation’ (p. 4), tackling the earlier declared aim of placing Nature, not the human, in the spotlight. A fascinating illustration of this comes in Hande Gurses’ chapter, which dissects the trope of solitude in Marlen Haushofer’s *The Wall* (1963) and Claire-Louise Bennett’s *Pond* (2015). Through questioning the power dynamics of human-animal relationships in *The Wall* and intertextual world-building in *Pond*, Gurses demonstrates that solitude is an anthropocentric and untenable fantasy, as humans will inevitably attempt to make a home and a community through language. Elsewhere in Part Two, in the second of a triptych exploring Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014), Patrycja Austin emphasises the web of symbiotic relationships between all life and even abiotic matter (‘there are no individuals in ecosystems’), concluding that the death of the biologist represents not the end of life, but the end of a belief in human exceptionalism (p. 137).

The final section, ‘The Age of Dystopia’, houses six chapters that probe depictions of environmental disaster: Nature’s most terrifying manifestation of revenge. Peter Melville surveys the fantasy genre’s somewhat ambivalent attitude toward environmental issues, identifying texts that ‘epitomize fantasy’s exploratory potential’ whilst critiquing the genre’s ‘failures to actualize that potential’ (p. 162). One of the most forthright (that is, scathing and utterly engaging) compositions in *Avenging Nature* comes from Víctor Junco, who takes his role as avenger seriously, with Hollywood, politicians, corporate greenwashing and ‘rapacious “green” capitalism’ in the firing line (p. 224).

A recurring theme throughout the essays is the instability of the Nature/culture binary, with writers examining the difficulties inherent in comprehending Nature through the necessarily anthropocentric lenses of language and science. As Valls Oyarzun states in the introduction: ‘Nature precedes and exceeds words; it is therefore “real”’ (p. 2), and the limiting and controlling effects of any cultural framework to the real are theorised intelligently in several of the essays. In the opening chapter, Anastasia Cardone probes the biosemiotics (the science of communication via signs within the biological realm) suggested in Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). Within this paradigm, Cardone argues that human beings are no longer a Cartesian ‘rational animal’ but a ‘semiotic animal’, who is ‘surrounded by other semiotic subjects’ (p. 9). Cardone’s reading suggests that whilst any perception of the natural world is *egocentric*, coloured by human emotion and rationality, it can avoid being *anthropocentric* by striving for the ‘interconnection and plurality in the world’, an attempt to listen to Nature’s language (p. 23). In her chapter on Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014), Jessica Roberts posits that the novel is a damning rejection of ‘Frankensteinian science’, that is, ‘science with the power to classify or control nature’ (p. 50).

The editors assume a sympathy with the book’s environmental agenda; should a person sceptical of the impact of human activity on the planet come across this text, they will find little to persuade them otherwise. But that is surely not the editors’ intention. Rather, *Avenging Nature* is aimed at readers and academics already versed in the tenets, or at least values, of ecocritical theory. This is a richly multidisciplinary collection, and as such small shifts in tenor and linguistic style occasionally affect the cohesiveness of the whole. Yet each chapter is sharply written and focused, and an enthusiastic reader can see each as an accessible gateway into a new way of critiquing the fragile status of Nature within the Anthropocene. Whilst the term ‘ecoGothic’ is confined to Jessica Roberts’ chapter, Gothic tropes abound throughout, and readers of this journal will find much to enjoy. Reflecting on the rapidly expanding field of ecocriticism with all its various roots and branches, Valls Oyarzun suggests that Nature’s cultural vengeance is well underway: ‘by taking stage-centre in twenty-first century Humanism’ (p. 5). By opening new dialogues and expounding clear environmental ethics, *Avenging Nature* offers plenty in support of her quest for justice.



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# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic***

(London: Penguin, 2020)

Joan Passey

Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic* (2020) embraces over two centuries of Gothic history in its elaborate creation of an intertextual, referential, and reverential Gothic world.

The novel focuses on Naomi's visit to her cousin, Catarina, in her husband's family home—a Gothic mansion set atop a hill in Mexico in the 1950s. While there, Naomi is antagonised by the Doyles and fears for her cousin's sanity and safety. The British family in Mexico have been there for generations, but only cousin Francis bothered to learn Spanish, and the fair, blue-eyed Doyles are convinced of their racial superiority over the natives.

The house is a character in its own right—a groaning, pulsing organism. Naomi conceives of it in bodily terms, convinced the walls are flesh and that throbbing organs lie beneath. It is a living thing, seemingly symbiotic with its parasitic hosts. Naomi forms an allegiance with the quiet, blushing Francis, who seems so different from his aggressive family. Francis is an eager mycologist, and Naomi finds him amongst the gravestones of the family cemetery (the burial ground of the victims of a mystery illness), picking mushrooms. She later finds his room covered with drawings of them. In an earlier scene, the monosyllabic servants are scrubbing dirt from mushrooms with soft brushes. There is something fungal about this novel from the very beginning—something preoccupied with earth, growths, and pulpy, organic things. The Doyle family brought over their own soil from England, after all, not trusting the soil of Mexico to nourish their English roses.

*Mexican Gothic* is a novel which wears its Gothic heritage heavy upon its sleeve. Naomi marvels throughout at Catarina's dreamy Gothic fantasies—how she ended up in this situation because of her love of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *Jane Eyre* (1847)—how she was wooed by the idea of a stony English gentleman whisking her off to a Gothic mansion. Catarina talks about there being figures in the wallpaper, *a la* Perkins Gillman. The text abounds with Gothic tropes: malevolent servants, foggy cemeteries, uncanny familial resemblances, and later, ritual, murder, and incest.

Please note: extreme spoilers from this point onwards.

The novel functions on a range of levels: it is a Gothic homage, paying its respects to its heritage and tradition but resituating the English mansion in the Mexican hills. It is an ecoGothic novel (or a mycoGothic novel) centred on the earth, the fungal, on growth and inheritance. It is also specifically a subterranean Gothic novel, drawing on a long tradition of anxieties over mining, as the Doyles earned their fortune from silver ore. The underground is not a hospitable space for human life; instead, it is connotative of burial. The ground is the place from whence primordial life first rose, as well as our final resting place. The earth is cyclical – producing life and absorbing death to make life anew. This goes some way to explaining the multifarious interpretations of the Doyle family symbol—an ouroboros, which Naomi sees everywhere.

The snake eating its own tail also gestures towards the incest Naomi later uncovers – a family, producing and consuming itself. The grotesque patriarch, Howard's, interest in the superiority of his own race extends to the superiority of his own specific family bloodline, and he has dedicated himself to producing offspring with his sisters, even trying, to no avail, to reproduce with his niece. Naomi discovers that Howard must produce sons so to eventually take over their bodies and this is his intention, in his ailing hours, for his firstborn, Virgil. It then becomes a narrative of possession, drawing parallels with *Hereditary* (2018). Howard has lived for many generations and intends to live for many more; however, he realises the bloodline is failing due to the incestuous loop and has invited Catarina and Naomi into his clan to inject new blood into the line. In many ways, then, it is a distinctly Victorian Gothic, preoccupied with phrenology, blood purity, and eugenics, drawing from the mid-century surveys of racial characteristics.

Upon his arrival many years ago, Howard participated in a religious ceremony with the indigenous Mexicans, involving a mushroom which could potentially give him everlasting life. It is this mushroom—an icon of life and death, growth and decay—that has grown rampant beneath the house, which throbs in the walls, and is slipped into Naomi and Catarina's food to forge a connection between them, the house, and the Doyle family. Much like *Hereditary* and the early scenes of *The Witch* (2015), the novel then delves into the ritualistic and

cannibalistic, and Naomi realises that Howard has established himself as a sort of god over his family. Francis tells Naomi she has been breathing in the spores since she arrived in the house. The family's memories are in the very air, consuming her, making her part of the network. Through the mushrooms, the house, and the spores inhaled and ingested, Howard has a psychic power over them and can compel them to do terrible things.

Moreno-Garcia is drawing on a long and vivid tradition of Gothic fungi. In the Gothic canon, the mushroom has been cemented as a symbol of degeneration. In *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), for instance, Sari Altschuler (2018) highlights how fungus represents the decay of the house: '[f]ungus was especially ripe for Gothic articulation. It grew at night in untended spaces and multiplied at a seemingly unnatural rate. It worked stealthily - the spread of fungus and its rotting of plant and animal matter occurred almost imperceptibly' (p. 103). Fungi were 'an unnatural plant' that 'flourished in darkness' and 'were dangerously indistinguishable from animal cells' (p. 103). Fungus, then, since the mid-nineteenth century has suggested hybridity, and the uncanny of microscopic, unseen worlds. Fungal spores were referred to in the 1840s as 'cryptogamous', conjuring the concealed and secret—the crypt and cryptography (p. 106). Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) laughs at the idea of the 'mushroom growths like the Hapsburgs and Romanoffs' while celebrating his own superior Szekely blood, associating mushrooms with racial supremacy (1897: p. 39). L. Dryden (2003) reiterates the relationship between fungus and degeneration in H. G. Wells' *fin-de-siècle* novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898), describing the aliens as possessing 'grotesque Gothic bodies, whose viscosity and fungal appearance is repellent', 'suggestive of degenerative tendencies in their evolutionary pattern' (2003: p. 180). This atavistic concern is inseparable from Wells' parody of British imperialism, and *Mexican Gothic* entangles phrenology with mycology. The fungal tentacular, then, conjures insidious invasion alongside a confrontation with the alien. This use of the mushroom as destructive parasite appears later in William Hope Hodgson's 'The Voice in the Night' (1907) and later still in M. R. Carey's *The Girl with all the Gifts* (2014), where a parasitic fungus turns people into zombies.

There is a tension between our understanding of fungus as dangerous and, according to the multi-million-pound business of truffle sales, desirable. *Mexican Gothic* represents this tension between repulsion and desire in Naomi's sensual dreams of the terrible Virgil. In *Mexican Gothic* the fungal homestead warps Naomi's mind, playing into a longer history of

mind or body-altering mushrooms—such as those in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). In *Mexican Gothic* fungus overtakes minds and the mansion, and the idea of the mushroom as a sprawling and destructive invasive species appears in Jeff VanderMeer's *Finch* (2009) and David Walton's *The Genius Plague* (2018). A mycelial network travelling across space (and time) even helps humans travel the universe in *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-present). The expansive reach of mycological networks, combined with their strangeness, appeals to the Gothic preoccupation with the transgression of the temporal and the spatial. The house in *Mexican Gothic*, infested with spores, performs extraordinary feats of recording and broadcasting memory through time, and its materiality flexes and transforms—similar to the fungal stretching of the house in Darren Aaronovsky's *Mother!* (2017).

*Mexican Gothic*, to offer a value judgment, is arguably the best new Gothic novel I have read in decades. It is slick, rich, and multifaceted, cramming in horrors and references at every opportunity. The imagery towards the close of the novel, sodden as it is with pustules, bile, and seething sores, is visceral and jarringly effective. The hybridity of the family-mushrooms-house is reiterated throughout, rendering it a posthumanistic horror, breaking down the stability of the body. The haunted house *is* the haunted, possessed body, and the thing doing the possessing is not a ghost, but a mushroom, motivated by human greed and hatred. There is a moment where Francis posits that it is not the mushrooms' fault—that this is what they do. The horror of a brainless, all-consuming thing is exaggerated, yet does not compare to the horror of Howard Doyle and his twisted desires.

The ouroboros is the interconnectedness of the mycelial network, feeding one into the other. It is the status quo of history, aristocracy, and racial superiority repeating itself, respawning itself. It is repeated colonial horrors, consuming the people, the landscape. In many ways, though, the ouroboros in this text *is* the Gothic, as *Mexican Gothic* both draws from and feeds into a long and ghastly tradition—or, rather, inserts itself within an intertextual mycelial network.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Joan Passey** is a Lecturer in English at the University of Bristol where she specialises in nineteenth-century seascapes and coasts. She is a BBC AHRC New Generation Thinker and has appeared on BBC Radio 3. She has previously published *Cornish Horrors: Tales from the Land's End* (2021) with the British Library and her monograph, *Cornish Gothic*, is under contract with University of Wales Press.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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Sue Edney (ed.),  
*EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century: Phantoms, Fantasy and Uncanny  
Flowers*

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020)

Gheorghe Williams

Gardens are a meeting place, but not only for friends taking tea among flowers; they embody both nature and culture, a site where wild(er)ness imbricates the cultivated order of anthropocentric space, logic and reason. Gardens, then, are an ideal venue for exploring the ‘EcoGothic’, a mode chiefly dedicated to disturbing and uprooting this perceived dualism of nature-culture no matter how troublesome the ecological realities that come to light may be. In *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century: Phantoms, Fantasy and Uncanny Flowers* (2020), Sue Edney has brought together an exciting range of perspectives on this dark potentiality, with each entry illuminating the ways that Gothic and sensation fictions of the long nineteenth century were particularly sensitive to the troubling indistinction of the garden and all that resides there.

Beginning with a brief meditation on control and the possibility of its disintegration, Edney’s detailed introduction foregrounds the garden’s function as an ‘arena’—its being ‘on show’—as key to its utility as a setting for ecoGothic narratives that consider the unravelling of human intention (p. 1). Indeed, many of the chapters explore how aesthetic subversion and the collapse of desired function are central to the way ecoGothic gardens (and their inhabitants) can resist, disrupt and exploit human frameworks of imagination. In this regard, Edney’s volume resonates with Elizabeth Parker’s *The Forest and the EcoGothic* (2020), which adopts a similar strategy of taking one particular locale—the forest—as a lens for exploring the bounds of ‘EcoGothic’ more broadly. Parker’s introduction to the term’s conflicted usage history is, perhaps, a slightly more extensive one, but this is more than supplemented here by Edney’s comprehensive exploration of what defines the ‘domestic yet liminal space’ of the garden (p. 7). The ‘ecocritical uncanny’ provides a clear conceptual scope for the collection, unifying in ‘the ecoGothic polytunnel all those elements of vegetal sentience, of plant ‘monster’, of spiritually alive and enchanted gardens’ (p. 4) that are explored throughout.

The chapters are not formally organised into a thematic or chronological structure but develop organically from one to the next. Readers will especially appreciate Edney's chapter overview, which offers a comprehensive, even narratorial explanation of their arrangement, and will stand on its own both as preparatory reading for the volume and as a valuable point of reference for readers returning later.

Initial chapters consider the affective power of garden spaces. In Chapter 1, Heather I Sullivan uses Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (1809) and Eichendorff's *The Marble Statue* (1819) to explore the 'Gothic green', suggesting that its 'vegetal exuberance' (p. 18) can evoke 'human immersion in the broader ecological energies of our world' (p. 30). In Chapter 2, Caroline Ikin explores the garden at nineteenth-century writer John Ruskin's Brantwood estate, suggesting a correlation between the Gothicism of his personal and fictional writing and the decline of Brantwood's gardens as his mental illness deteriorated. Joanna Crosby's chapter explores 'the Gothic orchard', identifying a split between cultural representations of the orchard as a 'sacred space', and 'the reality of the nineteenth century productive orchard, which was a place of activity and change' (p. 62). Chapter 4, by Christopher M. Scott, considers the overlooked religious dimensions of the gardens in Algernon Blackwood's short stories, arguing for their ecoGothic significance as a warning 'against forsaking spiritual engagement with bliss or dread in entangled Edens' (p. 80). Ruth Heholt's chapter continues this focus on Blackwood's stories by comparing his 'The Man whom the Trees Loved' with E. F. Benson's 'The Man who Went too Far' (both 1912). Drawing from new materialism, Heholt suggests that both tales depict a failure of gardens to cultivate protection from 'material and metaphorical' wildernesses, a 'forewarning' (p. 97) of the deaths soon to be wrought by World War 1.

The following three chapters variously consider intersections of the ecoGothic garden with Gothic approaches to sexuality and gender. In Chapter 6, Jonathan Smith notes an important correlation between Darwin's writings on plant 'fertilisation, movement and digestion' practices and the acts of 'crime, violence and sexual transgression' that characterised the plots of sensation fiction (p. 103). Shelley Saguro's chapter explores the 'abcanny' in Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction, where gardens can be read as a site of 'masculine egotism' undermining anthropocentric notions of natural purity that (mis)guide pursuits of an imagined Edenic paradise (p. 114). Drawing from ecofeminism, Teresa Fitzpatrick's chapter picks up similar themes by suggesting that the Victorian 'plant monster' embodies the vampire and

*femmes fatales* as ecoGothic tropes, destabilising ‘patriarchally constructed identities’ in their encounters with male gardeners (p. 145).

Francesca Bihet examines the garden’s far end as a locus of fairy activity, key to childhood engagements with dispelling ‘adult disharmony’ (p. 153); Bihet suggests that even after the disillusionment with writing about fairies following the Cottingley photographs controversy and World War 1, fairies remained an important literary signifier of how children ‘can develop a close, enchanted and material relationship with nature’ (p. 163). Edney’s chapter focuses on Tennyson’s poetry, exploring how his ‘sensation poetics’ (p. 169) facilitates material and spiritual encounters with the garden’s otherwise occulted nonhuman phenomena. The final chapter, by Adrian Tait, re-examines Blackwater Park in Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*, arguing that the novel as a whole is haunted by the ‘more-than-human-world [that is] embodied in Blackwater’ (p. 196), contesting our capacity for agency within environments that are ‘radically alive’ (p. 197).

The Afterword by Paul Evans reflects upon and beyond the central themes of the volume. Part-essay and part-memoir, this is a beautifully written meditation on how even the tranquillity of gardens is rich with ecoGothic interactivity. Evans recounts time spent in and around the grounds of Powis Castle, considering how recollections of these experiences—like the gardens in which they took place—continue to ‘call on [his] attention’ across the years, but also exert their own sense of looking back at him. This collection, too, is one that will continue to draw its readers back, as the changing social and ecological landscapes of the twenty-first century prompt us continually to *look back*, and to reconsider—in life, and in gardens both ‘literary and real’ (p. 1)—the nature of our ongoing relationship with the more-than-human world.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Gheorghe Williams** is a PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK, where his thesis examines Gothic influences on contemporary British political drama. He is especially interested in the critical intersections between ecodramaturgy and the Gothic mode, and has previously presented and published work on ‘Ecogothic Theatre’.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Sarah E. McFarland,**  
*Ecocollapse Fiction and Cultures of Human Extinction*  
(London: Bloomsbury, 2021)

Sladja Blazan

A global climate crisis is underway, and the human species might not survive it. This is alarming news. Or is it? Have you, dear reader, prepared for the end? Do you secretly hope that somehow things will fall into place, and you will be one of the few to survive? Or maybe you simply cannot imagine a world devoid of humans? That would not be a surprise as literary and cultural productions that seek to narrate global climate disasters seem to end in a promise of regeneration. Most apocalyptic scenarios end with a male hero somehow or another saving the world and starting anew—and not only the world of fiction is misleading in this way. Sounding alarm without adequate consequences is slowly becoming the norm in politics too. Even the current U.S. president, Joe Biden, does not shy away from hyperbole when it comes to global climate change. On a tour of the New York’s hurricane-impacted neighbourhoods after a category 4 storm, Biden called out ‘code red’. As Biden himself put it: ‘That’s not hyperbole. That is a fact’ (Rogers and Macur, 2021). Yet, what are the consequences? The \$1.2 trillion package infrastructure plan’s climate spending is an abdication of responsibility (Aronoff, 2021). While the alarm bells are deafening, life goes on as usual. And we, too, read the news, shake our heads, sigh a little, and move on to what seems like more pressing issues at any given moment.

Sarah E. McFarland’s study *Ecocollapse Fiction and Cultures of Human Extinction*, published in 2021 as part of the Bloomsbury’s Environmental Cultures Series, makes a bid to discontinue this unruly habit. Her book takes a logical step forward: if we are to take warnings about climate change, global warming and species extinction including our own seriously, we need to prepare for death not life. She thus offers a study of narratives that imagine the end of the humankind not as a cycle of renewal. The five chapters of this timely book explore narratives that focus on a world sine human. Mainly through a close reading of texts that imagine an apocalyptic scenario without the more common happy ending, this study examines what if ‘the means to survive as a fully fleshed human being no longer exist’ (McFarland, p.

25). In doing so, McFarland positions her study in the tradition of David Wallace-Wells' much quoted *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming* (2019) or Pramod K. Nayar's *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* (2019). Yet, other than these studies, *Ecocollapse Fiction and Cultures of Human Extinction* excludes the idea of species survival and focuses on species death, exploring the emotional complexity of responding to one's own demise. For this, McFarland analyses the rare novels that centre on the understanding that our species may go extinct as a possibility to explore our 'worldly entanglement before individuals can begin to imagine and adapt to their potential experience of that diminishing future' (p. 17). The study thus offers a much-needed reconciliation with eschatological images of human finality.

The term 'ecocollapse' is a departure from 'climate fiction', which in McFarland's opinion emphasises 'the explicit engagement with anthropogenic climate change *regardless of other genre elements*' (p. 25). The phrase 'climate fiction' certainly evokes a niche that is not one, as most fiction in a way will and must be climate fiction in the so-called 'Age of the Anthropocene'. Yet, departing from the common focus on analysing the impact of the human on current climate issues is also a departure from responsibility. Human caused climate change is an important element that should not be dismissed in current discussion of ways in which we narrate climate change. 'Ecocollapse fiction' thus cannot replace 'climate fiction', but rather encourage yet another much needed perspective; namely, how we imagine the world sine human. The body of work chosen for this study, however, is based on yet another premise. Other than Amitav Ghosh's (2016) assessment that it is only within the framework of 'generic outhouses that were once known by names such as "the Gothic", "the romance", or "the melodrama", and have now come to be called "fantasy", "horror", and "science fiction"' that writers can find the narrative means to address environmental issues (p. 43), McFarland sees the potential for narrating the climate change and mass extinction in the realistic novel. The 'realistic ecocollapse fiction' that she analyses are: Helen Simpson's 'Diary of an Interesting Year' (2012), which is juxtaposed with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), a text that does not qualify as ecocollapse fiction because of its promotion of human exceptionalism; Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), in a reading that focuses on the agency of the island that seems to enact life with sentient plants; Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* (2012), with a focus on the possibility of a post-pandemic other species survival apart from the human, which McFarland

juxtaposes with Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), a novel that proposes a happy ending and 'therefore perpetuates the "hopeful future" genre' (McFarland, p. 46).

An effective if surprising element of the study is its dedication of large parts to cannibalism; for if resources are scarce, any available flesh will turn into potential food. Taking a radical approach, McFarland brilliantly takes entanglement of the human and nonhuman to a higher level. If binary categories will not hold, it is necessary to explore what it means to eat not only the flesh of nonhuman animals but also the flesh of human animals. In her own words: 'Cannibalism erases differences by collapsing species boundaries' (p. 38). Cannibalism in this study thus refers to 'cannibalistic cultures of human extinction' rather than to singular acts of consuming the flesh of one's own species (p. 193). Binaries between cannibals and those who refuse to satisfy their hunger by eating human animals while striving for nonhuman animals are exposed as false morality in the interpretation of the books as well as in the arguments of the author. A world of scarcity, after all, cannot accommodate a 'caloric pyramid scheme' nor forced binaries between 'good' and 'bad' ways of retaining food (p. 120). In readings like this, Stacy Alaimo's (2010) statement about 'humans [as] the very stuff of the material, emergent world' (p. 20) come to the fore. Applying Alaimo's theory turns human flesh into the same type of nourishment as any other materiality used as food.

The flattening of hierarchies that separate the human from the rest of the natural world 'interconnected, entangled-and-untangleable intricacy' is the strongest element of *Ecocollapse Fiction and Cultures of Human Extinction* (p. 57). The focus on realism is somewhat misleading. Narrowing the corpus down to narratives that rely on realism excludes such important ecocollapse texts as Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) for example, which in this publication is only mentioned as a study of violence against women. Yet, Butler's text is an important contribution to narratives that seek answers to the questions posed by McFarland's study: 'One day we will not exist. How do we deal with that fact?' (p. 222-3). But these are some threads that can be developed in more detail hopefully in future studies that engage with the ways in which we learn something that we have dismissed for too long: specifically, how to die. I admire McFarland's radical rejection of 'happy' endings and her insistence on questioning the desire to survive in an ecocollapsed world. Exposing 'good' moral behaviour as a hierarchical power tool offers a much-needed reminder of the politics of moralising, which so often comes in the way of justice. At times the study gets lost in close

readings and would have profited from a more theoretical approach. But these are minor issues. The main message clearly comes across and stands in the tradition of Montaigne's (2000) famous remark that 'to philosophize is to learn to die' (p. 179). Seen from this perspective, life is our 'definitive journey' towards death. And how do we prepare for death? McFarland offers no advice, but she would most likely agree with Montaigne: 'let death take me planting my cabbages, indifferent to him, and still less of my garden's not being finished' (Montaigne, p. 185). Let us tend to the world and die in peace.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Sladja Blažan** received her Ph.D. from Humboldt University Berlin in 2005. Currently a guest professor at Bard College Berlin, she has previously taught at University of Würzburg, New York University, Free University Berlin, Humboldt University Berlin, University College Dublin and Bard College. Her areas of research include speculative fiction, critical posthumanism, migration and environmental humanities.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles (eds.),**  
*Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene*  
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Chloé Germaine

Ecophobia is a pervasive aesthetic and attitude in cultures and politics across the nations of the Global North. Following Estok (2018), ecophobia is not only a human psychological condition of fear about the natural world, but a pathology that allows humans to do harm to their environment. That is, it is as much a cause of the climate crisis as its result. This idea is not new, though it has been taken up with force in recent studies of literature and culture in the context of the Anthropocene. In his strident critique of the anthropocentric bias of Western culture, for example, philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen (2019) quotes Whitehead's (1967 [1925]) proposition that '[a]ny physical object which by its influence deteriorates its environment, commits suicide' (p. 109). In response to this pathologically self-destructive trajectory of our society, critics in the humanities have taken up the urgent question of how narrative, fiction, and media representations of nature mediate human interrelationships with the environment, particularly those that, to borrow Carter and Soles' (2021) description, are 'ecohorrific' (p. 1). While Estok (2019) surmises that ecohorrific genres are 'always ecophobic' (p. 48), other critics are more hopeful about the ways in which representations of estranging, uncanny, horrifying, or fearful interrelationships with nature might allow for critique, provoke empathy, and even prompt changes in attitudes and behaviour. This latest collection of essays edited by Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles—examining a range of texts across media—is a timely reflection on emerging cross-disciplinary approaches to horror in the Anthropocene. Theirs is a thoughtful exploration of the pitfalls and potentials that inhere in ecohorrific representations of nature, and the book encourages dialogue between distinct theoretical approaches, a range of media, and diverse historical periods.

The introduction to the volume offers a helpful critical summary of different definitions of, and critical frameworks that have been applied to, what has become known as ecohorror. The authors contend that ecohorror is a mode defined by estrangement and that it has become 'the dominant mode in which we talk to ourselves about the global climate crisis' (p. 3). The evidence they offer for this is compelling, especially when one considers their suggestion that



ecohorror is not a genre, but a modality that pervades multiple genres and media. The authors also join the conversation about ecophobia, suggesting that not all fear is ecophobic, and that some instances of ecohorror might even be productive. They suggest, following young climate activists across the globe, that a negative affective response to the climate crisis might be required to create change. That is, ecohorror is both ‘justified and necessary’ (p. 5).

That said, the introduction to the volume avoids a too-easy celebration of ecohorror, recognising the ways in which it can present the planet as frightening, estranging and antagonistic. Indeed, Tidwell and Soles offer a nuanced approach to ecohorror that acknowledges the ways in which some texts may well have a paralysing effect whilst others might engage readers and viewers in a call to action. In their careful assessment of ecohorror, Tidwell and Soles move beyond dichotomous approaches—that is, whether the mode is ‘good’ or ‘bad’—to consider its unique narrative and affective affordances. They explore how ecohorror texts disclose the interdependence of the human with the nonhuman, or more-than-human world, drawing on new materialist ideas such as entanglement, the assemblage, and transcorporeality; all of which undermine the notion of the human as an autonomous subject. For scholars new to the field, there is an instructive summary here of existing approaches to ecohorror, and of studies in related fields that inform the essays in the volume. Following the introduction are twelve chapters that explore distinct examples of ecohorror, with a varying range of affects, from across media. In this review, I focus on a sample that illustrate the overarching contribution of the collection to building a way of thinking interdependence and nonseparation between humans and ‘nature’.

Dawn Keetley’s essay ‘Tentacular Ecohorror and the Agency of Trees in Algernon Blackwood’s “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” and Lorcan Finnegan’s *Without Name*’ opens the volume with the formulation of a specific type of ecohorror; one that discloses the ‘irreducible alterity’ of nature whilst simultaneously entangling humans within it. Keetley’s Levinasian reading of Blackwood offers a new approach to what elsewhere has been called the ecoWeird (see, e.g. Onishi, 2020), considering the ambiguity of a text in which the human subject appears to ‘dissolve’ in the *mélange* of the inhuman, but which also, as Keetley points out, reveals an ‘animate nonhuman life that is not separate from but imbricated with human life’ (p. 28). Keetley draws deftly on Levinas without becoming mired in dense philosophical discussion, making connections to more recent new materialist theories in her textual analysis.

Her account of tentacular ecohorror is both compelling and rigorous. Moving from tentacles that reach for the human to spirals that contaminate, Christy Tidwell's essay on horror manga, Junji Ito's *Uzumaki*, is another excellent intervention in the discussion of the modality of what we might name the 'ecoWeird'. As is common in many of the essays in the volume, Tidwell is interested in how such texts blur distinctions between the human and nonhuman, focusing here on the ways in which genre hybridity and exchange effect such blurrings. Her corpus offers a fresh way of understanding the interrelations and interdependencies between humans and 'others' from without a solely Western cultural imaginary. What is also useful in this essay is the connection Tidwell makes between ecohorror and body horror, asserting the ecological dimensions of the latter. As she states, 'bodies and environments come together' in ecohorror texts, and damaged or contaminated bodies intersect with damaged ecosystems (p. 52).

Part Two of the volume considers landscapes in ecohorror, with chapters on nineteenth-century poetry and fiction as well as science fiction cinema. Keri Stevenson's 'The Death of Birdsong, the Birdsong of Death: Algernon Charles Swinburne and the Horror of Erosion' is a stand-out chapter because of its absorbing reinterpretation of the work of Victorian poet Swinburne (1837 – 1909), who is typically associated with the decadent movement of the fin-de-siècle period. Applying an ecocritical lens, Stevenson identifies in Swinburne's 'disanthropic' poetry an ecological imaginary that discloses a world without us, to borrow Eugene Thacker's (2011) formulation, that is bleak, even polluted, but enduringly sublime. The landscape under examination here is the coastline, and Stevenson reads Swinburne's poem, 'A Forsaken Garden', to elaborate on a landscape that is 'free of the colonization of human minds and needs' (p. 97). The third chapter in this section of the book shifts period and media, considering the 1957 creature feature *The Monster That Challenged the World*, which takes its inspiration from a real-world ruined landscape, California's Salton Sea. Bridgitte Barclay's chapter on inter-relationships between this real-world landscape, environmental disaster and the science fiction film explores ecohorrific depictions of evolution and scientific hubris. The chapter gives useful insights into the 'de-extinction' subgenre of science fiction and horror film, which tends to be conflated with the creature feature. Her material-ecocritical reading of *The Monster that Challenged the World* also emphasises the ways in which loss and horror abound in extinction narratives, especially in relation to damaged or toxic landscapes. Her reading suggests a taxonomy of how institutional science is represented as a source of horror

in film and traces such mid-twentieth-century concerns into the twenty-first century; where, as she notes, we see their validity far more clearly (p. 143).

Part 3: The Ecohorror of Intimacy is a particularly generative section of the book for those readers interested in the paradoxical affordances of ecohorror: its simultaneously estranging and intimate effects. Herein lies the dimension of the uncanny, divested of its Freudian and humanist baggage, and reconfigured as a disposition towards the natural world that is both unbearable intimate and unnervingly strange. Brittany R. Roberts' chapter "This Bird Made an Art of Being Vile": Ontological Difference and Uncomfortable Intimacies in Stephen Gregory's *The Cormorant* is a fantastic exploration of this paradox through an analysis of an animal horror novel published in 1986. The focus here is on ecohorrific representations of companion animals and multispecies relationships, and of the 'ontological gulf' (p. 174) that persists between humans and more-than-human others despite their shared intimacies. The next chapter is also interested in human-more-than-human intimacies, though with a slightly more hopeful approach, and focusses on the representation of Amphibian Man in Guillermo del Toro's film *The Shape of Water* (2017). In this chapter, Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann position the film as a 'post-pastoral ecohorror' that blurs generic boundaries and 'combines the ecology of the pastoral with the horror of exploitation' (p. 196). The analysis considers the post-pastoral concerns of the film, particularly its depiction of the exploitation and silencing of women, gay men and African Americans, and suggests that such patriarchal, corporate oppression aligns with the human exploitation of the more-than-human world. At the same time as acknowledging these difficult contexts, Murray and Heumann stress the hopeful dimension of *The Shape of Water* and what they identify as the 'potential healing power of interdependence' apparent in the relationship between Elisa and the Amphibian Man. Their conclusions therefore look beyond the estranging effects of uncanny ecohorror to the production of different kinds of communities.

Part Four of the collection is concerned with the subgenre of animal horror and its theme of prey and predator relations. The chapters return to non-Western texts as Kristen Angierski reads Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* alongside other animal rights films, such as films such as *Free Willy* (1993). I found the final essay in the collection particularly shrewd for its analysis of the intersection between animal horror, depictions of race, and white supremacy in horror film. Carter Soles' reading of *The Shallows* (2016), a low budget shark attack thriller, is a deft

synergy of ecocriticism and critical race studies. The close reading of the modality of film itself, the ways in which the camera positions the viewer in relation to the whiteness of the shark and the whiteness of the heroine, exemplifies the need to consider the entanglement of form, content, and ethics in ecohorror. Soles also offers a rigorous unpacking of whiteness in this film, and other related animal horror, suggesting different kinds of whiteness that emerge in the depiction of white European characters, liminally white ethnic groups, and white sharks.

This was such a rich, diverse collection of scholarly essays on ecohorror. The range of texts considered and the distinct, rigorously applied theoretical frameworks make this a must-read for scholars working across the Environmental Humanities. Ecohorror is an important modality through which to explore, negotiate and unpick ecophobia, as well as a productive space for challenging social oppression, racism, sexism, and economic inequality, alongside the destruction of the natural world. Indeed, as the essays in the volume show, such concerns are not distinct but interrelated. The essays also disclose the ways in which ecohorror functions not only as a mode of critique, nor only as a repository of social anxiety about environmental crisis, but as a future-oriented imaginary that looks to scope out different kinds of interrelationships, interdependencies and intimacies between humans and the environment in which they are enmeshed.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Beatriz Rivera-Barnes,**

***The Nature of Hate and Hatred of Nature in Hispanic Literatures***

(Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021)

Laura Kemmerer

In *The Nature of Hate and Hatred of Nature in Hispanic Literatures* (2020), author Beatriz Rivera-Barnes masterfully interweaves an active, dynamic concept of hatred that traces its roots back to biblical literature, branches out into intimacy and necessity for hatred to exist, and highlights the importance of hatred in ecocritical thought and discourse.

Segmented into two sections with several chapters each—'The Iberian World' and 'Diaries of the Americas', respectively—*The Nature of Hate* begins with the exploration of *La Celestina* and the hatred of love, following a 'continuity of hated', as Rivera-Barnes puts it, from the Old Testament to 1499, when *Celestina* was published. In this chapter, the author discusses both societal and religious hatred in the text, as well as a lack of choice that bred its own form of resentment. Building on this foundation in the second chapter, Rivera-Barnes focuses on two biblical plays authored by Lope de Vega—one a comedy, the other a tragedy—investigating the concept of intimate haters, and how, for there to be hatred, there must be intimacy. In the third chapter, Rivera-Barnes introduces the nature of hate and hatred of nature, revisiting the story of Cain and Abel through Miguel de Unamuno's *Abel Sánchez* and exploring the context of God as a hateful creator who 'fomented the first murder' (p. 10), according to Rivera-Barnes.

The second section continues to expand on the hatred of nature through an exploration of imagined or real texts left by doomed expeditions, using Werner Herzog's *Aguierre, Wrath of God* (1972), Carlos Saura's *El Dorado* (1988) and a handful of other films alongside other texts, such as the *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition* (1542). In the fifth chapter, the author moves on to a comparison between Alonso Carrió de la Vandra's *Lazarillo de ciegos caminantes de Buenos-Aires a Lima* (*The Lazarillo of Blind Walkers or Guide for Inexperienced Travelers from Buenos Aires to Lima*) (1773) and Ernesto Guavara's *Motorcycle Diaries* (1992) and *Otra Vez* (*Once Again*) (2000), drawing similarities between these autobiographical ventures into Latin America; a journey that leads both authors to hate. Though



the authors themselves are quite different, this section details how discovery and travel can lead to hate.

In the next step, Rivera-Barnes goes on to explore the work of three Hispanic authors—Alejo Carpentier, Manuel Zapata Olivella and Enrique Buenaventura—as they turn their own creative minds toward the 1791 rebellion, trauma and the making of Haiti; a reconstructed story that is meant to be revisited, and, according, to the author, even re-hated. Continuing to build on this exploration of the hatred of nature, the author details the journey into madness and psychiatric debility through the lens of José Eustasio Rivera’s character Arturo Cova expressing a phobia of nature, later termed ecophobia by philosopher Simon E. Estok.

Tracing the lineage of ecophobia even further, Rivera-Barnes expands on the idea of nature as something that is evil, something to be detested, noting that it is in the jungle where Romulo Gallegos’s character Marcos Vargas eventually loses his mind. Continuing to use Estok’s work as a lens to examine this intersection of ecophobia and narrative, the author explains that ecophobia is revealed to be a challenging affair, and that evil itself, as Augustine says, is a human construct.

Expanding into consideration of Luis Palés Matos’s poetry, the author uses an inference about how ‘Yes, it isn’t about race’ (p. 13) and how this is not about an element of self-hatred that can only be explained through the form of poetry. A chapter rooted strongly in location, from Guayama, Puerto Rico to Loisdida, New York, the author looks at self-hatred in the context of the Puerto Rican countryside, as well as in the New York City of Puerto Ricans and the lived experience of the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Rivera-Barnes then turns to the examination of four novels—Hernán Robleto’s *Una mujer en la selva* (*A Woman in the Jungle*), Mario Vargas Llosa’s *El hablador* (translated into English as *The Storyteller*), Mayra Montero’s *Tú, la oscuridad* (*You, darkness*) and Rafael Bernal’s *Su nombre era muerte* (*His Name was Death*)—which treat the jungle as a hyperobject. These works venture into the impossibility of truly knowing, focusing on the continuously looping intersection of language, speaking, lack of knowledge, and the flow in the opposite direction. This chapter also continues to expand on the nature of hatred and its inverse.

*The Nature of Hate and Hatred of Nature in Hispanic Literatures* concludes with an examination of what Timothy Morton has billed ‘dark ecology, ecological awareness that is dark-depressing’ (p. 11), explaining that ecognosis is coexistence of knowing and letting be known. In Juan José Saer’s *El entenado* (1982), we see an interest in this coexistence, but with an emphasis on hate. Here, Rivera-Barnes considers the ritual of preparing and cooking food as an expression for the cycle of hatred and its reassimilation and remembrance.

With a talent for exploring texts that give voice to characters that traditionally were without (for example, Cain being given a voice in an interpretive text), Rivera-Barnes soundly demonstrates the lineage and process of hatred in Hispanic literature. *The Nature of Hate* would be of particular interest to researchers and students interested in studying the lineage of ecophobia in European and medieval literatures, as well as those interested in the dynamics of ecocritical thought as a practice. As Rivera-Barnes demonstrates in the book, we must take into consideration the importance of the role of hatred in ecocriticism, rather than reducing discourse to interacting with nature in a cooperative way. Humankind’s relationship with nature has always been equal parts fraught and beautiful, and *The Hatred of Nature* successfully explores the lineage of hatred in the dynamic, almost primordial sense, that is present throughout a lineage of texts.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Laura Kemmerer**, an academic ally of the Horror Writers Association, is the editor-in-chief of Pittsburgh-based indie horror magazine *What Sleeps Beneath*. She’s currently pursuing a second masters in English, specialising in Gothic literature from National University.

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## **BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION**

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

**Darcie Little Badger, *Elatsoe***

(Montclair, Amsterdam, New York: Levine Querido, 2020)

Tia Tidwell

Darcie Little Badger is a refreshing and entertaining storyteller who accomplishes at least two surprising things in her debut novel, *Elatsoe*. First, she creates a high tempo murder mystery even though she reveals *who did it* in the first twenty pages. Second, bucking against the usual paradigm for young adult fiction, she describes an asexual teenage protagonist whose present and supportive parents do not take away from her agency and her high stakes decision-making authority.

*Elatsoe* takes place in a locale that feels familiar, like our world, but with a few key differences. This America does not possess a collective cultural imagination, which shelves the cosmology of Indigenous people into books or museums. Here, the magic, stories, and ghosts of the Lipan Apache are alive and well, mixing with those monsters that are typically more at home in YA literature, such as vampires, fairies, and clairvoyants.

Weird behaviour from Ellie's ghost dog dispatches her out into the night, crossing bridges over toxic water to check on her parents, who are on a date at the local movie theatre. Once there, she is momentarily relieved to find that they are okay, but then she discovers that her young cousin, Trevor, is in intensive care from a car crash. That night, Trevor—a husband, new father, and elementary school teacher—visits Ellie during the nebulous final breath between life and death. He asks her to protect his wife and young child from his murderer. This request sends Ellie and her best friend on a quest to find out not who killed her cousin, but why, and bring them to justice. It comes as no surprise to Ellie, or the audience, that the police are quick to label the death of this young Native man an accident. The story could end there, but

in the supernatural alternate history Little Badger has created, the powers-that-be have another thing coming.

*Elatsoe*, a little gory, a little spooky, sometimes goofy, is ultimately heart-warming and genuine. The novel's somewhat erratic pacing and unregulated tonal alternation mirror the perspective of its teen heroine and feel authentic. Although the story revolves around a murder, it is the relationships rather than suspense that kept me turning pages. At the story's nucleus stands Ellie and her ghost dog Kirby. Ellie has inherited the skill of ghost calling from her Six-Great Grandma and namesake Elatsoe. She can safely call forward the ghosts of animals but, importantly, not humans.

The ghosts are omnipresent in this story, and they are beautiful. As Ellie contemplates the interconnectedness of life and time, she accidentally starts to disrupt the fabric of the present, sinking into the world of the dead: 'Overhead, all the fire leached from the sun, and it shone more timidly than the moon [...] It seemed that Ellie had not only raised extinct arthropods, she had woken up the whole ancient ocean'. She watches spectre whales drift overhead while her dog companion waits nearby: 'At the scale of evolutionary time, cetaceans were new. This wasn't an ancient ocean; it was every ocean since the beginning of time. Ellie was submerged in the sea of the dead' (p. 170). Ellie's power comes from a deep recognition that all lifeforms are kin, and her young wisdom cuts sharply against the irreconcilable divides that define our time. Her foray into the world of ghosts is dangerous, though, and she is warned by the stories of her family, and a wise elder, that it is not always easy to come back to the living.

Politically charged moments erupt throughout the story. Little Badger addresses the issues and context of our day with truth and humour. Ellie, visibly Native is racially profiled multiple times, and her character responds with a potent mixture of exasperation and creativity. There is the scene in which a well-timed land acknowledgement sends a bloodthirsty vampire skittering off Apache territory: 'You aren't welcome along the Kunétai! You aren't welcome in my home!' As the vampire starts to bleed and disintegrate, he is utterly confused by the power assaulting him:

“Is that like ... magical?”

“No. Christ. We’re Indigenous to the southern US and northern Mexico. Really you’ve never heard of us?”

“I know what Apaches were—”

“*Were?* This land is still our home, and Euro-vamps can’t occupy a home when they’re unwelcome.” (p. 154)

Ellie moves through the story with bravery and courage, but the worry and anxiety of her parents is palpable—they recognise the real dangers of existing when one’s people were supposed to have disappeared long ago. Ultimately, hope and justice win. Not a single person questions Ellie’s asexuality or her friendship with Jay, a buoyant cheerleader, descended from some of the same evil forces they team up to fight against. The conspicuous villain doesn’t take away from the message that unsustainable consumption, and the people who look the other way, are the real threat.

The haunted nature of this story feels appropriate, given that the novel was written for a generation of kids facing an existential climate threat, a global pandemic, missing and murdered Indigenous people, the Residential Boarding School Initiative, and on and on. The ghosts are sometimes disturbing, like the human ghost invoked by the love of a child, and sometimes comforting, like Ellie’s deceased springer spaniel Kirby, or Six-Great Grandma’s woolly mammoth, but each spectre holds great capacity for destruction. These contrasting portrayals of death reflect the terrifying reality of our time. Ghosts walk with us, they are the kin we have loved and lost, and we, like Ellie, must resist their calls to join the dead.



## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Tia Tidwell** is an Assistant Professor of Alaska Native Studies. She belongs to the Nunamiut people of Anaktuvuk Pass and currently resides in Fairbanks. Her research focuses on the intersection of settler colonial studies, Arctic literature, and Indigenous counter-narratives.

# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Jeff VanderMeer, *Hummingbird Salamander***

(New York: MCD, 2021)

Courtney Skaggs

*New York Times*-bestselling author, Jeff VanderMeer has returned with a new novel, *Hummingbird Salamander*. VanderMeer is the author of the Southern Reach trilogy; the first novel in that series, *Annihilation*, has been translated into over thirty-five languages, won both the Nebula Award and Shirley Jackson Award, and was made into a feature film directed by Alex Garland in 2018.

Fans of VanderMeer's suspense-driven fiction, which often takes on questions and themes surrounding climate disaster and environmental collapse, will find much to appreciate about *Hummingbird Salamander*, even though it represents a departure from the science fiction of his widely acclaimed Southern Reach trilogy. In this new novel, VanderMeer instead explores the boundaries of detective and thriller fiction and these subgenres' capacities to express concerns about Anthropocenic environmental issues. The result of this foray into new territory is a gripping novel that is difficult to put down. Those who enjoyed seeing VanderMeer's writing translated onto the screen will also be happy to know that this new novel has already been optioned as a future project for Netflix.

*Hummingbird Salamander* begins with a series of lines which make use of the second person. This stylistic choice serves a dual purpose—injecting the reader into the story from its very beginning and deferring the revelation of details surrounding the narrator's identity. The novel opens with the following passage:

'Assume I'm dead by the time you read this. Assume you're being told all of this by a flicker, a wisp, a thing you can't quite get out of your head now that you've found me. And in the beginning, it's you, not me, being handed an envelope with a key inside...on a street, in a city, on a winter day so cold that breathing hurts and your lungs creak.'

A barista leans out onto the sidewalk from your local coffee shop to say, “I almost forgot”.

The before of those words and the after, and you stuck in the middle. “I almost forgot”. Except the barista didn’t forget, was instructed to make it happen that way. “Time sensitive”.

You turn in surprise to receive what someone has left for you, but you don’t refuse it. Bodies don’t work that way—a person hands you something, you take it. A reflex. You worry about what it is later’. (p. 3)

The contents of that envelope, besides the aforementioned key, are, the reader finds on the next page, an address and a number. Instead of answers, only more questions come as the ominous urgency of *Hummingbird Salamander* continues to heighten.

At the bottom of page four, the narrator finally makes an attempt to introduce herself. VanderMeer writes:

‘Another winter morning in a city in the Pacific Northwest.  
Where, exactly? I won’t tell you.  
Who am I? I won’t tell you. Exactly.  
But you can call me Jane.  
Jane Smith. If that helps.  
I’m here to show you how the world ends’. (p. 4)

As the novel unfolds, the author continues to make use of short, matter-of-fact sentences, such as those seen in the narrator’s introduction to the reader. The brevity of the sentences and chapters in this novel quicken the pace of the reading experience and add to the novel’s sense of foreboding.

Jeff VanderMeer, in *Hummingbird Salamander*, has crafted a reading experience for his audience which mimics the investigative journey undertaken by Jane, the novel’s narrator. On page 18, he writes, ‘Was the hummingbird code for something? Or just the first of two bookends? That space between them yawned like the abyss, and the space in my head felt deliberate’. As Jane embarks on an investigation into the meanings of a series of strange clues

left for her by an enigmatic stranger, the reader is invited to do much of the same work—piecing together the puzzle of her past and how it relates to the rapidly unfolding mystery that is the novel’s main plot. The relative anonymity of Jane and the few clues she provides about her identity early on invite the reader to scour the novel for clues. What little is shared about her is given to the reader in small pieces, leaving the reader to wonder about the narrator’s reliability—is Jane telling the full truth? What, if anything, is she hiding and why? The yawning space between clues and answers feels deliberate on the part of VanderMeer; the search for understanding—both on the part of Jane and the reader—is a central force behind the novel’s strong sense of forward momentum and suspense.

As Jane follows the breadcrumb trail of clues left to her by a stranger, Jane’s world rapidly dissolves around her. Not only has her choice to take on this investigation damaged her personal life, prompting issues both at work and at home, but catastrophic crises also loom in the not-so-distant background of the novel, lending the overall tone a distinct sense of pre-apocalyptic urgency. The world, in *Hummingbird Salamander*, is not unlike our own—there are mentions of a global pandemic, wildfires, floods, air pollution which discolours skies, and refugees seeking asylum because their homes have been destroyed due to environmental disasters. What isn’t made clear is whether or not Jane’s detective work surrounding the mystery has played any role in the dissolution of her world.

Do other people in Jane’s world see their surroundings in the same way? Is the world in *Hummingbird Salamander* truly ending, or is the pre-apocalyptic aspect of the novel, perhaps, a perspective that is unique to Jane? These questions can be tracked with a trail of hints leading from the novel’s beginning all the way to its end. Following this line of interrogation into the novel uncovers new questions—what is Jane’s mental state, and how do her personal truths and realities compare to that of those around her? As much as *Hummingbird Salamander* is a novel about mystery and climate change, it is also one about the slippery elusiveness and relativity of truth, about how perspectives evolve in tandem with the influx of new information. Whether or not that information is objectively ‘true’ may be debatable, but what Jane considers true certainly has a profound impact on her daily lived experience and the ways in which she interacts with her rapidly changing world. That world may be a projection or representation of a mental state in crisis. Indeed, it is important to note that Jane’s detective work is an endeavour she undertakes and interprets alone, further suggesting that her

perspectives on the situations and settings in which she finds herself are unique to her, that others may interpret the same set of clues, locales, and experiences in a different manner. Since the novel's narrator is Jane herself, questions such as these are left up to the audience's interpretation.

Fans of environmental literature and detective stories alike will find much to enjoy about *Hummingbird Salamander*. This is an unparalleled novel which invites readers to immerse themselves both in the world of the novel as well as its many mysteries. In so doing, readers will find that the novel is, perhaps, holding a mirror up to the state of our own contemporary world, taking into consideration questions about truth and how we navigate our way through an earth in crisis.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Courtney Skaggs** is an MFA / MA candidate at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Courtney is the editor-in-chief of *Permafrost Magazine*, an intern with the University of Alaska Press, and a radio DJ at KSUA. Courtney's writing has appeared in *Strange Horizons* and *Ghost City Review*, among other places.

# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Evie Wyld, *The Bass Rock***  
(London: Jonathan Cape, 2020)

Rebecca Gibson

*The Bass Rock* is a meandering novel; it unfolds slowly, with exacting patience, until it has proven its point. Concerned less with plot than with character study, Evie Wyld gradually builds up her three central female characters—anxiously alcoholic Viv in the present day, stiff and isolated Ruth in the post-WWII era, and mysteriously powerful Sarah in the 1700s—through three competing narrative strands. The story begins with Viv, almost forty yet child-like in her lack of self-sufficiency, driving between her flat in London and the old family home in Scotland—the same house where Ruth used to live and which Sarah still haunts. The landscape of the novel is dominated by the looming titular Bass Rock, although this landmark proves less important to the narrative than the human lives which unfold around it.

The novel's ecoGothic sensibilities are contemplative rather than bombastic, manifesting in small moments of mundane morbidity as its central characters reflect on the cycles of life and death that unfold around them. However, Wyld is also alive to the reciprocal nature of the relationship between people and their environment. She is interested largely in demonstrating how physical places entangle with people's experiences to create history; how a person's presence can have a palpable impact on a place, and how trauma might linger in that place across the years. In the novel, the beach and surrounding cliffs near the Bass Rock are the site of many acts of violence against women throughout history, which are remarkable for how easily they have been forgotten. Wyld peppers the novel with these violent episodes, whether woven into the narrative strands of her three main characters or dropped on the reader in between sections like gruesome little anecdotes. These isolated stories are often delivered by the arbiters of such violence, men who lack the awareness to even interrogate their own misogynistic motives. The repetitive nature of such interludes in the same place—as well as the constant looping back and forth through the three main narrative strands—conveys the message that this violence is cyclical and deeply entrenched within not only our social structures but in the land itself.

Wyld is a flexible writer; Ruth and Viv's perspectives are written in different tenses and shift between third and first person, giving an excellent sense of their personalities before their stories even start to unfold. Although both clearly suffer from significant social anxiety, Ruth is more prone to reflecting on the landscape and its impact on her—taking long walks across the cliffs and musing that being by the sea can sweep away bad moods—while Viv is in the throes of a depressive and anxious state which make even leaving the house difficult (except for going to the pub). Not every writer is capable of such versatility, and Wyld demonstrates her ability further with the third strand of the novel, which focuses on Sarah, a young woman living in the 1700s. Her side of the story is actually told from the perspective of a local boy, Joseph; they go on the run together after Sarah is openly accused of witchcraft and the village turns against Joseph's family for offering her sanctuary. As a result of this mode of narration, Sarah is not as well-developed as Ruth and Viv; she remains at a distance from the reader, filtered through Joseph's perspective so that her motives remain unreadable. This allows her to be sketched as a more ambiguous witch/ghost character type who hovers on the outskirts of Ruth and Viv's narrative strands, providing a few spooky thrills in a novel which largely relies on a growing sense of dread to do its Gothic work. Given that she is such an interesting figure, Sarah's underdevelopment as a character could be considered a flaw in the novel. Without this distance, though, Wyld could not deliver the only real twist in her tale, one which provides not only a nasty shock, but which also cements her overall point about misogynistic violence.

Wyld is preoccupied with the social processes by which women become social outcasts and therefore permissible targets for such violence, re-examining various common stereotypes (the promiscuous alcoholic, the witch, the frigid wife) in order to deconstruct the causes and consequences of their ostracization. This painstaking work is beautifully done. Ruth's character in particular stands out as a tragic figure, never quite attaining what she wants and dreading the prospect of having to ask for it. Ruth's isolation in her new husband's house—the old family home that links all three narrative strands—is one of the novel's most sustained examples of emotional trauma impacting physical space. Her husband is absent and often aggressive when at home, her stepchildren are away at boarding school and her family in London are remote and uninterested in her daily life. Ruth's loneliness is so acute that it seems to call back through the centuries—she experiences a psychic impression of Sarah in her bedroom, not threatening but merely present. Viv later experiences the same, implying a chain of isolation and mistreatment linking the three women across space and time. The structure of the novel is such

that Ruth's fate is revealed to the reader through casual reminiscence in Viv's perspective. This dissemination of important information through the criss-crossing of narrative strands is a feature of the novel rather than a bug, but it does have a tendency to deflate tension. It is this lack of dramatic tension which makes the novel drag at times, skilfully observed though it is. As a whole, *The Bass Rock* is committed to depicting different forms of tension—marital tension, social tension between strangers just becoming friends or between romantic prospects, familial tension—but these all work on a scene-by-scene basis rather than adding up to a greater sense of drive. It's easy to get lost in the details of each new fraught interaction between characters because they are so expertly observed and relayed to the reader; what is missing is the overarching desire to find out what happens next.

This contemplative tone feels deliberate even as it stymies the novel's potential vitality; it reflects Wyld's vision of nature as quietly looming in the background of civilised human interaction. Instances of the macabre or morbid are never far away, ensuring that in their sheer numbers they feel mundane and expected rather than truly horrifying. *The Bass Rock* is a novel at peace with the eeriness of the landscape it describes; in trying to assess its relationship to concepts of ecoGothic, I found myself returning repeatedly to a scene in which Ruth's stepchildren discover and play with a dead shark washed up on the beach. In other scenes, too, Wyld emphasises the liminality of the natural world—when out walking, Ruth addresses butterflies by the name of her dead brother; Viv is constantly buying fresh produce and leaving it to rot through absentmindedness; Sarah's escape from her village is initially spurred by the accusation that she has corrupted the land because the crops are dying. Such instances imply a symbiotic relationship between the people and the land, one in which life and death sit very close to each other and little is required to tip the scale. The looping back and forth between time periods and resultant lack of mystery as to Ruth's fate adds to this sense of futility and inevitability. In this sense, the reader can be identified more with the Bass Rock itself than with any of the novel's actual characters; silently observing things fall apart, rebuild, and fall apart once again.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Dr Rebecca Gibson** is an associate lecturer and researcher at Lancaster University, UK. She recently completed her PhD, titled 'Uncanny Incisions: Plastic Surgery in the Gothic Mode', and has recent publications in *Horror Homeroom*, and *Fantastika Journal*. Her research interests include medical Gothic, the medical humanities, body horror, weird fiction, and ecoGothic. Her Twitter is @face\_of\_gothic.

# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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**Daisy Johnson, et al,**

***Hag: Forgotten Folktales Retold.***

(London: Virago Press, 2020)

Ali Cargill

When we consider folktales—in particular, folktales with a feminist perspective—we might think of Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Her re-interpretations of folk and fairy tales shift the form towards realism, including characters often drawn from communities located in harsh environments. Their superstitions are those which help the people of those communities thrive, and in this way Carter repositions her tales as part of the enduring struggle for human survival. In so doing, she makes them newly relevant.

So it is in *Hag: Forgotten Folktales Retold*, a collection of diverse and less familiar folktales re-interpreted by a selection of contemporary female authors. The tales are situated in and drawn from the various geographies and cultures of the British Isles. In the collision of ancient worlds with contemporary peoples and societies depicted in these new, re-imagined versions, a new dynamic is created—one which makes each tale relevant for the reader today.

In the preface, Professor Carolyne Larrington explains how the stories—each one prompted by an original tale, and each one having geographic relevance for the author—were originally conceived as a podcast series (p. 7). She notes the way in which podcast technology has the potential to recapture the sense of intimate voice in oral storytelling, and this is a strength of the collection. These stories ‘speak directly in your ear’ (Ibid.), as if by the fireside we sit, entranced. They tell of the strange, the uncanny; they conjure the weird—perhaps not so much fantasy as those elements of our world we still cannot comprehend. In this way, they articulate the wonderful mystery of that world.

These are the voices of women, some of colour, some queer, and each tale is infused with their individual perceptions and experiences. Themes that run bright in the tales will



resonate strongly with readers, since they speak of lived, learnt human wisdoms: love, desire, relationships, the loss of a child. The tales create fresh space to articulate the struggles of women of colour, and several of the stories are unafraid to speak out about issues such as gendered violence. Many of these tales are not only written by women, but are also feminist in nature. The narrative style is varied, from Eimear McBride's use of an overt, humorous narrator to Ireosen Okojie's more sinister tip into horror. Daisy Johnson's 'The Retelling' begins with Johnson herself narrating from inside the story. Okojie's 'Rosheen' is narrated by both mother and babe, while Imogen Hermes Gowar's 'The Holloway' speaks with the voice of a young child.

Readers interested in the Gothic and ecoGothic will appreciate the fact that the women who live inside these tales are transformed, made strange: princess becomes panther; mother gives birth to child, part babe, part seal. Much that is uncanny and supernatural is at work, here. In the human-nonhuman co-mingling, the power and agency of nonhumans is emphasised; new hybrid forms are created, and they are magical and mythical rather than monstrous. Boundaries are crossed and re-crossed, and liminal space is created where the distinctions between fear and desire become blurred. In Natasha Carthew's 'The Droll of the Mermaid', the mermaid possesses the power of life or death over a fisherman rowing out to sea towards his end. She rises from a rockpool, light over dark, her hair a gold halo, her eyes salt pools like 'distant water...washed in by the strange tide' (p. 218). Will she love him, or drag him to his death beneath the waves? The women in these stories reach into and touch, an Other world; it is a world where a dynamic combination of (super)nature and human gives rise to a sense both of Gothic fear and of agency exemplified in the powerful female. Indeed the narratives are infused by this sense of women's empowerment, constructed as they are to operate outside the confines of human, female self. In Mahsuda Snaith's 'The Panther's Tale', woman transforms into beast with 'round jowls and flaring nostrils' (p. 127); her eyes are 'bright, fierce' (Ibid.) and 'unflinching' (p. 116). Okojie's Rosheen sleepwalks, 'a fever dream let loose on the land'; she is a flash in the dark, a 'strange entity' (p. 68). Carthew's mermaid combs her hair and the act 'pitche[s] stars into the night' (p. 218). There is beautiful writing here.

The landscapes of the tales are significant; they exercise their own agency and transformative power. The natural world encroaches upon and invades built environments,

turning them into uncanny ones. Vision is fogged and the known world made obscure. Rain soaks; damp seeps right to the heart. In the dark, Gothic spaces of many of these narratives, the stench of decay pervades. A woman digs in a mix of dirt and her own blood, and conjures a death. Another scales a wall, scratches her legs, and feels no pain. Her fingers rake; soil works into her nails. At first, the night-time Forest is conjured as ordinary: chestnut, ash, moonlight, familiar nocturnal creature sounds (p. 113), yet it is also private place of extraordinary metamorphosis. The sea is a liminal space where, in the mix of air with salt water, human meets, and becomes, nonhuman. The shoreline's creases of sand, dark spots of caves, become places of bright sorcery, where gilded rockpools glitter, and there is magic enough for the seascape to give up from its depths a precious gift.

The original tales are included after the new, re-imagined versions, and it is interesting to read these. The preface notes that earlier, oral versions of folktales would be 'sparse and stripped down' (p. 7), allowing the storyteller to exercise their own creativity in the telling. These new interpretations bring to each tale fresh artistry and invention. The tales hold true to their origins in that there exist within their worlds fairies and pixies and boggarts from old—but these are drawn within a contemporary world where there is love, and hope yes, but also death, and violence, and men that menace, still.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Ali Cargill's** background is in teaching English and Creative Writing. She is currently a PhD researcher in Creative Writing with the University of Hull. Her thesis, which includes the novel *Wyrd Magic*, is an exploration of personal grief through narrative. Her research interests include nature writing, and all things Gothic.

# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Paula Johanson, *Small Rain and Other Nightmares***

(Toronto: Doublejoy Books, 2020)

David J. Sciuto

Paula Johanson's short story collection, *Small Rain and Other Nightmares* (2020), exposes our ecological worries by reaching into the shadows for our darkest-kept secrets and illuminating them on the printed page. To varying degrees, the nine seemingly unrelated short stories in *Nightmares* invoke ecoGothic anxieties about our changing environment. The tales are about feelings, disturbing in a calmativie sort of way. While we sense that things are not as they should be, we get no impression from the heroine in any tale that the world should be anything other than the world in which the character lives. Johanson exemplifies this female character trait in the post-apocalyptic story, 'If You Go Out in the Woods':

'The vaguely circular hill pleased me aesthetically. Like a fool, I tromped boldly around it, admiring how well our home suited the forest life. This was the way people were made to live; within the environment, not in spite of it. This and other profound statements occupied my cold-befuddled mind until I finally got around to knocking on the door, being in no state to try the alternative entrance by the stream' (p. 27).

Despite the devastation, Janice, the story's main character, finds something pleasing. Indeed, the women in these stories best adapt to changes and take charge. At the same time, the men either cling to a dubious semblance of sanity or devolve into sexist aggression made impotent in these strange new worlds. With several references to pregnancies and motherhood, feminine characters are fertile in a barren wasteland and ultimately arise as heroes of the tales.

A hovering mood of uneasiness haunts our minds as we read these tales. We dread the fear as it grows within us like larvae emerging from an insect's eggs burrowed into our skin. Each story attempts to lift the lid off of Pandora's Box, releasing issues that we would prefer to leave locked away. Johanson artfully entwines Gothic elements, focusing on ecological concerns and emergent themes of dystopia, ambivalence to nature, and coexistence. Moreover, she embraces ecological themes about renewable or regenerated forms of energy in nature and

humankind. In doing so, the author offers hope amid destruction in the form of feminist empowerment. Her female characters are heroes, exhibiting the will to survive and dutifully carrying the torch of human continuance.

Among the more impressive tales in the collection, 'Small Rain' sets the stage as the first story. It is a post-apocalyptic survival story. Walking in a week-long light rain instigated by nuclear fallout does not deter a young woman who happens upon a diner where she finds an older woman. The two converse casually. The young woman dreams of reuniting with her parents, 'up beyond Hope', while the old woman, who resolves to stay put, speaks cynically from age: 'It won't be the same, you know. It never is, going home' (p. 4). Fear paralyses neither woman; instead, both approach their unsure futures confident in their choices, empowered to survive.

Set in our present world, 'Blood Turn' revolves around the first law of ecology, which states that everything is connected to everything else. It is a story that reaches deeper into the psyche to find unsettledness. A young woman sits next to a lecturer's elderly wife at a conference and immediately smells clotted blood. The odour invokes uncomfortable memories for the young woman, from menstrual blood and the pain of childbirth to her brother's traffic accident and blood donation. Nevertheless, when the older woman's aromatic, perfumed scent quells the young woman's anxious thoughts, she recalls her grandmother, a positive and constant force. She is inspired to call her. Blood is thicker than water. It can invite fear, but it also reminds us of our humanness and relationships with others.

In 'Working in a Vacuum', we find a story that satirises Big Brother technology as it is used amid a paralysing winter storm. Book publishers remain entrenched in their offices, unable to visit their snowbound writers to assess their progress. Fearing a loss of control in the face of natural disaster (a common ecoGothic theme), the publishers feel anxious about their imprisonment in the storm. Alienation creates an icy, barren world that symbolises writers, who often feel disconnected from their publishers and isolated from the rest of the world.

The second post-apocalyptic tale, 'If You Go Out in the Woods', tells of two young women, one with a couple of children and the other pregnant, emerging from a *smial*, a kind of Hobbit-hole underground, to buy a few Christmas items in this desolate, new world.

Dystopic themes of mistrust and self-preservation arise from their utter isolation during a cold, dark nuclear winter. Johanson's women possess the vision, agency, knowledge, and power to overcome the situation. This story pits boastful, ignorant men, who want only to breed and overpower, against strong women who believe 'This is the way people were made to live; within the environment, not in spite of it' (p. 27). Its themes have to do with feminist empowerment and ecoGothic adaption to a changing environment.

In 'Skyline', the reader is immersed in a present-day peaceful rural setting that draws city dwellers to the country home of Jo and Duncan. Wanting 'to get way out somewhere that would feel like the middle of nowhere', the urbanites enjoy honest hospitality at a country breakfast. The ecological order of rural life balances pure nature and humanity, while city life represents dishonesty and technology over nature.

'With a Screwdriver' introduces two couples and a single male living in a home. This communal unit of characters becomes disrupted when they invite Adam (symbolically the first fallible man?) to stay with them. During his stay, Adam awaits a phone call 'for the job that'll make me rich and famous and powerful and the object of envy'. Instead, he becomes an uncontrollable control freak. He attempts to humiliate and abuse the women by imprisoning and trying to rape them. Uncannily, a natural black hole, which one character captures in a box and brings home, parallels the unpredictable fear and danger of the volatile guest.

In the final three vignettes, 'Smoke and Bubbles Rising', 'Sleep', and 'What Scares You?', the author meditates on family relationship fears and about the horrors of child loss. Finally, 'What Scares You' reads like an author's preface—such pieces are seldom included in modern collections—serving as Johanson's philosophy on nightmares. Admittedly, these are among the least ecoGothic stories in the book. Instead, they are more introspective, touching perhaps on fears conjured in the author's mind but not necessarily concerning to environmentally minded readers.

Authors of postmodernist literature have become increasingly fixated on the ecological disturbances of climate change, pandemics, and pollution that threaten our very existence. Over the course of the past two centuries, the progression of natural and anthropogenic environmental degradation has manifested in numerous serious problems. Now in the late stage

of our planet's disease, the patient is presenting with severe symptoms, and its prognosis is not good; hence, we remain anxious about the future. We want to coexist with nature while harbouring a dichotomous impulse to control our environment further. I found Johanson's collection of stories about ecological uneasiness to be a good read if you are looking for hope about our unclear future. Although often buried deep within a gloomy, vacant backdrop, there is a message of perseverance time and again in these nightmarish ecological tales that otherwise disrupt our sleep and rattle our subconscious minds.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Dr. David Sciuto** is an adjunct professor of English at Rivier University and a faculty member of the Manning School of Business at the University of Massachusetts. He is the author of several Gothic horror short stories, including 'The Fonder Memories Kept', 'The Parsonage', and 'Alden Westerby'. Currently, he is working on a novel, *Angel of The Mourning*. In addition, several of his Gothic poems have been published in the *Horror Ezine* (2013, 2015). Talk to David about his self-proclaimed literary movement called 'RetroRomanticism'. His works have been likened to the literary styles of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and H.P. Lovecraft.



# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Rivers Solomon, *Sorrowland***

(New York: MCD Publishing, 2021)

Cheyenne Alexis Corty

Cults have piqued a perverse curiosity in Western audiences since the 1960s. What happens when someone is born into one? What happens when they begin to question the social norms set for them? In Rivers Solomon's third novel, *Sorrowland* (2021), they<sup>32</sup> attempt to answer these questions by describing the adventures of Vern: a Black, intersex, cult defector with albinism. Vern is only fifteen when she leaves the cult compound—the Blessed Acres of Cain—and she is nine months pregnant with twins.

Solomon has written three novels to date: *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), *The Deep* (2019), and *Sorrowland*. They have received accolades for two of these books, including a Community of Literary Magazines Firecracker Award in fiction for *Ghosts* and a Lambda Literary Award for *The Deep*. Their novels can be considered examples of Speculative Fiction, and they all address concepts such as gender, sexuality, generational trauma, systematic racism, and other facets of marginalised identities and experiences.

Solomon introduces readers to Vern just as she gives birth to twin children, Feral and Howling, in the midst of an eerie, ecoGothic forest. These children are a direct result of Vern's marriage to the Blessed Acres of Cain's leader, Reverend Sherman. The family is not alone in the deep, dark woods, for they are being hunted by an unknown aggressor, who leaves threatening objects for Vern: 'a skinned raccoon staked to a trunk' and 'cottontails hung from trees' (p. 4). During several chase scenes, Vern navigates the dense forest while attempting to escape this assailant. The first occurs when she gives birth to her second child, Feral.

Over the course of the next three years, Vern begins to experience intense hallucinations, or 'hauntings' (p. 11) accompanied by grotesque fungal body growths. They begin as invisible pains and aches, which eventually turn into a rash and then an exoskeleton. Solomon's

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<sup>32</sup> Solomon uses they/them pronouns.

description of the development of these growths is filled with vivid, disgusting details: ‘Both her babes pointed to her, and she [Vern] looked down at herself. A great rash had broken out over her arms, chest, and neck. Inflamed patches of red and white, bumpy and pus-filled, covered her’ (p. 104). As Vern suspects, her fungus problem is linked to the Blessed Acres of Cain and is, therefore, impossible to treat or cure in the forest, though she attempts to do so with various mixed salves.

In the early portions of the novel, the creepy forest itself becomes a character. Not only is it a home for Vern’s family, but it is also full of ecoGothic dangers. Vern is only able to exist in this forbidding environment because of her training at the cult compound, where they taught her numerous survival techniques. Vern’s personal connection to the forest becomes more evident when she begins to exhibit the fungal growths more fully, and they begin to deteriorate her health.

After three years of fully immersing herself in these woods, Vern decides that she and her family must leave the forest to seek medical help. Thus, they detach themselves from the trees’ root systems and protective yet foreboding canopy and depart for the city. Perhaps not surprisingly, their journey quickly becomes taxing as Vern attempts to navigate urban life while trying to find answers about her condition and her past. As her small family ventures into a world with which they are wholly unfamiliar, they are also thrown further into the conspiracy that surrounds the Blessed Acres of Cain.

*Sorrowland* focuses mainly on issues pertaining to genetic experimentation and religious cults, but it also addresses colonial history. Solomon’s characters are at odds with their traditional, familial belief systems. They constantly question the validity of the history they are told and the reliability of the authorities handing out the history. Vern, in particular, lacks crucial knowledge regarding her life and the world outside of the Blessed Acres of Cain. She realises she has been lied to by Reverend Sherman, her mother, and other members of the cult, but she is unequipped to navigate her journey to the truth alone. Unable to read due to her poor eyesight, Vern escapes the compound alone, and she raises her new-born children alone. Vern’s own insecurities and struggles create palpable anxiety throughout the narrative. Her lack of answers inspires a burning desire to learn more, for her sake and ours.

*Sorrowland* is organised into three distinct parts—Kingdom Plantae, Kingdom Fungi, and Kingdom Animalia—that consist of traditionally numbered chapters. The first section contains the forest scenes; the second encompasses the journey out of the forest; and the third elaborates the climax of the novel. By organising the novel into these distinct parts, Solomon is able to signal dramatic shifts in the narrative more fully, while also intertwining references to history and literature throughout. This structure does, however, present some challenges for the narrative flow of the novel.

*Sorrowland*'s pace begins to slow in Kingdom Fungi, bringing the story to a standstill. In the first part of the novel, Vern and her family's constant flight from the mysterious assailant creates a high level of foreboding and suspense. In the second section, all this tension subsides and is replaced by a more domesticated kind of anxiety. Instead of evading her pursuer, Vern attempts to diagnose and treat the white fungal exoskeleton which has now grown considerably, affecting her on a molecular level. In between descriptions of the growth, Solomon also slows the pace of the plot substantially by introducing two new characters and focusing on Vern's relationship with them. This shift is jarring, especially when the action ramps up again in the third section. Because the narrative flow of the novel feels at odds with itself, *Sorrowland* begins to feel like three separate books. Though, perhaps this was purposeful, meant to give readers some empathy for Vern and the disjointed, confusing manner in which she learns about the mysteries of her past and the source of her fungal problem.

*Sorrowland*, regardless of these flaws, is a thrilling novel, highlighting struggle and perseverance. Solomon possesses a strong and refreshing voice, and they bring much needed attention to the relations between Queerness, race (and racism), colonisation, and urbanisation. The novel also showcases Solomon's growth as a writer of speculative ecoGothic fiction, as well as their deft ability to narrate challenging visuals and concepts. Given that it poses so many difficult questions and takes on so many important subjects, it is inevitable that *Sorrowland* leaves some of its queries unanswered. Perhaps it is better this way, though, like spores left drifting through the forest air.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Cheyenne Alexis Corty** holds two degrees from The University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her

Master's Thesis is titled, 'Sowing Change Through the Elderly Herbalist: *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968)'. In her spare time, Corty reviews books on social media focusing on horror and speculative fiction.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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**Daisy Butcher and Janette Leaf (eds.),**  
***Crawling Horror: Creeping Tales of the Insect Weird***  
(London: The British Library, 2021)

Deborah Schrijvers

Insects play vital roles in the functioning of healthy ecosystems, yet their diverse forms often instigate disgust and fear in their human beholders. In part because humans do not know much about them—especially compared to mammals—these creatures have made rich subjects for authors of Gothic, Fantasy, Horror, and Weird stories. The fact that they possess strange anatomical and behavioural characteristics does not hurt either. These include their exoskeletons and metamorphic life cycles in addition to their eusociality, variety, and survivability. Importantly, insects also tend to possess rapid breeding cycles and engage in uncontrollable invasions of domestic space, both of which inspire Gothic angst regarding border transgressions. In this anthology *Crawling Horror: Creeping Tales of the Insect Weird*, insects (mostly) arise as reifications of this crisis; either they invade the domestic space and threaten human life, or they wage a war for world domination against humans.

This book is the latest instalment of the British Library's *Tales of the Weird* series, and it includes stories originally published between 1846 and 1938. Editors Daisy Butcher and Janette Leaf have chosen to present readers with a variety of insects in the sixteen short stories that comprise the anthology: 'beetles, moths, butterflies, ants, a cockroach, a flea, a stick insect and a praying mantis [...] as well as insects in their larval state', namely caterpillars, and a fly (pp. 8-9). Due to their pervasiveness in Gothic and Weird stories, the editors aim to give insects their due with this anthology, to allow for their 'peculiarities to come to the fore' (p. 7). The editors have made it their business to balance familiar and unfamiliar authors and stories, as well as to include stories by female writers. Admittedly, the selections have a decidedly Western bent, but they are set on different continents, specifically North America, Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia. They are also ordered chronologically and, as indicated by the editors, move from the Gothic to the Weird. The short introductions by the editors help readers to place each story in its respective tradition.

Although they are set on different continents and adopt different timelines, these stories present a few overarching themes, which are shaped by Gothic writing traditions. As they often possess exotic origins, insects occupy liminal Gothic spaces that threaten Western domestic spaces. This idea especially comes to the fore in the earlier stories, such as ‘The Mummy’s Soul’ (1862) and ‘After Three Thousand Years’ (1868). In these stories, archaeologists and tomb raiders die after they raid ancient Egyptian grave sites and bring bejewelled or cursed insects into Western homes. They imperil their love interests or wives, who dwell within these domestic spaces.

A second theme of the anthology is that of the unconscious or subconscious as a space in which insects are able to communicate with humans and influence their lives. Different insects are able to do so in Olive Schreiner’s ‘A Dream of Wild Bees’ (1895), Lafcadio Hearn’s ‘The Dream of Akinosuke’ and ‘Butterflies’ (1904), and E. F. Benson’s ‘Caterpillars’ (1912). Insects invade the zone between reality and dreams to tamper with the lives of humans, to affect the fate of a foetus in the womb, or to bring messages from the beyond. Although they do not involve dreams, some stories—Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Sphinx’ (1846) and Christopher Blayre’s ‘The Blue Cockroach’ (1921)—feature insects who interfere with the unconscious by predicting futures filled with doom. In the latter, the appearance of a cockroach produces hallucinogenic visions that signal the beginning of a mental breakdown.

Another ecoGothic theme in this anthology has to do with scientific boundary crossings, especially those that transgress the border between life and death. If interfering with insects of exotic origins brings catastrophe, then so does experimentation with the natural order of life. This theme manifests in A.G. Gray’s ‘The Blue Beetle: A Confession’ (1857) and J.U. Gisey’s uniquely humorous ‘The Wicked Flea’ (1925). Yet, perhaps most interesting are stories in which the species hierarchy is reordered and insects hold command over humans, such as A. Lincoln Green’s ‘The Captivity of the Professor’ (1901) and Clare Winger Harris’ ‘The Miracle of the Lily’ (1928). In Green’s story, an entomology professor is held captive by the ants that he studies, not vice versa. Capable of reversing the species hierarchy on the basis of their intelligence, this masterful group of ants possesses a complex mode of communication. In effect, the ants enslave ‘lesser’ species for their own business and entertainment. The professor is treated as an object of curiosity, who is made to dance and sing on demand. This aspect of the story invites an ecoGothic as well as a postcolonial reading. The treatment of the professor

by the ants invokes taxonomic justifications of colonialism and slavery in human histories, which categorise people of colour as 'less' than human species. As such, the story can be read as an implicit critique of those arguments, as well as a critique of the exploitation of actual nonhuman animals. In Harris' story, highly intelligent insects wage war with humans, leading humans to adopt a scientific, artificial, and contained lifestyle in order to conquer insect plagues. This solution leads to the extinction of all of nature and the devaluation of human life as a consequence. In our current times of bee and other insect extinction through forms of agriculture and climate change, this is a surprisingly topical story.

In another of the finest stories, 'Beyond the Star Curtain' (1931) by Garth Bentley, humans wage war against intelligent insects and triumph over their adversaries. Here, climate change has altered all ecosystems on earth, which has become almost uninhabitable for humans. Fungi, plants and insects have grown so large that they subsume humans by force. However, the protagonists state and demonstrate that through their 'human logic', imperial civilisation familiar to contemporary readers will be attainable in the future once again. In the final story, Carl Stephenson's 'Leiningen Versus the Ants' (1938), the hierarchical species war takes on the form of a colonial war, waged between a settler and ants over a plantation in South America. Although the human wins, the ants are portrayed as organised and highly intelligent. They possess military strategy and mass, and they are willing to sacrifice themselves for their cause. Through this war, the settler comes to realise that ants are able to think.

As mentioned by the editors, insects arise as manifestations of fear of the 'other' in all of these stories: 'Fear of the insect can also be a manifestation of fear of the unknowable. It is the fear of sentient beings existing in a way so spatially, temporally and imaginatively different to our own, that they stand in opposition to human kind' (p. 8). These fears take on different shapes and scales in this anthology, yet, some of these stories also challenge human animosity against insects. As a whole, these stories furnish nuanced representations of insects through elaborate descriptions of their mesmerising features and characteristics. Given that insects are under-researched in both the natural sciences and the environmental humanities, this anthology points out the way in which insects have nonetheless occupied the Western Gothic and Weird literary imagination.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Deborah Schrijvers** is an Ad Astra PhD student at University College Dublin within the department of Environmental Humanities. She holds BAs in Philosophy, Literatures in English and an MRes in Literary Studies. Her research focuses on decolonising extinction narratives in spaces such as the zoo, natural history museum and rainforest with an emphasis on gender and race through analyses of contemporary, transnational literature, film and art.

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**D. T. Neal, *The Day of the Nightfish***

(Chicago: Nosetouch Press, 2020)

Antonio Alcalá González

D. T. Neal's *The Day of the Nightfish* is a story of Nautical Horror about the effects of excessive curiosity and the acquisition of dangerous knowledge. It also questions popular Western ideas about the apparent supremacy of humans on Earth. The narrator is driven by his obsession to locate the origin of a maritime species that has recently become popular as the centrepiece for a variety of dishes in restaurants around the globe: nightfish. His quest takes him on an adventure that reminds him that human beings may not be the only intelligent species on the planet. On another level, his experience leads us to question what right we have to exploit and kill other species to keep our global, consumerist economy running. This novella reminds us that, thanks to our ability to manipulate nature, we have turned animals that hunted us in the past into prey. As it indicates, the line of production that brings meat to our tables not only starts with the killing of animals, but also implies the exploitation of workers in the companies that process and distribute meat.

Neal's story testifies to the fact that writers get inspired from both their literary predecessors and their contemporary contexts. In the case of *The Day of the Nightfish*, the narrator, a cook in training to become a chef, compares himself to Ernest Hemingway, because both men use their life experiences as inspiration for artistic production. The literary connections with oceanic writers do not stop there; some parts of the plot—and the nightfish themselves—are inspired by H.P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth*. In the two stories, an unnamed narrator is driven by unrestrained curiosity into a mysterious town on the coast of New England where he encounters grotesque creatures. In both texts, the creatures' bodies represent a combination of fish and reptile characteristics, reminding us that there will always be corners under the surface of the ocean beyond our reach and knowledge. Just as the narrator in Lovecraft's text collects pieces of information about the strange hybrid inhabitants of Innsmouth from different sources, Neal's protagonist also increases his knowledge about nightfish. He speaks with other characters who share details about the plant where such fish are processed. They also tell him how to get on board one of the ships from the factory's fishing fleet.

Like his Lovecraftian predecessor, Neal's narrator acquires unbearable knowledge that ends up permanently haunting him. He reflects on the fact that, even with the connections provided by the internet and its related tools, we are still isolated and vulnerable when traversing coastal and oceanic waters: 'I felt very small. The lighthouse stood by itself, alone, and was screened by the low dune hills. There was no trace of Gunwale from this vantage point. As silly as it sounded, in the howling wind and surging water, I felt a little lonely. I had a little time to myself. Who had time for that anymore?' (p. 51). He realises that such moment of peaceful privacy also moves him close to the wild and endangers his life: 'All at once I felt particularly vulnerable on the beach, in the cool sea breeze, with only the wind and the waves for company. And at that moment, I suddenly became aware of the tracks in the sand around me' (p. 52). It does not matter how superior we think we may be to other creatures. In the end, Neal's narrator demonstrates that we are also driven by our basic survival instinct when facing absolute danger. Besides, the memory of his traumatic experience turns the commodities bought by our contemporary lifestyles into something irrelevant.

As an example of Nautical Horror, *The Day of the Nightfish* represents a strong sequel to Neal's earlier novella *Relict* (2013).<sup>33</sup> In both texts, the author follows the legacy left by Lovecraft. He confronts the reader with oceanic settings located beyond the apparent security of civilisation, where violent creatures emerge to contest humans' arbitrary claims of superiority. The ecocritical discussion of the pollution of the sea present in *Relict* is extended in *The Day of the Nightfish*. The latter goes beyond the criticism of our exploitation of nature since it also focuses on the dangers faced by those who extract natural resources from the ocean.

In the future, I would challenge Neal to explore further the horrors at the bottom of the ocean about which his narrator can only speculate. The holes in the knowledge about where and how the nightfish live, which drive his narrator into mad nightmares, mirror humanity's relative ignorance about remote corners on Earth. These and similar gaps can become a rich source of inspiration for Neal to, literally, get deeper into the secrets of the abyssal depths below the surface of the ocean. In doing so, he may drive us madder than his narrator by filling our incomplete knowledge on the oceanic sublime with whatever horrors his imagination can create.

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<sup>33</sup> You can find an article on *Relict* in Issue II of *Gothic Nature* [here](#).



## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Antonio Alcala** is founder of the *International Gothic Literature Congress*, and chair of the Humanities School at Tecnológico de Monterrey in Santa Fe, Mexico City. He has co-edited a special journal issue on Nautical Gothic (*Gothic Studies*) and the critical collections *Doubles and Hybrids in Latin American Gothic* and *Lovecraft in the 21st Century Dead, But Still Dreaming*.

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## **TV AND FILM REVIEWS**

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## ***Color Out of Space: A Roundtable Review***

(USA: SpectreVision, 2019)

*A special collaborative collection from Sara L. Crosby, Carter Soles, Philip Sorenson, Christy Tidwell, and Patrick Zaia*

*NB: The introduction and individual reviews are provided first and the critical engagement/conversation follows*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sara L. Crosby

When Richard Stanley's *Color Out of Space* was released in the U.S. on January 24, 2020, it provoked an odd reaction from both critics and audiences. The response can only be described as a bemused incredulity. They liked it—this first big-star, semi-mainstream adaptation of H. P. Lovecraft's favorite short story, 'The Colour Out of Space' (1927)—and they rated it a remarkable 86/82% 'fresh' on Rotten Tomatoes. Many of the film's admirers fretted, though: how exactly was this 'freshness' possible? Lovecraftian cosmic horror has notoriously defied cinematic adaptation: its shadowy, epistemological terrors too weird for reason, too unwieldy and resistant to the sharp visual or narrative language of film. What magic formula had Stanley discovered where so many others had failed? Was it Nicolas Cage's unhinged performance? Was it Stanley's phantasmagoric colour palette? Multiple critics argued as much, but again, they could not quite help expressing a lingering dissatisfaction with such pat explanations (Sobczynski, 2020; Jorgensen, 2020). Successfully translating Lovecraft's special weirdness to the contemporary screen would seem to require something more fundamental than some wacky acting or sparkly CGI. What was it?

The film's star and director hint at an unusual answer. In interviews, they have both pointed out that the movie is about our current environmental crisis. Stanley puts it most eloquently: 'We're all facing a situation where planet Earth and the future of mankind is starting to look more and more checkered. The world is clearly changing, and we're not in control of that process' (Weintraub, 2020; Yamato, 2020). That lack of control in the face of monstrous inhuman forces (although unleashed by humanity) resonates, of course, with Lovecraft's cosmic horror. Stanley suggests that this Lovecraftian horror—with its focus on ancient inhuman gods and star-borne forces beyond our human ken—can serve as a means to represent and understand the terrestrial forces unleashed by anthropogenic impacts upon global ecosystems.

Now, in the midst of this Anthropocene, as great beastly and incomprehensible 'hyperobjects', like climate change and the sixth mass extinction, lumber out of the mists of denial, Lovecraft's cinematic moment may have finally arrived (Morton, *passim*). Again, Stanley observes that the author's cosmic monsters 'seem to be speaking to people's hearts and minds in the 21st century' in a way they hadn't before (Beasley, 2020). In an era of everyday ecohorror, typified by uncanny daily disasters and extinctions and threats of extinction, Lovecraft's weirdness matches environmental reality, while his terror of epistemological failure reflects the horror stirred by our incapacity to comprehend or stop global ecological collapse.

As Christy Tidwell (2021) has argued so cogently elsewhere, 'Ecohorror doesn't truly stand alone but reaches out into and works with other kinds of horror, including body horror and cosmic horror'. The following reviews explore this important moment: when ecohorror 'stand[s]' beside the most influential crafter of cosmic horror and finally makes it possible to successfully adapt his weirdness to the screen and to the Anthropocene.

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## THE REVIEWS

### Nature as Alien in Richard Stanley's *Color Out of Space*

Patrick Zaia

In an era where everything is rendered visible and accessible by the all-seeing eye of present-day technologies, it is no wonder that the occult has become such an attractive subject in popular culture. Whether it be in pop music, television, art, literature or fashion, contemporary culture's usage of the occult's dark symbology appears to be driven by a desire to re-enchant an enlightened yet disillusioned modernity with a sense of supernatural otherness and arcane mysticism. In short, we might interpret pop culture's dissemination of occult aesthetics as an effort to re-inject a feeling of divine mystery back into a world domesticated and ruled by rationality and empiricism. It seems the scandalous French intellectual Georges Bataille was right when he declared, back in 1943, that as experience moves from 'the unknown to the known, it is necessary to invert itself at the summit and return to the unknown' (Bataille, 2014: p.112).

This current fascination and appetite for all things darkly enigmatic and ominously elusive is perhaps most strikingly evident in the magical realm of cinema, as illustrated by the commercial successes of the mystical and occult inflected horror films *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019) and *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019). For some fans and critics, the popularity of these films herald a new direction in horror cinema where terror is elicited less by jump scares or gore and more by a mounting sense of cosmic dread, whereby the events and characters of



the film seem to be menacingly directed and shaped by an unknowable, alien force. While this particular mannerism of horror is certainly threaded throughout the narratives of both *Midsommar* and *The Lighthouse* to bone-chilling effect, it is perhaps more richly embodied in Richard Stanley's bewitching comeback film *Color Out of Space* (2019).

Adapted from H.P Lovecraft's short story of the same name, the film's narrative is centred on the Gardner family who live peacefully and duly on a remote farming estate in Arkham County. However, their relatively mundane existence is irrevocably shattered when a meteorite suddenly crashes into their property, carrying with it a cosmic malady that begins to infect the surrounding environment as well as each member of the family. The unearthly toxicity emitted from the meteorite initially expresses itself as a dazzlingly unfamiliar 'color', described by Lovecraft in the original short story as being so otherworldly that it can only be referred to by analogy (Lovecraft, 2014: p. 642). This makes it quite literally a colour 'out of' space in that it exceeds our phenomenological capacity to apprehend an object in space and time. Indeed, whenever the film attempts to depict the Color in its raw and unmediated form the screen becomes immediately overwhelmed by incandescent bursts of searing magentas and luminous whites, causing the visuals of the scene to dissolve and burn up in a flaring abstraction. It is as though the Color is so extremely and unrelentingly 'other' that even the film's visualisations of it are doomed to disintegrate into an incoherent surplus of sound and image. However, this violent rupturing of our perception speaks to the thematic core of Stanley's film: which is the cosmos' absolute indifference to all the flimsy constructs that we humans employ to order and structure the world around us. In this regard, the Color signifies the non-human darkness which lurks beyond all our methods of understanding, thereby exposing all the rationalising frameworks and humanist ideologies we use to make sense of the world to be nothing more than a facile illusion. Or, to put it in Lovecraft's own words, 'a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity' (Lovecraft, 2014: p. 381).

But perhaps what makes Stanley's film so exceptional is the way it frames this 'non-human darkness' to be nature itself, which the film achieves by channelling the unfathomable amorphousness of the Color into the narrative's setting and characters. By focusing on and extending upon these moments, the film paradoxically reveals and conceals its monster: we see the horrifying effects the Color has on the landscape yet the Color itself remains veiled

and obscured by its host. This cunningly imbues the Color with a physical presence whilst also maintaining its abstract, alien aura. As a result, the Color is portrayed less as a distinctly concrete entity but more as a terrifying form of *processing* that virally destabilises its host in a series of horrific psychological and biological mutations. In this sense, Stanley's version of the Color bears a striking resemblance to Friedrich Schelling's description of nature as a dynamic process of unconditioned productivity which *grounds* the world in a never-ending state of flux and becoming (Schelling, 2004: p.13-15). However, this incurs an intriguingly familiar paradox whereby nature can only ground the world by continually *ungrounding* itself, meaning that nature denies itself any solid or physical formation and, as such, can only ever appear to us indirectly via its inhibitive form as phenomena (Schelling, 2004: p. 16-18). Hence, Schelling's nature, like Stanley's Color, is not simply a tree or a mountain but, rather, a dark maelstrom of drives, compulsions and impulses which generate all phenomena (humans included) in an infinite succession of transformations and aberrations.

The implications of Schelling's concept of nature, as played out in Stanley's film under the guise of the Color, is that the popular dichotomy which separates us from nature is false, as we are neither above or below nature but simply a node or a stage within its all-encompassing web of interconnected processes. To put it more succinctly, man is nature and nature is man, as echoed in a line uttered in the film by the eccentric hippie Ezra: 'What's in here is out there, and what's out there is in here now'. However, the opening scenes of the film appear to be in direct opposition to this holistic sentiment in the way it sets up a master and slave dynamic between the people of Arkham County and the sprawling forests which surround them. As a result, the trees, plants, and shrubs of Arkham forest are, at first instance, positioned to be nothing more than passive voyeurs to their own degradation and exploitation at the hands of humankind. Indeed, many of the character's attitudes and actions shown in the first half of the film express a dangerously narcissistic strain of anthropocentrism, where one believes that through sheerly being human, they are above nature and, therefore, the master of it. However, as the film progresses and the Color gains more control over the characters and environment, this humanist conceit is brutally turned inside out.

The Color skews this binary by permanently fixing the ecosphere in an effervescent state of endless blossoming, depicted as large masses of flamboyantly coloured plants abruptly

sprouting and smothering the original landscape in rich blotches of pink and violet. This is subtly introduced in the scene where Jack, the youngest of the Gardner family, is lured to the family's well by a high-pitched whistling. As he stumbles towards the sound's source, the film cuts to a long profile shot that tracks his movements, bringing into our peripheral view the vivid eruptions of colour that have rapidly spread around him. The effect is both unnerving and hypnotic: we are mesmerised by the incongruous display of pinks and blues that frame the scene whilst also being wary of their sudden appearance, as though the landscape itself is an exotic predator stalking Jack as its prey. Indeed, the malignant appetite hinted at in this sequence is dreadfully confirmed and emphasised in later scenes, where we see the forest's gruesome, yet beguiling metamorphosis repeated in the character's physical and mental states. Horrid patches of pink and violet begin to cover the body of Nathan as his mind progressively unravels into schizophrenic insanity; Theresa assumes a trancelike state, appearing eerily vacant and dispossessed, before she is nauseatingly fused together with her youngest son Jack, transforming into a monstrous spider-like creature in the film's final act. In each of these instances, the Color's acceleration of the natural environment causes it to transgress all ecological boundaries, thus allowing it to engulf all phenomena in a fevered state of overproduction. As a result, all biological hierarchies are dissolved under the Color's alien glare into a flat and singular ecological plane, thereby causing all ontological distinctions between man, animal, and nature to collapse into indeterminate blobs of twitching matter.

In a darkly perverse way, this grotesque breakdown induced by the surging energies of the Color curiously reiterates Schelling's positioning of nature as an all-encompassing, universal property. Indeed, both are depicted as indistinct forces of ceaseless production that remain beyond humanity's immediate perception, seizing the world in an endless state of fluctuation. And it is within that immeasurable and primordial chasm of nature, with all its cosmic energies and prodigious urges, that all phenomena are unified. But whilst Schelling portrays this unity with typical romanticism, Stanley renders this oneness as something truly and deeply horrifying. For in Stanley's film, to be unified with the world is to be painfully stripped of one's own humanity and drained of all anthropocentric ideals, absorbing one into the unfathomable abysses of nature.

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### *Color Out of Space*

Carter Soles

*Color Out of Space* is a nuts-and-bolts horror movie that feels like a mélange of several other movies. The film details the strange occurrences that take place at the New England farm of Nathan Gardner (Nicolas Cage) after an extraterrestrial entity, the Color, lands on his property in a meteorite and takes up residence in the family well. From *Annihilation* (2018) the film borrows its sci-fi weirdness, its comet hits the earth and creates a weird zone scenario, and its alien/human and alien/animal hybridity themes. With *Hereditary* (2018) it shares its pagan-themed family horror, which in *Color Out of Space* is centered on the daughter Lavinia (Madeleine Arthur), who is a practicing Alexandrian Wiccan. Lavinia's final scene, where she self-immolates (or assimilates?) into a swirling purple column of Color in an ecstatic state,

made me think of the last scene of *The Witch* (2015). *Color* also contains hints of John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), in its fused, writhing alpaca monster, and of *The Shining* (1980), in its deployment of an alcoholic patriarch who goes crazy. Indeed, Cage's Gardner is like Jack Nicholson's Jack Torrance in one key way, especially in the second half of the movie during which his madness increases: he is a character in quotation marks, always also a self-aware performance by a star actor who by now has a very familiar set of known ways for conveying craziness. We have seen this kind of performance before in a horror movie from Cage himself, in the misogynistic but visually interesting *Mandy* (2018).

Yet, if *Color Out of Space* is low-budget and low-genre, the relative roughness of its construction and lack of much artistic pretension may be exactly why it should interest ecocritics. I would agree with Nicole Seymour that low-genre environmentalist films '[demonstrate] the importance of what I call "low environmental culture": art and discourse that is accessible, nonhierarchical, and lowbrow' (p. 114). Indeed, generic works like *Color Out of Space* that contain over-the-top elements like Nicolas Cage performances 'reanimate environmental conversations by affiliating with nature, environment, and the nonhuman "improperly": not through "deadly seriousness" or reverence but through modes such as gaiety and frivolity' (Seymour: p. 115).

Surely a certain amount of frivolity accompanied the casting of Tommy Chong as Ezra, the paranoid, cabin-bound rural hermit who squats (with Nathan's permission) on the wooded Gardner property. Actually, Chong is effective in the role and is especially creepy at the film's end, when hydrologist Ward Phillips (Elliot Knight) discovers him as a desiccated corpse sitting in a chair (a Mrs. Bates reference I assume). The camera dwells on Ezra's zombie-like face as his voice comes over a reel-to-reel tape machine, slowing down and speeding up at irregular intervals, producing an uncanny effect and evoking human-machine hybridity. As Sherryl Vint writes, evoking cyborgs and the human-machine boundary also tends to evoke the human-animal boundary (p. 12).

Indeed, animal-alien hybridity is a big theme in *Color Out of Space*. This perhaps not surprising from director Richard Stanley, whose most famous previous project is the one from

which he was fired, the 1996 *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Here we see the Color, the film's name for the alien presence, take animal forms such as a praying mantis-like insect and the family dog Sam, whom it possesses. Since we also see the Color take control of humans—human or non-human, there is a telltale purple light in the eyes—we can surmise that to the aliens, we are all the same, human and non-human animals alike. Hence the film suggests permeability and fluidity between human and non-human animals, a key ecocritical theme.

In its depiction of an alien entity taking animal forms (or does it possess already-extant animals?), *Color Out of Space* presents a variation on Vint's contention that, often in the guise of aliens and/or cyborgs, non-human animals 'haunt' science fiction, 'always there in the shadows behind the alien or the android with whom we fantasize exchange' (p. 12). Vint reminds us that 'any alien animals or aliens who have animal-like qualities are both aliens *and* animals' (p. 16). In this connection, I find *Color Out of Space's* point-of-view shots of the alien insect looking out at young Jack Gardner (Julian Hilliard) through its multifaceted eyes to be provocative. Though presented as a mysterious, nonhuman force challenging human hubris, the Color is granted some visual agency in the shots of it looking back at humans, sharing its perspective with the viewer.

In addition to its animals and/as aliens motifs, *Color Out of Space* exemplifies the Rural Gothic, defined by Bernice M. Murphy (2013) as a subgenre of the specifically American Gothic (p. 4). *Color* taps into Rural Gothic tropes with its weirdly lit woods, a crazy hermit living in a forest shack, and at least a brief visual reference to Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows*—Ward is reading it at one point. At the core of this subgenre is the urbanoia theme—the city person's fear of the wilderness, and the proximity of rural areas to that wilderness (Clover 1992, pp. 124-9). As Murphy states, 'the forest beyond the settlement is the place where the representatives of "civilization" are pitched against forces that embody "savagery" and order—moral, psychological, and geographical—is opposed to "chaos"' (p. 16). *Color* engages with those fears, staging its scariest alien/human confrontations in the alpaca barn and in/near the well—locales outside the home (hence more exposed to the chaotic wilderness and, as it happens, the meteorite that brings the Color to Earth) that also represent the Gardners' commodification and exploiting of animal and earthly resources—even seeing the nonhuman world purely as a resource. As Carol J. Clover (1992) writes, in urbanoia films 'the city comes

to the country guilty’ and the Gardners are indeed recent transplants to the area—albeit on Nathan’s father’s property (p. 134). But the Gardners’ newness to the area and Lavinia’s dislike of it—she is the one who senses something is wrong and urges her two brothers to leave the farm with her—suggests that urban person’s guilt. Nathan and his family do not belong because they are exploitative urbanites who view the farm as a getaway from the stresses of urban life—or not: financial advisor Theresa Gardner spends much of her time online, talking with her rich clients.

By confining itself to the Gardner property, *Color Out of Space* does not really capture the scale (or even strongly imply) a global-level apocalypse. True, Ward stands watch over the reservoir at the end, delivering a voice-over monologue about ‘I hope the dam water that covers this place will be very deep’, this film’s equivalent to the famous last line of *The Thing from Another World* (1951) imploring the developed world to ‘Watch the skies’ for further alien incursions. But unlike in *Thing*, where that line is spoken over a public radio broadcast, Ward does not actually warn anyone of anything—no, *Color* is more urbanoiac than apocalyptic. By contrast, in *Annihilation*, the organisation that sends the five women specialists into Area X is large, bureaucratic, well-funded; the situation, though weird and seemingly unmonitorable, is being patrolled and explored by organised parties of trained personnel. In *Color Out of Space*, Gardner’s farm (our film’s Area X) is defended by the five Gardners, their squatter Ezra, the rural Sheriff Pierce (Josh C. Waller), and Ward, the visiting hydrologist on survey. (All of them except Ward die and/or are absorbed by the alien). Seemingly, no one else ever knows about the events depicted; the film ends with Ward standing alone on his dam, quietly keeping watch in case something alien should rise again from the submerged meteor-struck property. The film thus suggests the metaphor that the city-dwelling humans have built their reservoir *in order* to submerge this area—the site of the (unknown to them?) alien horrors of the Gardner farm but also ‘the sticks’, as Nate calls it: rural land inhabited by people vilified as backwoods degenerates in order to justify the city people’s exploitation of their resources. A dam blocking a river and flooding a region is the same visual metaphor that closes *Deliverance* (1972), a defining urbanoia film and, for me, *Color Out of Space*’s most powerful intertext.

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### **‘Something’s happening to the alpacas!’: Biological Families and Adaptation in Richard Stanley’s *Color Out of Space***

Philip Sorenson

Richard Stanley’s *Color Out of Space* (2019) is a fairly loyal adaptation of Lovecraft’s work. He signals his allegiance in the film’s first shots: a voice-over recites the novella’s opening lines as the camera stares out into a vine-choked and foggy woods. In spite of this loyalty, Stanley does take liberties. For example, Nathan Gardner (updated from Lovecraft’s Nahum), played by Nicholas Cage, is not an authentic rural New England farmer. Instead, he is a failed painter and a wealthy hobbyist who is raising alpacas on inherited land. These changes underscore issues of authenticity, family, and legacy, which are the film’s true focus. The various threads and nodes—body horror, cosmic horror, the uncanny, etc.—tangle in the



marginalia and illuminate the family itself. Stanley's *Color* centres horrible families, suggesting that death lives in and is made by the family. In so doing, the family is re-presented, woven into a different kind of figure: a sick body or a collapsing ecology. This figure bears two concerns. First, the conditions for the family's sickness are made by categorical transgressions. These transgressions are gendered and economic, which provoke a violent return to a pure biological ground. Second, the family misconstrues itself to be self-contained, inhabiting a fully rationalised and human-ordered sphere. Beginning in an imagined place of enclosed, human-centred 'ecological denial' (Plumwood, 2002: p. 98), the Gardner family is ultimately realised as a site of biological and necrotic exchange to which the individual family members are wholly bound.

Early in the movie, Lavinia Gardner (Madeleine Arthur) is performing a ritual at the edge of a river. She stands robed, holding a staff inside of a circle of stones. During the ritual, she calls to the spirit realm, asking its inhabitants to 'burn out any trace of cancer from the body of Theresa Gardner, my mother'. Lavinia further asks that the spirits 'grant [her] freedom'. The freedom in question is freedom from her family. Initially, for Lavinia, the family is *simply* stifling. She is a teen and is constantly in conflict with her parents. Theresa (Joely Richardson) accuses her of dressing inappropriately; Nathan berates her for her vulgarity and laziness. But these adolescent conflicts grow, like the colour-haunted garden, becoming ever more perverse. For example, directly after the meteorite strike that brings the colour to the Gardners' farm, Lavinia asks, 'What the fuck was that? An Earthquake?' To which, Nathan sharply responds, 'Just watch your language. Can you watch your language?' Much later, after the family has turned into an amorphous mess, and as Nathan drags a sobbing Lavinia to her now monstrous mother, Lavinia begs not to be locked in the attic: 'I promise. I'll do whatever you want. I'll . . . I'll clean up my language. I'll even clean up my room'. This is a disturbing parody. Moments later Nathan responds by declaring that the Gardners are a family and 'if there's one thing that families do, they stay together'. His platitude exposes the film's principal horror: Theresa and the youngest son Jack (Julian Hilliard) have melted together into a single spider-like *thing*. They have been stuck together. Nathan then shoves Lavinia into the attic where Theresa and Jack have been locked. As he does so, he shouts 'Now feed your mother', which functions as a transgressive doubled meaning. It is Lavinia who will be the dinner. She, like Jack, will be returned to and devoured by her source.

This horror is one of multiple categorical transgressions. Identities merge or become unbalanced, people become animals, animals melt together, gardens become poisonous, and plants turn self-aware and murderous. Becoming one's parents, or in the case of Lavinia and Jack, being absorbed by them, is a fear shared by other characters too. In the scene just described, Nathan realises his abuse and says to Lavinia, 'No, I'm not a monster. I know I'm not my dad. I know'. He conflates monstrosity with his own abusive parent, and then, by demonstrating his own monstrosity, suggests that all men become their fathers and that all fathers are monsters. Nathan's transformation into his father, which is both predictable and a monstrous anomaly, is imbalanced by his mimetic identity. Note the comedy of the alpacas. Throughout the film, he must defend his keeping of these animals. After Nathan claims that alpaca meat is delicious, Lavinia mocks him: 'No one eats alpacas. They use them to make sweaters. I don't know why you bought them in the first place'. Nathan seems unclear about his own investment. Who would raise alpacas as a novelty meat, a boutique commodity? Not only is this the economic activity of an ultra-wealthy back-to-the-land ex-urbanite, but it also embodies, in general, all attempted commodification or rationalisation of nature. While Lovecraft's Nahum Gardner is an actual farmer, 'authentic' in his New England rurality, Stanley's Nathan Gardner is a farce, a mimic. His play-acting ultimately underscores the inevitable commodity collapse. The rationalisation fails, as markets always do. Cage's performance is in moments totally unhinged, and here it works to underscore his character's inauthentic and ill-considered foray into farming. And so, the alpacas are always wandering from their pens, and no one can remember exactly how they got out. The paternal ordering of nature remains elusive, always just out of reach. The human enclosure will always fail.

For Lovecraft, the outside is a peripheral space of illogic. Or, rather, it is a space wherein the 'human' is exceeded. The human-ordered world for him, of course, is the world of the Western Male Subject. What invades this 'human' world? It is a 'colour'. Certainly, Lovecraft's story plumbs 'the outer reaches of knowledge where meaning breaks down, but the bewildered mind is compelled to go further by the senses and feelings'; it is a site of 'anomalous becomings' (Powell, 2019: p. 264). While the novella centres alterity, unnerving with sludgy and corroding bodies, its mingling of inside/outside, its expression of inexpressibility, it is also veiled racist anxiety. In the penetration of a white and 'rational' New England by a 'coloured'

difference from outside, the alien other is comingled with Lovecraft's repulsive and ever-present racism.

Stanley's adaptation partly occludes this. Stanley's Gardners are not figures of New England rural simplicity, sentries at the border between the civilised and the natural, between the human and the other. In Stanley's *Color*, the Gardners are themselves urbanites displaced. They are sophisticated economic actors. Theresa, after all, runs her hedge fund from the attic. Thus, the narrative of whiteness and 'colour' is reoriented into a narrative of the domestic as economic space. This maintains the novella's reactionary values. In other words, the family-ecosystem is disordered and arcing toward collapse because it fails to respect gender norms and fails to differentiate between domestic and economic activities. The madwoman in the attic should not be trading stocks; her transformation into a mother-thing is (perhaps) reason's punitive reassertion. Women, as Plumwood reminds, are 'the Others of reason'. Because 'women . . . have been constructed as oppositional to western rationality, culture and philosophy', they are aligned with 'the slave, the animal, and the barbarian, all associated with the body and the whole contrasted sphere of physicality and materiality' (p. 19). As Theresa violates her 'rational' 'biological' category, the family's ecology becomes available for further disorder.

This disorder is, nonetheless and suggestively, most extreme in Theresa. While performing her gender by making the family dinner, she mechanically chops off two of her fingers. She stumbles into the dining room bleeding everywhere and, in a singsong, declares 'dinner's ready'. Later, she becomes enraged that the internet is down and that she cannot make trades. She is like the satellite dish that is 'garbling the fuck out of everything'. Finally, the colour unbirths her youngest son Jack, fusing them together. She is being forced back into her bare biological role. In one of the most disturbing sequences, making animal grunts and squeaks, Theresa is fed water. She laps the poisonous water from a bowl. She is reverting to the animal, which, again, is aligned in *Color* with the abject, with nature, and with motherhood. This return also underscores the film's overlay of 'family' and 'biology'. Reverting to the animal is not entirely a reversal here; it is a disclosure of the family as an ecology.

Thus, the family's disorder is coextensive with the outside world's. The substance of the world has been altered, such that everything that relies on transmission—light, electricity, radio waves, wi-fi, language, memory, genetic material—is altered, becomes garbled. A deteriorating Nathan walks through his farm-as-technicolour-horror, all purple, pink, and full of buzzing. It is chaotic and swollen: 'Just look at you beauties. And a month early! Peaches!'. Walking through and dropping tomatoes into his basket, Nathan grimaces manically and claws at the rash on his arm. With reference again to Plumwood, the environment in which the Gardners live was previously backgrounded and instrumentalised. As that environment reasserts itself, as it becomes animated and insinuates itself into the human sphere as that sphere's ostensible Other, the family finds itself to have been already dependent, integrated, and available for infection or invasion. The novelty alpacas, the hobby farm, were always biological and linked biologically to the family.

And the disordered substance of this fictional world is partly resolved by the film's recitation of its own primary horror. As the colour erupts from the farm's well and swallows everything, the family is shown in a spectral form on their couch, together forever. While glitchy phones, glitchy bodies, and glitchy time suggest a categorical breakdown, something is finally and always reasserted. There is no escape. We are our families. Our families are a biology, a kind of body, and our biology is theirs. And isn't biological determinism one of the most Lovecraftian of themes? And as such, have we not been returned to where we began: Stanley's loyalty to this particular writer? I ask, why today adapt Lovecraft at all? Should we not make our own escape from his influence, from the reassertion of his noxious eugenics? How might we explore the anxiety of our organic selves beyond hygiene, misogyny, and invasion?

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### **‘I live here’: Bringing Cosmic Horror Home**

Christy Tidwell

*Color Out of Space* (2019, dir. Richard Stanley), as an adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft’s 1927 tale about an extraterrestrial organism infecting and transforming humans (something that ‘came from the stars, where things ain’t like they are here’), is clearly cosmic horror. But the film’s cosmic horror threatens not only the minds and bodies of people; it also threatens the *oikos*—both the ecology and the characters’ home. This is cosmic horror *and* ecohorror, and each subgenre is intensified by the presence of the other, making *Color Out of Space* well worth watching from an ecohorror (or ecoGothic) perspective.

The film’s opening scene immediately establishes its investment in environmental issues and reliance on ecohorror tropes. *Color Out of Space* begins with images of the forest, which is wet and green, both dark and alive. Ward (Eliot Knight), a hydrologist and the narrator, speaks over these images to introduce the viewer to both the forest and the narrative:

‘West of Arkham, the hills rise wild and there are valleys with deep woods that no ax has ever cut. There are dark, narrow glens where the trees slope fantastically, where thin brooklets trickle without ever having caught the glimpse of sunlight. When I went into the hills and vales to survey for the new reservoir, they told me the place was evil. They told me this in Arkham, and, because that is a very old town, full of witch legends, I thought the evil must be something which grandams had whispered to children through centuries’.

These lines establish the forest as something fearful. As Elizabeth Parker (2020) 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”’ (p. 2-3). But the forest is also—given the images of it—beautiful, and at this point, the forest scenes are replaced with first an image of a water’s smooth surface disturbed by raindrops and then a cloud-filled sky. These are images of gently interrupted peace (the raindrops and gray clouds hint at storms coming, but all remains calm); they also connect the forest to both sky and water—each of which will feature prominently in the narrative. Ward’s voiceover continues, ‘Then I saw the dark westward tangle of glens and slopes for myself’, and the film returns to the forest, seen now from above and outside instead of from within. Finally, Ward concludes by noting that he ‘ceased to wonder at anything besides its own elder mystery’. Here, the film both builds upon the image and fear of the deep, dark forest and establishes it as something valuable, something worth wondering at. This combination of fear and wonder results in part from the generic mixture of the film—ecohorror says that perhaps the forest is something to be feared while cosmic horror says that it is also threatened by something larger than the forest or even the planet, something beyond human knowledge or experience.

Ecohorror is not only concerned with fears *of* nature; it also frequently addresses fears *for* nature (see Rust and Soles (2014) and Tidwell (2018)). In this case, the alien organism is an obvious threat, changing the natural environment as it grows. As Ezra (Tommy Chong), the family’s off-the-grid squatter, says, ‘It grew down there. Poisoning everything, changing everything into something like the world it came from. Into what it knows’. It is a coloniser, and Ezra uses the language of invasive species to explain it. With the advent of this invader,

new and strange plants spread through the garden, alien insects emerge from the garden, and the tomato plants look beautiful but taste terrible.

The alien organism also affects the water, and the local water plays a significant role in the film. Ward arrives—conveniently just in time to witness and share this story—because he is a hydrologist doing a survey of the groundwater before a dam is built. This establishes both local concerns with water and another way that the film focuses on the environment. As things become ever stranger, Ward tests water samples, and he warns Lavinia (Madeleine Arthur) that ‘there’s something wrong with the water here, some kind of contamination’. There is indeed something wrong with the water. We see something come through the water faucet while Lavinia does the dishes, and she is sick shortly after. It is also likely that others are affected (or infected) by the water. By reframing the alien in familiar environmental contexts, the horror of something extraterrestrial is made terrestrial.

Terrestrial is still too broad, though, because the film and its horror are much more local than that. *Color Out of Space* focuses on the contamination and ultimate destruction of the home itself and of the family that lives there. Except for brief moments where the film follows Ward, the narrative all takes place at the Gardner family home, a place that should be safe but is not. As Ezra says, ‘It’s not out there. It’s in here. . . . What’s in here is out there, and what’s out there is in here now’. This challenge to expected borders—inside and outside, safe and unsafe—resonates with both ecohorror and cosmic horror as well as with climate change. Climate change occurs on such a grand scale that it dwarfs individual human responses, overwhelming us and making it difficult to effectively respond to it. It is about what is out there (global forces occurring over geological periods of time) and also about how that comes home and affects individual lives (through weather-related destruction, climate anxiety, etc.).

The effects of these horrors on the Gardner home and family also highlight the failure of old patterns of thought to reckon with horrors (whether alien or environmental) on such a scale. Nicolas Cage’s wonderfully unhinged performance as Nathan Gardner, the family patriarch, illustrates this most clearly. Nathan takes action to protect his family and his home, but his actions primarily involve asserting his own individual power (shouting and shooting),

and his individual power is dwarfed by the cosmic threat they face. As things progress, he denies the awful realities surrounding him as well as the futility of his own behavior. Even in the face of his wife/son being melded together into one monstrous and pained creature, Nathan insists, ‘Everything’s under control’. This is obviously untrue, and he ultimately retreats into his own delusions when he finds he cannot control the situation. After locking Lavinia in the attic with her mutated mother and brother (because ‘if there’s one thing families do, they stay together’), he sits downstairs watching a movie with a drink in his hand, talking about their vacation. He insists on a life that is no longer possible, and, as a result, he is unable to help his family. Nathan is a well-intentioned man who fails his family by refusing to acknowledge his own limits and the scope of the threat they face, just as many continue to live in denial of climate change and, through this denial, fail to protect both the environment and future human generations.

With the exception of the narration about the forest at the beginning, these references and resonances are not present in Lovecraft’s story. There is no dam-building, no water pollution, no climate change. The film adaptation adds all of this, perhaps because it is growing ever more difficult to separate our fears about pollution and climate change from cosmic fears about overwhelming threats to the world as we know it. The color out of space ‘stuns the brain and numbs us with the gulfs that it throws open before our frenzied eyes’, and so does climate change. What—in Lovecraft’s hands—was *out there*, beyond the human and beyond earthly limits, is—in this film—very much *in here*, affecting this world and the environment. In one of the final scenes of the film, Ward tries to save Lavinia, telling her, ‘You can’t stay here’. Lavinia’s response is telling; she says, ‘I live here’. Similarly, in the face of climate change and global environmental damage, we *cannot* leave. We live here. This is our home.

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## THE RESPONSES

### Patrick Zaia Response

Firstly, might I say what a wonderful opportunity this has been to discuss the concept of Lovecraftian horror and how this is reflected not only in Richard Stanley's film adaptation but also in the world of critical theory. Lovecraft has had somewhat of a dramatic resurgence in recent times, and perhaps this has to do with the times in which we currently live. From the tentacular and all-encompassing powers of contemporary capitalism to the explosively brutal impacts of environmental and ecological disasters, it is hard not to feel as though the human race is being slowly pulled towards its doom by inexplicable forces beyond our control (which is perhaps the most crucial quality of Lovecraftian horror). And yet, in spite of all the horrible monstrosities that are delivered to us on a daily basis, our global leaders and politicians continually insist, just as Nathan Gardner does in *Color Out of Space*, that 'Everything is under control'. It is this kind of humanistic delusion and anthropocentric narcissism which Lovecraft's fiction and Stanley's film most viciously attack, where any notion of 'the human' as an all-knowing and all-powerful entity is dramatically undermined by some grandly alien force. Indeed, this aspect of Lovecraftian horror was covered (in varying degrees of depth) in all the reviews which make up this roundtable discussion, which are marvellous in their diversity of opinion and voice. For me, this is perhaps the major importance of Lovecraft's work and why—despite his horrendously racist politics—we should still reflect on his work and its various iterations today. For the profound negativity of Lovecraft's work opens one up to wild speculation and unhinged imaginings, forcing us to consider things beyond the realms of the human.

### **Carter Soles Response**

Let me start by acknowledging how much I love the original H.P. Lovecraft story ‘The Colour Out of Space’—a personal favorite. Though I shy away from comparing Richard Stanley’s film to the story in my review, I find that the unnerving, uncanny feeling I get from the source material is largely absent from the movie adaptation. Christy Tidwell also notes the film’s divergences from Lovecraft, but more in terms of the ecocritically resonant elements it adds: its evocation of the Deep Dark Forest trope, its characterisation of the alien presence as a coloniser of nature, and especially its dam subplot—the very one that reminds me of *Deliverance*.

Philip Sorenson’s contention that ‘Stanley’s *Color* centres horrible families, suggesting that death lives in and is made by the family’ squares with my reading of the film as urbanoia/hillbilly horror, which is frequently centered on rural families. This also connects to Tidwell’s argument that the film’s horror is ‘much more local’ than one might expect given its cosmic horror/alien invader elements. Along this line, I appreciate her concluding point that the film potentially urges us to interpret ‘home’ on a planetary scale in these troubled Anthropocene times.

Patrick Zaia’s thoughtful interpretation that *Color* represents Nature as an unfathomable abyss makes me want to watch the movie again, to see if I can see past the fuchsia-toned special effects to see the depth Zaia sees in it.

### **Philip Sorenson Response**

In each of the reviews, parallel concepts emerge; all are responsive to a *big* Lovecraftian worry. Patrick Zaia shows how the colour exceeds knowability and is aligned with the breakdown of humanity and Nature’s difference. Carter Soles discusses the film’s generic ‘mélange’, paranoia, and the permeability of the human-animal boundary. Christy Tidwell also notes the genre hybridity while discussing global and domestic contaminations. Last, Cory Willard’s

review employs transcorporeality as an ecocritical tool. Each deals in categories and their transgression, all with permeability and its significance, and all point to the fear of an invasive difference that is a difference always present: chimerical being. Reading these responses sharpened a core difficulty for me, a difficulty with Lovecraft and Lovecraftian adaptation. In Zaia's review, he notes that Schelling's unifying and fluctuating nature is celebrated by Schelling 'with typical romanticism', while 'Stanley renders this oneness [...] horrifying'. Nature's vastness and exchanges destabilise that ever-policed chain of being: no longer can the 'human' be defended as primary or even as primarily 'human'. As such, how might we understand our relationship to this unfriendly, uncaring, infinite cosmos? How might we understand what it means to be a self or a body adrift in this flux? Might we be optimistic? Or even thrilled by our own unstable strangeness? For Lovecraft, these are not possibilities. Only fear remains, and the racist and xenophobic values being expressed via Lovecraft's anxieties are self-evident. I wonder, again, about the value of replicating these anxieties. What purpose, especially in our age of nationalism and daily lived ecological terror, could *this* adaptation serve? What anxieties, ecological or otherwise, could now be more usefully allegorised? And if given a choice between an anti-hierarchical, acephalic, and democratising realm of infinite being—a divine Spinozan universe—and the worrisome Lovecraftian universe, I know which I choose.

### Christy Tidwell Response

Reading others' responses to *Color Out of Space* is fascinating, and I find common ground with other contributors on several points. For instance, Carter Soles writes about permeability and fluidity between species, which I think is key both for an ecocritical reading and for the possibility of reading *Color* as body horror (a subgenre I see as deeply related to ecohorror).

Mostly, however, I am interested in conflicts between my sense of the film and others'. Although I appreciate Soles' interpretation of *Color* as rural Gothic, where he argues that its local scale keeps it from capturing or implying 'a global-level apocalypse', I see the local as analogous to the global, especially when relating the color to environmental contamination or climate change.

Patrick Zaia's argument that 'man is nature and nature is man' gives me pause, too. This gendered language choice is not interrogated, but it relates directly to the film. As Philip Sorenson and I argue, Nathan is an overwhelmingly negative representation of paternalism and masculinity; his sense of control is thoroughly challenged by the film and this 'man' is indeed *not* separate from 'Nature'. So, neither *man* nor *humanity* is separate from Nature.

This connection to Nature is suspect in Sorenson's interpretation, however, leading him to critique the biological determinism of the film and ask, 'why today adapt Lovecraft at all? Should we not we make our own escape from his influence, from the reassertion of his noxious eugenics?' Why Lovecraft indeed? This is an excellent question, although I disagree that the film provides 'no escape' from biology or family; instead, the family is a victim of horror, and Lavinia *is* offered an escape. She simply chooses to stay rather than leave her home. After all, she says, 'I live here'.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Patrick Zaia** is an artist, writer and musician currently based in Queensland, Australia.

**Carter Soles** is Associate Professor of Film Studies in the English Department at SUNY Brockport. His research interests include ecomedia studies, identity studies, and film genre studies. He has written on the cannibalistic hillbilly in 1970s slasher films for *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2012), on environmental apocalyptic themes in 1960s horror for *ISLE*, and on petroculture, gender, and genre in Mad Max for *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* (Lexington Books, 2019). He is co-editor, with Christy Tidwell, of *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene* (Penn State UP, 2021) and is writing a book on ecohorror cinema.

**Philip Sorenson** is the author of four collections of poetry: *Of Embodies* (Rescue Press, 2012), *New Recordings* (Another New Calligraphy, 2018), *Solar Trauma* (Rescue Press, 2018), and *Work Is Hard Vore* (Schism Neuronics, 2020). With Olivia Cronk, he co-edits *The Journal Petra*. He is an advanced lecturer at Loyola University Chicago, where he teaches creative writing, literature, and composition.

**Christy Tidwell** is an Associate Professor of English & Humanities at the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology. She regularly writes about environment, speculative fiction, and gender, and she is co-editor of *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* (Lexington Books, 2018) and of *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene* (Penn State UP, 2021).

# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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## Tentacles Everywhere: William Eubank's *Underwater*

(United States: TSG Entertainment and Chernin Entertainment, 2020)

Emily Alder and Sarah Artt

‘In space, no one can hear you scream’—strapline for *Alien* (1979)

If Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) is the now-classic hybrid of science fiction and horror, then William Eubank's *Underwater* (2020) demonstrates how this now-established narrative model can be used to address contemporary ecological concerns. Like *Alien*, *Underwater* deals with a small group negotiating survival in a claustrophobic and hostile environment, while menaced by monsters. But this time, instead of on a spaceship, we are in an extensive mining base, Kepler Station, 36,000 feet deep on the ocean floor. This scenario—nonetheless alien, but now much closer to home—importantly emphasises the relentless process of extraction and consumption of natural resources that underpins the economic and political systems ultimately responsible for climate change.

The Mariana Trench, as a magazine article forming part of the opening credits notes, ‘may as well be another planet’; it is ‘an isolated environment’ and (even if only to humans) ‘as deadly as space’. ‘Rumours of strange sightings at drill site [are] dismissed by the company’, we’re informed, while unknown physiological and psychological effects of working in the sunless, high-pressure environment are implied. All of this sets up expectations of a classic sf horror movie, with shades of *Alien*, H. P. Lovecraft, and James Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989). *Underwater* is also indebted to Neil Marshall's underground horror, *The Descent* (2005), which also features claustrophobic spaces, darkness, and creatures that have evolved perfectly to live deep in the earth. Using sf and horror conventions to encode the effects of carbon emissions and resource extraction methods on the planet and its global climate systems, *Underwater* presents a variety of ecohorror that we might call ‘climate horror’.



The film begins with an immediate crisis: a pressure breach in the structure of the base kills off many crewmembers and forces those who remain into survival mode, led (for a while) by Captain Lucien (Vincent Cassel). While the opening provides an exciting action sequence, it comes at the expense of any real connection to the characters, who must, and do, cooperate just to survive. We follow Norah (Kristen Stewart), a mechanical engineer who looks like the fetching mash-up of Jean Seberg and Ellen Ripley (*Alien*), even when she is covered in dirt and scratches, crawling through debris and the bodies of her fallen colleagues. Everything we've come to expect of disasters in space—a hull breach, a character sucked from an airlock, tense slow-motion EVA, malfunctioning space-suits—are present here. Nevertheless, these tropes resonate differently in the submarine setting; on the floor of our own planet, this alien space is disturbingly domestic.

*Underwater* is mired in the conventions of the horror genre: dark, enclosed spaces, mysterious noises, and of course, demonic creatures from the deep. Norah is deliberately positioned for us as the Final Girl in terms of physical appearance, drawing on some of what Carol Clover (1992) says of the heroines of early slasher films: 'The Final Girl is [...] feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way [...] but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality' (p. 51). In some ways, with her practical sweatpants and bleached buzz cut Norah evokes something of Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in her final incarnation in *Alien 3* (1992), an exhausted survivor who hasn't yet lost her grit. In *Underwater*, Norah both is and isn't the Final Girl. She is marked out as the protagonist through her voiceover and her solitary status at the outset of the film. Yet, she is pitted against two possible enemies: the collapsing base which she must work to make safe for herself and her colleagues, and later some angry, demonic sea monsters. So far, we are in textbook eco-horror territory with the natural world revolting to expel humans and their technologies (see e.g. Foy 2010, Parker 2019).

The location of Kepler Station at the bottom of the Mariana Trench is nearly seven miles deep. The company, Tian Industries, is drilling even deeper, disturbing the oceanic crust below the seabed and with it, whatever lives there. At first the characters attribute the collapse of the base to seismic disruption caused by the drilling, yet they cannot ignore hints they have somehow suffered a deliberate attack of some sort, that they have precipitated an active

response to human transgression against the environment. In one of the few moments of breathing space for the characters during their high-intensity flight for safety, which takes up most of the film's action, the perplexed engineer Smith (John Gallagher Jr.) observes a wrecked drill, which weighs 6000 tons, and whispers 'How did it get ripped up like that?'. The despairing biologist Emily (Jessica Henwick) then reflects 'We did this. We drilled the bottom of the ocean. We took too much. And now she's taking back. We're not supposed to be down here'. Emily's remarks hint at the breaching of planetary boundaries and the tipping points of climate change that our world is approaching with frightening speed (Steffen *et al.*, 2015).

While the creatures themselves are, as one character in the film remarks, very much 'Some *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* shit', they are ultimately just a convenient horror motif. The demon crabs, jellyfish, flesh-eating tentacles, and the half-seen, kraken-like Final Monster are symptoms of a transgression that has already taken place. That transgression is irreversible climate damage, set in motion by our own predecessors generations ago. This is what sets climate horror apart from eco-horror: the knowledge that even a rebellion by creatures from the deep will not be enough to repair what has already been done. If, as Clover suggests, the slasher films of the 70s and 80s tell us something of that era's sexual attitudes, climate horror expresses today's collective dread. *Underwater* is nothing new, but the dread that it conceals, the fear of being too late to reverse global warming or to mitigate rising ocean temperatures may be a crucial amplification of eco-horror's more generalised sense of exposure to the wrath of nature. If Norah is the Final Girl, it is climate catastrophe that is the serial killer or alien who always comes back for the sequels. If horror is always about cultural anxieties, then here in climate horror the fear is of the inexorable consequences of climate catastrophe that cannot be vanquished—although there is still hope for mitigating them.

*Underwater* is often extreme and fanciful in its creatures, not to mention containing some logical inconsistencies such as diving helmets that can withstand eight tons per square inch of water pressure yet crack under three blows from a fire-extinguisher. Nevertheless, the film has a clear point to make. Norah saves Smith and Emily by blowing up the base, the monsters, and herself, concluding that 'Sometimes you have to stop feeling. Start doing'. She breaks through the inertia of our culture's general inaction around addressing climate change—of eco-paralysis—but it is a temporary victory: single direct actions are not that effective for

driving long-term change. Tian Industries suppresses the testimony of sole survivors Smith and Emily and is going to drill again. We have no reason to suppose that more monsters of the same species do not still remain, heralds of a deep-sea ecosystem rising against its extractive colonisers. They haven't been stopped, and neither has the power of equally giant and tentacular corporations.

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**Dr Emily Alder** is Lecturer in Literature and Culture at Edinburgh Napier University. Her research interests lie in literature and science, especially of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and she has published on weird, Gothic, and science fiction. Emily is Editor of the journal *Gothic Studies* and Membership Secretary of the British Society for Literature and Science.

**Dr Sarah Artt** is Lecturer in Film and Literature at Edinburgh Napier University. She writes widely about film, television, and literature for general and scholarly audiences. She is currently working on a book for Bloomsbury about silence in the work of Lynne Ramsay, Joanna Hogg, Céline Sciamma and Lucile Hadžihalilović.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Lorcan Finnegan, *Vivarium***

**(Ireland, Denmark, Belgium: Vertigo Releasing, 2019)**

Karen J. Renner

That the horror evoked by horror films is partly a fear of our own mortality is no surprise. However, many recent horror films are tapping into a deeper and more complex emotion, one that could perhaps be best described as existential dread: the fear that after our death, our entire existence will be forgotten within a generation or two at best and thereby rendered meaningless. As we witness increasing evidence of climate change in the natural disasters that plague the world around us with more frequency, anxieties about our own mortality increasingly parallel fears about the potential extinction of humankind as a whole.

The 2019 film *Vivarium*,<sup>34</sup> an international co-production between Ireland, Denmark, and Belgium, released in the U.S. in late March 2020, fits soundly into this category. Directed by Lorcan Finnegan, the film centers on Gemma (Imogen Poots) and Tom (Jesse Eisenberg), a nice enough couple who are interested in buying a home in the suburbs. They tour one in a new development named Yonder, only to find that soon after they arrive, their real estate agent Martin (Jonathan Aris) has abandoned them and no matter which way they turn, they are unable to find their way out.

The film relies on two ecogothic metaphors. The first, evoked during the film's opening credits, is a disturbing fact lifted from the natural world: brood parasitism, represented most famously by the cuckoo, which is known to invade the nests of other species, eject the birds' eggs or young, and replace them with their own brood. The cuckoo is a potent symbol and one that has played a symbolic role in horror before. Indeed, *Vivarium* was inspired by one of those predecessors, *Village of the Damned* (1960), itself an adaptation of John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), which cites the infamous bird in its title (Cuffari, 2020). In

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<sup>34</sup> You can find an [interview](#) with director Lorcan Finnegan in Issue II of the *Gothic Nature* journal (pp. 278-284).

Wyndham's 1957 novel, women in an English village all become impregnated by an alien species and give birth to human-alien hybrids with a hive mind, telepathic powers, and little regard for their human parents.

Gemma and Tom soon meet the 'cuckoo' they have been assigned when they are delivered a child—literally delivered: the child arrives in a box with a label that reads 'Raise the child and be released'. It's a boy, of course, the gender foretold by the blue nursery already prepared in their home. Never given a name, The Boy (Senan Jennings) is both unnerving and annoying. He wakes his foster parents every morning by shrieking at the top of his lungs until they place breakfast (cornflakes with the perfect amount of milk and orange juice) in front of him. In addition, The Boy has an uncanny ability to memorise what Gemma and Tom say and seems to delight in enacting their previous fights in an eerily modulated adult voice (Aris's, in fact, the actor who plays Martin).

Thankfully, The Boy grows fast—on day 98 he looks to be somewhere around seven—but it's not fast enough for Gemma and Tom, who quickly lapse into a nihilistic depression. And one can hardly blame them: in addition to having to raise this 'creepy little mutant', their lives are entirely insipid. Yonder, the eponymous vivarium of the film and its second ecogothic metaphor, looks the same in every direction. Like the neighborhoods mocked in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) or the television show *Weeds* (2005-2012), all of the homes are neat and tidy cookie-cutter identicals. Even the clouds in Yonder are perfectly cloud-shaped, never resembling anything other than what they are, rendering the very game of imagining shapes in them impossible or at least not very fun. It is exactly what one might design as an enclosed ecosystem for human pets if one didn't understand the very human distaste for prisons of any kind.

On one level, then, the film acts as an indictment of the very worst kind of suburban life, which we've seen critiqued more overtly in films like *Pleasantville* (1998), *American Beauty* (1999) and *Revolutionary Road* (2008) and which Finnegan himself examined in his earlier short *Foxes* (2011). However, the true horror of the vivarium metaphor arises from its ability to show humans functioning as mere playthings or—worse—livestock to some other



human or superior, otherworldly being. It's hardly a new conceit as similar ones form the foundation of several end-of-millennium movies like *Cube* (1997), *Dark City* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1999). However, it's become a common metaphor used by horror makers working in what Jimmy Packham (2019) calls the new subgenre of 'vegetarian horror', as seen in texts such as *The Farm* (2019), *The Hunt* (2020) and *Anonymous Animals* (2020). Films like this are particularly unsettling for both the disgust evoked by the dehumanisation of our species, as well as the disturbing realisation that *we* are ourselves guilty of committing these same treacheries against the natural world.

Trapped in the vivarium of *Yonder*, the only company Gemma and Tom have is each other, and though they are in love, it's not enough. Tom soon discovers that it is possible to dig in his yard, and dig he does—a sort of 'work' that allows him to entirely disengage under the guise of being a sort of breadwinner. Gemma tries to bond with The Boy, even saving it after Tom locks it in the car, intending to starve it. However, once it's older, it disappears every day—seemingly going off to be schooled by its elders—and becomes much more menacing. In addition to a horrifyingly mundane sense of malaise, the film offers some truly frightening moments. At one point, for example, Gemma tries to persuade The Boy to describe the creatures he meets with when he disappears every day. When he says he's not allowed, she tricks him into doing an imitation of them instead, and what Gemma witnesses in response convinces her (and viewers) that she should rethink her desire to see her captors. The sounds and physical effects mimicked by the child are an uncanny mixture of behaviors borrowed from the animal, and especially avian, kingdom, the kind you might find in a nature documentary. Coming from what appears to be a human child, however, the result is terrifying.

In one sense, then, the horror of *Vivarium* comes from imagining our humanity stripped from us, as we are reduced to a mere child-rearing technology. In another, the film forces us to recognise that the horrible life to which Gemma and Tom are subjected is the very same one we inflict on so much of the world around us, and so perhaps no fate would be more befitting us in the end. And yet acknowledging that we as a species might deserve this punishment is one thing; witnessing a likeable couple actually suffer it is another. Ultimately, *Vivarium* reminds us of the fate that awaits us as we continue to colonise the planet, driving out the natural world and becoming increasingly reliant on processed foods and plastic wares in the

process. We don't need an invasion of aliens to end up suffering the same end: we are sentencing ourselves to it every day.

**Karen J. Renner** is Associate Professor of English at Northern Arizona University, where she teaches classes in American literature and popular culture. Her book *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2016, and she is currently working on *Killer Kids: Youth Violence in US Popular Culture*, under contract with the University Press of Mississippi.

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# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Colonialism's Ghosts Haunt the Near Future: Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles' *Bacurau***

(Brazil: CinemaScópio Produções, *et al.*, 2019)

Antonio López

After winning the Jury Prize at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, the Brazilian film *Bacurau* was set for US distribution in 2020 but was delayed due to Covid. It has yet to reach US theatres but gained widespread critical acclaim when it was screened through a virtual cinema distribution model during the pandemic. Set in the near future with water shortages as the backdrop, *Bacurau* was filmed in the Northeastern hinterlands of Brazil by co-directors Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles. To establish the film's tone, the opening scene features Teresa (Bárbara Colen) returning to attend a family funeral in Bacurau (a small outpost named after a rare bird that hunts at night) by hitching a ride on a water tanker that is riddled with bullet holes. This image hints from the outset at the key themes of resource extraction conflict and water scarcity that pervade the ecological conditions throughout the film. Further foreshadowing the film's climactic orgy of violence, these early shots show Teresa encountering coffins along the way, a corpse strewn across the road, and a raving village doctor played by the grand dame of Brazilian cinema, Sônia Braga. Once Teresa arrives on the dusty streets of the village, she is then given a psychotropic drug, which initiates a cinematic acid trip into the liminal depths of horror.

The first half of the film builds up tension with common horror movie tropes: the Bacurau community experiences a mysterious escalation of isolation, invasion, and violence, such as the sudden loss of cellphone signal, the town's inexplicable disappearance from online maps, the puzzling arrival of a stampede of escaped horses, the discovery of a murdered family, and a hovering drone that looks like a B-movie UFO. One afternoon a pair of enigmatic English-speaking foreign visitors appear on expensive dirt bikes, wearing neon-coloured road suits, foretelling a larger group of foreigners that will arrive after dark. As is common in many horror films, a community (or family) has to defend itself against terrifying attackers, but in this case, instead of zombies, deformed mutants, or demonic assailants, the town of Bacurau

must defend itself against a gang of American tourists who have paid for the chance to hunt humans.

Through its self-conscious use of cult-film aesthetics, this genre-bending film nods to Jodorowsky-like weirdness, Spaghetti Westerns, and 70s-era slasher flicks. Formalistic characteristics include horizontal wipes and quick zooms, with a bow to John Carpenter as the film crescendos into a hallucinatory climax of mayhem and gore. (The town's high school is named João Carpenteiro, and Carpenter's composition, 'Night', is featured in the soundtrack).

Bacurau is a site of class resistance. Its outlaw anti-hero characters defend and save the town, reversing the classical Western trope in which the outlaws are the antagonists. It's also a twist on the urban/country dichotomy in American '70s rural slasher films, where class revenge against urbanites is committed by the low-tech hillbilly figure, whose liminality is characterised by ambiguous 'gendered, socio-economic, racial, and species status, but in relationship with technology' (Soles, 2013: p. 245). Like slasher hillbillies, Bacurau's residents resemble the pre-modern, uncivilised, wild, dangerous, and animalistic Other. But unlike the slasher genre, it's the urbanites who are the insane, homicidal maniacs. The town's inhabitants—which are a diverse mix of races and genders, including queer and trans folks—are grounded and earthy. They practice capoeira, a Brazilian martial art developed by slaves, and many of the weapons used in self-defense come from a decrepit little town museum, connecting the colonial past with the future.

Water politics (and scarcity) establish background power-dynamics, with *Bacurau's* ecological politics exemplified by how the local river is dammed and under the control of a corrupt regional government. But it's the sanctioned presence of the rich North Americans and their German mercenary guide, Michael (Udo Kier), that distills the film's critique of transnational capitalism. Michael is a bloodthirsty racist who contrasts with the town's diverse inhabitants, setting up a conflict between a tight-knit rural community against an encroaching global and technologically dominant force. The film draws out larger transnational ecocinema themes that centre the leitmotif of global discontent and inequality. Instead of nature being the source of unseen forces, it is systemic violence and white supremacy that are the true horrors

here. From the perspective of the wealthy hunters who have come for their human safari hunt, the locals are seen as disposable people occupying a sacrifice zone that is only useful for the extraction of water and human-destruction-as-entertainment. Disappearance from satellite maps makes them unrepresented and, therefore, invisible and expendable. As if playing a real-life video game, the intruders can surveil the community with their own technology and isolate it from the outside world as they murder locals to accumulate game points.

Transnational ecocinema is characterised by themes of hybridity, postcolonialism, diaspora, and the geopolitics and economics of a global inequality (Kääpä, 2013). In particular, *Bacurau* fits Lu and Mi's definition of ecocinema: 'the study of the production and reproduction of life, the relationship between the human body and the ecosystem, and the controlling and administering of the human body in modern capitalist and socialist regimes' (quoted in Kääpä, 2013: p. 27). Though the town has a strong sense of specific, geographical place, *Bacurau* is also a 'world place' that stands more broadly for the Global South, with its boundary-pushing characters and their hybrid identities clearly outside the conservative ideal of a society that seeks to preserve binaries and rigid hierarchies.

The filmmakers have likened the town of *Bacurau* to a remixed *quilombo*, the term used for historical colonies established by escaped slaves, thereby referencing the Utopian imagination of Afrofuturism and the dream of freedom and escape from enslavement. The invasion of foreigners in *Bacurau* conjures the ghouls of colonial terror; however, the film also alludes to the horror of contemporary reality now faced by Brazilians in which ecosystems and their inhabitants are violently extracted and sacrificed for the global economy. In response, the community works as an organic whole, as if they themselves sprout from the Earth to defend the land. Indeed, they represent the ultimate revenge of Earth—and literal earth—when Michael, the leader of the foreign invaders, is buried alive. Bound by some kind of shared hallucinatory matrix, like planetary antibodies the town violently exorcises the ghosts of colonialism's past and reclaims the land from a brutal future. Like the conclusion of so many horror films, dawn brings the end of liminal terror. The ominous attackers from the Global North are vanquished, along with their white supremacist biopolitics of extraction and disposable humanity. For a brief moment, at least, the horror of neo-Colonial power dynamics is resisted by subaltern class warfare.

*Bacurau* is available on Blu-ray and streaming on Mubi.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Antonio Lopez, Ph.D.** has a research focus on bridging ecojustice with media literacy. His most recent book is *Ecomedia Literacy: Integrating Ecology into Media Education* (Routledge, 2021). Currently he is Chair and Associate Professor of Communications and Media Studies at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy. Resources and writing are available at: <https://antonio-lopez.com/>

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Michael Belcher

### **Contradictory Impulses: John Pogue's *Deep Blue Sea 3***

(USA: Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2020)

Carter Soles

Like its two predecessors, the third *Deep Blue Sea* movie stages a scenario in which a small group of humans battles genetically enhanced, super-intelligent sharks. While the first two *Deep Blue Sea* films took place in high-tech underwater laboratory complexes, *DBS3* is set on Little Happy, a human-built former fishing village atop a reef in the Mozambique channel. The humans in this film are headed by marine biologist/shark-whisperer Emma Collins (Tania Raymonde), who works with her team to study the diverse marine life that inhabits what is called 'the nursery', a small bay created by the reef. With the exception of the genetic modification theme, which evokes both the Gothic classic *Frankenstein* and the ecohorror franchise *Jurassic Park*, this movie broadly follows the same overall plot structure of another popular shark-fantasy-horror, *The Shallows* (2016), in which protagonist Nancy Adams (Blake Lively) survives by fighting and killing a shark in an isolated bay. Of course, both *The Shallows* and *DBS3* follow the example set by *Jaws* (1975), which establishes the shark as the ultimate onscreen predator, a monstrous creature reduced to terrifying 'fin and jaws' and little else (Lerberg, 2016: p. 35). While solidly generic in most respects, *DBS3* is of interest to ecoGothic critics for its thoroughgoing, if at times vague and contradictory, engagement with several ecocritical issues, especially human/nonhuman/genetically modified animal relations and the possibility of human extinction as a result of such experiments.

*DBS3* makes its ecocritical investments clear right away. Little Happy is threatened by sea level rise. While once it was a fishing village with 800 human inhabitants, it is now a half-flooded, derelict environment, home to only six people: Emma, her three coworkers, and one couple, Bahari (Siya Mayola) and Nandi (Avumile Qongqo), who are holdouts from the original village community. The movie opens with Emma recording a video blog post about her work in the nursery, inviting the viewer to appreciate its wonders. Before diving in, Emma points out to her viewers that the sea level rise affecting Little Happy will also flood coastal cities like Miami and New Orleans, therefore directly impacting denizens of the USA (and by extension other developed nations with coastal cities). Yet, as is usually the case with mainstream horror/thriller films, Emma does not explain what any of her blog devotees should

or can do about any of this; for example, she does not utilise her platform to directly call out big oil for causing Earth's atmospheric warming.

Nevertheless, Emma and company are presented sympathetically throughout the film: they are our environmentalist heroes who only want to study and protect the local great white sharks and other nonhuman denizens of the reef. Conversely, the film's villains, a team of shark hunters led by Emma's ex-boyfriend Richard (Nathaniel Buzolic), show up with the express purpose of killing the three genetically enhanced bull sharks who escaped the destruction of the *Deep Blue Sea 2* lab complex. While Richard himself is, at times, sympathetic, he and his team mostly view the bull sharks as mere monsters to be eradicated, and go about their task in unsafe and excessively violent ways: they tote guns with explosive rounds into the fragile reef environment and attempt to detonate a mine in the nursery. Furthermore, despite the sharks' enhanced intelligence and evidence of fraternal and maternal emotional bonds with each other, Richard does not view the bull sharks as meriting his consideration—he sees them as mechanistic killers and has no compunction manipulating their vulnerabilities in order to capture, torture, and kill them. Viewers, meanwhile, are intended to align in reaction with Emma and her colleagues' horror at this violence.

Thus the film does an admirable job generating sympathy for the sharks, at least until the plot necessitates their destruction at Emma's hands. Emma is like so many other scientist protagonists in animal horror films, e.g., Matt Hooper in *Jaws*: someone who loves sharks yet does not blink an eye when it comes time to kill them to safeguard human species' survival. This ethos is best conveyed when Emma traps the last bull in a mechanical trash compactor. Just before she pushes the switch that will crush the shark to death, Emma tells it, 'I'm so sorry'—the extent of her mercy toward it. Instead of seeking a way to coexist with the genetically modified bulls, embodying Val Plumwood's notion that we humans 'recognize ourselves in mutual, ecological terms, as part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater' (Plumwood, 2000: n.p.), Emma instead accepts the idea that other intelligent species who threaten human dominance must be eradicated. She pushes the switch and the shark suffers a gory demise.

The film engages another common animal horror trope, in which certain nonhuman animals—in this case, a local great white shark named Sally—team up with the humans against

the monstrous threat of the genetically modified bulls. Indeed, before attacking their first onscreen human, the enhanced bull sharks kill several great whites, leaving their mutilated bodies on the seafloor for Emma to discover. Their rampant killing, reminiscent of the *Indominus Rex*'s murderous behavior versus other dinosaurs in *Jurassic World* (2015), shocks Emma and positions the natural great whites as suffering victims of the bloodthirsty modified sharks. Underlining the great whites' status as sympathetic allies, Emma makes the point that whatever the great whites suffer under climate change harbingers what humans will also suffer—the bull sharks, anthropogenic in origin if not directly tied to climate change, are simply the terrifying agents hastening that shared doom. The ultimate fear here is not of natural sharks but fear of our own scientific creations.

Yet for all its attempts to render the sharks, especially the whites, sympathetically, *DBS3* does not afford the viewer enough screen time to see Sally the great white as an individual or to really understand why she would save Emma from the bulls during the film's climactic battle. In the end, Sally feels more like a convenient plot device rather than a character. Near the end of the film, she appears one last time to silently bid Emma farewell as she sails away from Little Happy. In this, Sally assumes the role usually reserved for marine mammals like dolphins, who, for example, celebrate the demise of the shark at the end of *Jaws 3D* (1983), joyously breaching the water's surface once the 'truly wild animal [the shark] is expelled' (Ingram, 2000: p. 91). Like those human-friendly dolphins, great whites in *DBS3* seem perfectly happy with (certain) humans encroaching upon their feeding grounds even though we caused climate change and widespread oceanic habitat destruction/degradation in the first place. This positioning of Sally as Emma's friend is perhaps the film's most insidious ideological paradox.

The film also depicts Emma and the two other onscreen women in contradictory ways. Emma is the film's active protagonist and yet, like Nancy in *The Shallows*, she is placed on constant display for the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975: p. 11), wearing a bikini top and cutoffs through the bulk of the film and stripping down to just the bikini most times she goes in the water. Furthermore, while the original *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) blames its woman scientist for the escape of the monstrous sharks, having her nobly sacrifice herself so two male characters may survive, *DBS3* flips these gender roles, having Emma's male assistant Shaw (a possible reference to Robert Shaw as Quint in *Jaws*?) sacrifice himself so that Emma, Miya (Reina Aoi),

and Nandi may survive. The film ends with these three women sailing toward the mainland in a small fishing boat, with Emma saying, 'Planet's not going to save itself'. To complete the celebratory picture, in line with the 'friendly marine species' trope previously noted, the women see dolphins swimming peacefully near their boat as they head off to save the planet via unspecified means. While I applaud the ecofeminist gesture the film makes here, it feels superficial and glib after the violent shark-crushing we have just witnessed. If we are saving the planet, why are the intelligent, sensitive, genetically modified bull sharks beyond our concern? Do we not have a special duty toward them as their creators? Like so many generic monster movies, *DBS3* says no: our only responsibility is to destroy such creations as spectacularly as possible.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Carter Soles** is Associate Professor of Film Studies in the English Department at SUNY Brockport. He has written on the cannibalistic hillbilly in 1970's slasher films for *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2012) and is co-editor, with Christy Tidwell, of *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene* (Penn State UP, 2021).

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## **CREATIVE CORNER**

# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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## CREATIVE CORNER

### **The Empty Crab —It's the Real Thing**

*Ngoi Hui Chien*

*'If you listen carefully / you will hear the clicking sounds / of the ghostly claws / of my friends  
and me, crawling / and swimming down your veins'*

#### **Critical accompaniment**

The poem uses the Gothic image of a crab to describe the circumstances of a plastic bottle discarded on a beach, broken down by sunlight and becoming marine litter that harms living organisms, including humans. By tapping into the wellspring of ecoGothic imagination, the creative piece evokes discomfiture among the reader to draw their attention to the oft-neglected problem of marine debris. The amphibious nature of the crab, which exemplifies the transcendence across the boundary between the sea and the shore, represents the threats that a plastic bottle could pose to both ecosystems. The horror of the shoreline takes up a significant valence as the boundary does not only register the uncertainty of moving into an unknown territory but also witnesses the departure of plastic waste, whose unpredictable journey and vicissitudes will constitute an ungraspable impact on the inhabitants of the earth.

'It's the Real Thing'. That was one of the best-known slogans of Coca-Cola. It is used as the subtitle of the poem that draws its inspiration from the news that Coca-Cola is now the most common plastic litter on UK beaches. To enhance the realness of this environmental issue, the poem is written in the first-person point of view that allows it to open up an imaginary space in which the 'I'—the Gothic crab—could narrate its fateful story with a stronger emotive force to the reader and impel them to take real action to overcome the problem.

## **The Empty Crab—It's the Real Thing**

Stranded on the beach

I was deserted with an empty body

across the oceans

an assiduous journey to look for you

my fluid, my putrefied flesh

the parasites have long swigged

The ravenous sunlight will roast me

until I become crispy

its glare a knife piercing

through my soul it keeps piercing, a prelude to chopping

off my legs and claws

bit by bit, but

nobody will notice me

because there is no more foam

from my physique that no longer breathes

Do you know that

all the smaller Is will still walk horizontally

towards the horizon

towards the hope that you once shone

do you still remember, not in my blue sky

but the ocean filled with pieces of eternity

Scattered my toxic remains will be  
all over the sand, drifted will be  
into the water, into the blood

If you listen carefully  
you will hear the clicking sounds  
of the ghostly claws  
of my friends and me, crawling  
and swimming down your veins

Like the bubbly sensation of the fizzy drink  
swishing unceasingly  
in your crammed tummy exhausted from  
burping the undigestible  
exhaust

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Ngoi Hui Chien** is a literary scholar from Malaysia. His research interests encompass, but are not limited to, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, war literature, philosophy, and ecocriticism. Other than literary criticism, he is committed to creative writing too, especially poetry.

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## **The Tide of Plastics Rising**

*Micaela Edelson*

*'Plastic...does not decompose. It persists'.*

### **Critical Accompaniment**

Horror is the reality we're not expecting, the reality we don't even know differs from our limited view until the mirage of normalcy starts to fracture and shocks us into new knowledge. The plastics crisis is visible to many in littered roadways, but behind closed doors, we don't see how plastics seep through our plumbing, our air circulation system, and accumulate in piles on the poor side of town. The extent of the plastic crisis is not only a horror in itself, but also shocking in its oblivion to mainstream society and our consumptive craze. But the extent nor even the misconception of the plastic crisis doesn't haunt as severely as the legacy of our plastics long past our time on this planet, as individuals and as a species. Mountains of plastics crashing against haunted shores is horrific and will be the reality lest we see what we don't want to and change our system. The horror is we're running out of time.

I am an environmental scientist who previously worked with multinational companies to transform their plastics economy to that of a circular system. I encountered the immensity of our plastic-preferred system on a daily basis. Millions of metric tons—littered, landfilled, or leaked into the ocean. Outside of that work, I cringe with the polypropylene utensils automatically dispensed with every takeout order, with every straw served carelessly, with every black and colored plastic container I recycle knowing it's still fated for the landfill. Plastic is one of many environmental crises in the world, but it is also emblematic of the cross-cutting impacts of our consumption-driven system.

## **The Tide of Plastics Rising**

By 2030, plastics will triumph over fish in their weighted presence in the ocean. The clarity of water will succumb to transparent polymers. Fish will evolve to know their new competitors or will die consuming the microplastics leaked from the erosion of car tires, microbeads in personal care products flushed down the bathroom sink, or the polyester pilings extracted from washing machines. Our fishing nets will come up empty as retribution for the littered ghost fishing gear of ships past, haunting the ocean floor and entangling unsuspecting organisms. Plastics will accumulate in our intestines and our blood stream as they do in the stomachs of albatrosses—the new canary in the coalmine, the new eagle eggs falling fate to our application of DDT. Will we listen to the albatross' call? Or the sea turtles? Or the other billions of organisms inhabiting what once was the great blue? Or will we continue on our linear path of 'make, take, toss', growing the economy and oceanic debris.

With every plastic ever produced still in existence and with the push for consumption needed to sustain a speculative economy built on extraction and impact erasure, our current plastics economy is dangerously overwhelming both our ecosystems and ourselves. During plastics' lifetime—from production through to disposal—the impact is so incongruous to our relationship with our toothpaste tubes, our bread bags and clips, our blueberry cartons, that the mundanity of their use obscures the actualised impact of these plastics on our planet.

In a balanced ecosystem, twigs and fallen leaves comeingle on the forest floor, carried with the rain, they traverse streams, creeks, and rivers and enter into the great and connected water that comprises over 70% of the earth's surface. There, plankton and other aquatic microorganisms convert the organic matter into energy, energy to be upcycled along the food chain, nourishing the fish, the barracudas, and the sharks. As the shark dies, her energy is recycled by detritivores and re-invigorated into the lower levels of the ecosystem's hierarchy. The circularity of the ecosystem, unyielding in its sustainability and equilibrium, has persisted since our planet's dawn and will persist despite the fate of humanity and our environmental fallout.

Decomposition, finality, and re-integration are integral components to proper ecosystem functioning, albeit as organisms feed from organic plant matter or as the sharks,



barracudas, and fish lay in their grave. How many leaves would grace the earth if they were not decomposed? How many bodies? How much of the 40% of wasted food in America would sit in piles along highway lines towering over us to taunt in our wastefulness to display our negligence (U.S. FDA, 2021)? The biotic origins of life's cycles allow for decomposition and affords us the ignorance with what we let for rot.

Plastic, however, does not decompose. It persists. For a thousand years, plastic perseveres, posing a barrier between the syntheticism of humanity's creation and the organicism of the natural world, accumulating atop one another with annual production rates of 380 million tonnes—two-thirds the mass of the human population (Ritchie & Roser, 2018: p. 20218). How can the circle of decomposition, the circle of energy recycling, and the circle of life persist when the synthetic barrier preaches immortality and defense, desires shared by their creators?

From their inception, the environmental impact of plastics is flavored with the fate of fossil fuels, extracted from the deep trenches of the earth to release into an atmosphere altered and abused. The health impacts shine solidly in the 85-mile stretch between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where 150 petrochemical factories make our plastics and spew carcinogens afflicting the mostly Black neighborhoods. Dubbed 'Cancer Alley', the community's cancer rate is nearly 50 times the national average (Pasley, 2020; TorHoerman Law, 2020). From carbon and cancer, the blindingly hot liquid polymer molded into the perfect receptacle to carry the symbol of American consumption from the chemical lab to your lips. Enjoy.

How long is plastic at our side? How long do we grant it pleasure to grace our beings, to quench our thirst, keep safe our sandwiches, wrap our vegetables, tampons, and batteries, before being discarded among stale fries and molding blueberries? The syntheticism contrasts sharply with the organicism of their decay. Our toothpaste tubes and shampoo bottles can last whole months before their emptiness warrants an apathetic farewell.

Of course, the life of the plastic does not yield in the trash bin. It does not erase from existence as it erases from our minds. If it gets recycled, a fate for 9% of plastics in the US, the plastic might be lucky to return to its original format, it might return as a sneaker, hat, or

running track. Yet, more likely, it will be exported to Malaysia or Indonesia, where the profitability of waste export lies in its erasure from our view.

Burned openly amidst bare-footed children searching for high-value resin to feed their families, the carbon contained during production clears towards the clouds, releases into the atmosphere, and buries deep, deep into the lungs of such vulnerable waste pickers. Inundated with the trash of the other, breathing in the fumes of our consumption, their health discarded with the bottle.

Competing against the recycled or the exported are the plastics destined for the sea. Leaking from unsanitary landfills, falling out of garbage trucks, or simply tossed out of the car with callousness, 8 million tonnes of plastic enter our ocean each year, equivalent to an entire dump truck load per minute, 60 minutes an hour, 24 hours a day, 365.25 days a year (Pennington, 2016; Ritchie & Roser, 2018).

Circling in the great oceanic gyres up to double the size of Texas, the plastics comfort each other from their lives of use and abuse. Crafted from the bones of ancient beings to then be discarded and forgotten. The mortality of their lives thousands of years ago haunt us as they float roasting in the sun, unable to die for a thousand years more.

Our aversion towards disposables enables the plastic to travel the far reaches of the planet and allows the human touch to prosper even where the body has yet to conquer. Like the Fanta bottle resting at the bottom of the Mariana's Trench, the deepest known location on this planet, plastic is an unyielding symbol of humanity's penetration.

We've seen the pictures of turtles caught in fishing nets, with straws up their noses. We've seen fish and crabs caught in the six-pack plastic ring used to keep our soda and beer together. We've seen bird stomachs dissected to show the indigestible plastic accumulating, blocking out room for food and slowly starving the species. We've seen these iconic images preaching to reduce plastic consumption, iterating the impact of our polymer-heavy lifestyle—we know the ecological impacts, but our systems have yet to change.

And with the humanist narrative to appeal to, should I not speak to the microplastics found in the human placenta? Or the phthalates in our blood that have been linked to autism spectrum and other neurological disorders? The albatrosses are calling, will their call fall to deaf ears at the cost of even our own health?

As our discarded plastics lie in landfills, burn in open fields, or swim indefinitely in the oceanic gyres, we need to continually produce new plastics to accommodate both our growing population and our growing plastic consumption. Producing more, emitting more, disposing more.

Our planet is contained and contaminated. Plastics do not disappear, they accumulate. They accumulate in our oceans, our sediments, our air, and in our bloodstream. They will continue to accumulate on top one another until we see life through polymer-tinted lenses. We have all but sealed our fate.

## 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 writing has been featured in a variety of literary journals, including *Gothic Nature Journal*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and *The Washington Post*, among other platforms. Website: [www.micaelaedelson.com](http://www.micaelaedelson.com).

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# GOTHIC NATURE



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## FUGUE (a novel excerpt)

*B. Anne Adriaens*

*'Don't go too near the water, mind'.*

### Critical Accompaniment

The rubbish we throw away eventually comes back to haunt us. In *Fugue*, the sea is no more than a liquid corpse, a stinking dump that has become the embodiment of our worst fears. It has eroded the shoreline, including seawalls and buildings, chasing most survivors inland. To the descendants of these survivors, the sea has become taboo. Though of course, it hasn't 'gone away' entirely, and for those, like *Fugue*'s main character, who read the old books, it becomes a source of fascination. But when she reaches the shore, she finds that the place she's been dreaming about is nothing but polluted ruins, and only the friendliness of the small coastal community softens her disappointment. Still, despite the general desolation, she's drawn to the edge of the water and soon, she's unable to tell the difference between what her eyes perceive and the pristine beach her mind has reconstructed.

*Fugue*, like many dystopian stories, started with the question 'What if?'. What if the environmental crisis unfolding is left to run its course without mitigating action? What impact would this have on the land, on human societies? What kind of environment would future generations grow up in? Yet I wasn't content extrapolating aspects of the present into an imagined future. Instead, I wondered, what if the monsters from fairytales now represented facets of the natural world and as such, sought revenge? That's how the idea of an 'eco-fable' came to be: to use the fantastical to tell an environment-focused story.

## Fugue: Excerpt

Rain asks the question that any local would: ‘What’s the weather forecast for today?’

‘It should stay fair for a while. Bit of a breeze, but nothing threatening on the horizon’, he answers, looking at her more intently than usual.

‘Cool. I’m going to get some fresh air then’.

‘You do look a bit pale. Are you feeling okay?’

‘Sure’.

‘Hm. By the way, isn’t young Jeremy coming to visit this morning?’

‘How do you know that?’

‘He said “see you tomorrow” when he and Norah left last night. So I asked’.

‘Ah. Yes, but I won’t go far. If he gets here before I’m back, he’ll find me’.

‘All right. Don’t go too near the water, mind’.

‘I know’.

The hotel may hold a lot of space, but no matter how interesting said space is, it’s still enclosed. After a while, getting out becomes a necessity.

An hour later, a strong breeze ruffles her hair. It looks like the tide is on its way in. She nods to herself. She sets out along the shoreline on the other side of the cliff from where the hotel stands, following the ghost of the old promenade. The sea is unusually calm this morning, as though it exhausted itself during the recent storms, and the glimmer of sunlight dancing on



the water's surface is particularly peaceful. It holds her gaze, longer and longer, until she forgets to look where she's treading.

The ragged edges of ruins and derelict objects slowly fade, not so much swallowed by the waves as gradually paling to nothingness. She's still smiling, face turned to the water, when something hits her in the belly. Jumping back at the impact, she realises she's come to the end of some kind of raised road—or path, rather. What hit her is right in front of her: a rusting iron railing. A bit further left, there's a gap, then stone steps going down. The steps are covered in green-brown muck, but at the bottom, there's sand. *What?* Carefully, as though afraid she might be disappointed, she lifts her gaze from the ground. The sand stretches into a long, clean strip.

Rain's clear laughter is the happiest sound this place has witnessed in a long time.

Not thinking any further, she starts down the slippery steps, slides a couple of times but manages to not land on her arse. After a few steps on the beach, she takes off her boots and socks. Timid waves lap at her feet, pleasantly cool. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. *Wait till I tell them they've got a nice beach just around the corner.*

\*

The door opens much more quickly than Jeremy expected. Then the smile freezes on his face. Evgeni steps aside and lets him in.

'Where's Rain? I was supposed to meet her this morning'.

'I know. And she hasn't forgotten. She just went out for a stroll. Said she needed some air. She seemed a bit 'off' this morning'.

'But she didn't drink anything last night'.

'It's not that. She just seemed a bit under the weather, as my mother used to say. Though what *I* would say is that it seems as though a dream she had was still clinging to her'.

Jeremy shakes his head. The old man was clearly off on one of his tangents again. ‘Did she say which way she was headed?’

‘All she said was that she wouldn’t go far and that you’d find her easily’.

‘Okay. I’d better be off then. See you in a bit’, he says, walking back down the path.

‘I’ll make you kids some lunch, all right?’

Jeremy gives him the thumbs up, not looking back.

Where did she go? He was supposed to show her around, that’s what they’d agreed. That was the idea. Not that she’d wander off on her own, leaving him to search for her among the rubble. By the time he reaches the shoreline, he’s well annoyed. *Okay, deep breath. And another.* It takes a few more before he can think straight. The water stretches in front of him, looking perfectly harmless. He knows not to trust it though, even if it does provide a sense of calm. Based on the little he’s learned about Rain, she must have come here, straight to the water’s edge. But once there, did she turn left or right?

He doesn’t really want to chance it, so he climbs on the remnants of an old seawall and scans the surrounding area—then swears.

The tide is still out, the air is clear—and there she is, in the distance, walking through the shallows like she’s on a stroll along the promenade. He clammers back down then starts running towards the patch of land laid bare by the outgoing tide, the same question on repeat in his mind. *What the fuck’s wrong with you?*

He daren’t call out to her, decides to observe things first. And as he gets closer, he slows down. Something’s definitely wrong: she’s not wearing her boots, she’s carrying them.

He starts calling her name gently. No reaction whatsoever. Then something else catches his eye. Every time the water retreats, it takes with it a thin rivulet of blood. He stops only for a few seconds, long enough to ascertain he’s seeing what he’s seeing. How can she walk like

that when she's clearly cut her feet? Eventually, urgency prevails over his astonishment, and he rushes, half-stumbling, to her side. 'Rain? Rain! What are you doing?'

As he grabs her elbow, she finally turns to him, with the most serene look he's ever seen on her face.

'Rain, you're not wearing your boots. You're cutting yourself!'

As her lips remain stitched into faint smile, he starts shaking her. Telling her she's scaring him, tears threatening to spill. And then, out of the blue, her expression darkens. She sways a little. Then more. He catches her and pulls her away from the water.

She winces like an animal that's been injured, though that's nothing compared to the sheer horror in her eyes, the sudden hurt in her voice, as her gaze scans their surroundings. 'What the fuck? Where's the beach?'

'There hasn't been a beach here for over a century. What are you talking about?'

'But there was! The sand was soft and clean!' She pants, then shouts, 'Give it back!'

'Rain, I swear there isn't. There is no beach, only this rubbish. You must've been sleepwalking or something'.

'No, I wasn't'. She drops down in a heap. 'I wasn't...'

'We need to get you back to the hotel. Get those cuts cleaned before they turn bad'.

There's no response. She's staring at the rubble around her, shoulders shaking.

*Shit.* She's still an inch or two taller than him, and he's pretty sure he won't be able to give her a piggy-bag all the way to the hotel. Now's the time when he could do with being bigger and stronger, but there's no point wishing. He's smart enough to know that.

‘Show me your feet’.

‘What?’

‘Please. I just want to wash the wounds before you get your boots back on’.

‘Oh’.

And that’s that. She stretches out her legs, presenting her messed-up feet. He pours a little water from his flask. Grit, mud and blood seep into the ground, exposing the cuts on the soles of her feet. Most don’t seem too deep, which is a start. They still need attending to though. He pulls her socks onto her wet feet, then her boots. He even does up her laces, strangely feeling like a big brother caring for a baby sister—until he’s overcome by a sense of helplessness.

In the end, she’s the one telling him to get up—and help her up.

The walk back to the hotel seems like the longest ever. Though whatever relief he felt when getting there is quickly erased by Evgeni’s anger when he lets them in. Anger that quickly changes to worry.

They both help her up the stairs. She feels like a ragdoll under their grip and doesn’t protest when they guide her to her bed and pull off her boots and bloodied socks.

Evgeni turns a shade paler. ‘Right. Let me get something antiseptic’.

He’s back in no time, carrying a full bottle of whiskey. He uncorks the bottle then presents it to Rain. ‘Here, girl, take a good swig. You’re going to need it’.

She dutifully drinks, doesn’t even grimace.

‘Now lie on your front and show me your feet’.

And that’s when she screams. When he pours some twenty-five-year-old oak-matured whiskey on the cuts she unwittingly inflicted upon herself.

‘Shh. It’s okay. It’s killing the germs. That’s why it hurts’.

Once she stops shaking, he begins bandaging her feet as tenderly as a mother would. When he’s done, she draws her legs up against her belly and closes her eyes. Evgeni takes Jeremy aside.

‘We’re going to need some proper antiseptic. I trust Norah has some at your place?’

‘I think so, yes’.

‘Good. Could you bring some?’

‘Sure’.

‘Good boy. Bring her as well, if you can convince her. I wouldn’t mind a second opinion’.

\*

All the recent fuss has been an irritation at the periphery of her mind. She can’t quite understand why all these people are getting so anxious on her behalf. All she did was to go for a walk! Her feet still feel sore though, despite the antiseptic salve Norah rubbed onto the cuts and the new bandages. Luckily, most cuts were superficial, so they should heal quickly. And she can still walk—slowly, clumsily. Which is frustrating, yes, but it means she can still get about.

As for Jeremy, he’s making a point of sulking. She gave him a scare, he says. And the little tour he arranged to take her on—maybe to show her some of his secret places, she guesses, remembering Quentin when they were younger—has been postponed until her feet are healed.

More embarrassing was Norah’s reaction. She treated her injuries all right, that was fine. Business-like, almost. What makes Rain uneasy is the way she looked at her, still looks at her, more so since she told her what happened.

Rain confirmed, as she had to the others, that she hadn't drunk anything the previous night. She just got high on the music, she told herself, almost as a joke, until she realised the truth of it. But there were definitely no mind-altering substances involved. Norah seemed puzzled, then started asking what she'd eaten, how she'd slept. When nothing out of the ordinary came to light, she ran out of stuff to ask. Now, she just keeps glancing at her, eyes firing unformulated questions. Eventually, Norah gives her a long hug and takes Jeremy home. He, at least, smiles at her, rather sheepishly, as she says, 'See you later'. And then she's left with the awkwardness of it all.

She stays in her room all afternoon, literally with her feet up. The window's open a crack so she can hear the surf and dozes on and off, leafing through the century-old notebook she found in the abandoned room. Apart from detailed descriptions of how the sea encroached upon the land, gnawing at seawalls and roads and buildings, she doesn't find anything particularly enlightening. The results of what the notebook writer described are there, just outside her window. He doesn't offer much explanation but keeps referring to stuff about a fucked-up climate—nothing she didn't know already. After all, it was part of the history-geography curriculum. One thing that does stick in her mind is his (or is it her?) musings on why people are drawn to the water, regardless of imminent danger. That, she can relate to. And it tickles her curiosity.

It doesn't provide any answers, though.

Like, where did that beach come from? Why did it disappear when Jeremy found her? As her eyelids droop once more, the clean sand is there, soft under her feet, and the water is not clogged with rubbish. Somewhere, someone is keeping a gentle yet insistent eye on her. It doesn't bother her anymore.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**B. Anne Adriaens** currently lives in Somerset. Her work reflects her interest in alienation and all things weird and dark, as well as her concerns about the environment, which she addresses mainly through poetry and dystopian fiction.

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## **Mignonette**

*Emma Dee*

*'I know a taste no man should know, that man is meat like any other'.*

### **Critical Accompaniment**

The sea is a site of transgression as a liminal space where danger and taboo intertwine. Behaviour that is met with censure and disgust on land occupies a watery truce at sea. In this sense, the sea often appears as a place out of time and space, subject to older laws of nature. To be shipwrecked is to be adrift across oceans of morality.

Metaphorically, the sea embodies our collective unconscious, alien and beautiful, beguiling and terrifying. In short, the sublime. Voices and memories interweave within the text, flowing together like ocean currents or flotsam on the tide. In this way, I attempt to mirror in text the themes of the journal, with their conflicting and fragile senses of morality. The text is haunted by these voices and their testimony, wherein all voices go into the sea, and wait for the resurrection wherein the sea will give up her dead.

This piece is based on the real-world case of *R v Dudley & Stephen*, wherein three men shipwrecked off the Cape of Good Hope murdered and ate another of their number, namely the seventeen-year-old Richard Parker, and then openly and candidly explained what had happened upon their rescue. The men believed they were protected by the 'custom of the sea' where such acts were permissible. It was a watershed case and was at one point studied by all students of law in Britain and the Commonwealth. In life, as often the ironic case, the downed yacht was called 'Mignonette', a word with myriad meanings, many culinary.

## Mignonette

‘[U]nreason transformed into delirium of the heart, madness of desire, the insane dialogue of love and death in the limitless presumption of appetite’.

—Michael Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, 1861.

Night waters. Cold, salt, black moon on black waters. Rhythm and hush. And the black triangles rising through the water, rimed with silver. The first night was spent fighting off the sharks with oars, their eyes like so many black marbles. Fanged smiles perpetual, at night I dream of tar-bloody mouths, flat in the darkness. White, overlapping triangular petals ringing a wet round pool. It’s the oldest of fears—the fear of the long thin howl in the mountains, so liquid, so mournful, you hear it in your spine. The fear of disks of sequin eyes beyond the campfire. The carnified carnifex, a thing of all mouth, all hunger. Mindless appetite. It is visceral for several reasons. The viscera quivers to think of being unwrapped like a glittering, ruby patinaed present. It is the fear of being consumed. And the sea, is that not also something that reminds us how easy it is to be swallowed.

I have a family; children, a wife. Who would not resolve as I did. I resolved, of course, to survive.

Mignonette is a sauce of peppercorns and shallots and vinegar, served with oysters. Its piquancy plays the role of the lemon juice sometimes squeezed upon the squirm of mollusc, from the Latin meaning ‘soft’, precipitating an acidic death. The oyster must die in the mouth and so release the most delicious flavour. It is like eating the sea; brackish, perfumed, sharp.

The difference, of course, is that man has reason. And a shark cannot be reasoned with, therein lies the fear. I don’t even know if sharks have ears to listen. You know they even swim whilst they are asleep, always hunting, always hungering. But a man, with all his faculties, can reason himself and his friends right out—or into—the noose.

There was a man called Coffin. Unfortunate. He was not aboard our ship, our little boat, the Mignonette, that packet of spice and cloves. Coffin was a sailor, eaten as was his sacred

duty. They drew lots, you see, as is custom. The captain tried to take his place, and Coffin he refused. Said it was his right. Our captain made no such offer. Our boy was called Richard Parker, perhaps you know the name.

We ate that boy with turnips. And us, fathers of children, and he a boy of seventeen, alone in this world. But you see, he'd drunk seawater, that stupid boy, he was in a coma and sailing deathward. We added only windfall to his passing.

He was ill, yes, and he had drunk saltwater, but we all of us were weak and tired. We did not discuss this with him. We adults had to take charge. Someone had to make the decision. We had caught a turtle, but the blood, we needed the blood to drink. And we botched it, lost the blood, and the maddening thirst was everywhere. Like the throat was sealing itself up inside, narrowing, our own blood flowing thickly, dull black patina. I looked at my veins under the skin and saw they were like seams of coal.

And if we killed him, well then, we'd have the blood to drink. It was the thirst, you see, the thirst was worse than the hunger.

He said something when we put the penknife in, the one you have there in your hand, the one with the ivory handle. The lovely weight. The boy, he said something soft and quiet. And then he died, he died like a kitten.

And he said, 'All's fish that comes into the net'.

And he said, 'Human flesh has been eaten before'.

To stem the tide, to turn the tide, to tide us over until we reached land.

I resolved to live.

A mignonette is also a flower, the 'little darling', in spiced sprays of white plume. It is used in perfumes and also flower arrangements. It will flower all through the spring and summer, until the very first frosts.

Four of us in the boat, two tins of turnips, and no fresh water. Around the Cape of Good Hope we were wrecked. Ten days on the ocean's brim, floating between life and death. How many meals are we away from anarchy? I forget. And those endless mouths around us. So many they seemed to be as one mouth, one giant oceanic mouth, and we trembled on its blue salt-crusting lip, neither consumed nor consuming. Trembling. Waiting.

Fishify. When the flesh turns to fish. Like Jesus Christ and the disciples and the loaf of bread. Or communion, transubstantiation. Cannibalism is the realm of the holy. What is more holy than life? In that little row boat, how could I say, how holiest of holies, there at the stern where the deed was done.

We told them all, of course, back on land, how bloody it had been. How awful. The boy's heart, his liver, and sections of his flesh. Like wild wolves, wolves of the sea. The liver is easy, palatable. You don't have to cook it. The black of the water, the grey of the sky, and the red unfolding like silk. And then the rest of him went overboard, and the sharks did come again. And then it seemed we should have to draw lots again, but from this we were spared.

Back on land, sweet English soil, we told the truth, we had resolved to live. As is custom. Life and death hover out at sea between the crest of one wave and the trough of another. We brought his body back to give it a Christian burial. It was the least we could have done.

The body buried.

The soil empty.

Mignonette is a greyish-green colour, like inland waters. The boy had only ever sailed on lakes and rivers in little toyboat ships.

I now no longer eat turnips. I hold my children close. We were like wolves over the body of that boy. I know a taste no man should know, that man is meat like any other. It could have been a ritual, it should have been. He saved our lives, that's sacred.

I said neither one way nor the other, I abstained. I gave no sign, I did not intervene. I saw it happen. And I was...But I, along with Dudley, I fear we—I—I fear I ate the most.

And I, who had agreed, stood ready to seize the boy's legs, I ate very little. That I, at the end, ate little. I let him push the penknife in. Even a shark will only kill if it's hungry, to eat. I killed and did not eat. But then, it was I who waits the death sentence, and he with his belly full of that boy walks free because he did not hold his legs.

I've tasted shark, and I can say, it's a fish like any other.

What we can say of mignonette is that it is sharp, complex, pungent. It is a plant, a sauce, a colour, that carries a smell of the sea. When I first heard we'd be sailing that ship, I thought it was a sort of dance. A pirouette. A quick-step. An invisible line flickers like phosphorescence on a seashore, green, mignonette green but luminous. It almost hums. You cross it, and are rimed in opals. Your feet are wet.

The Judge, in his wig and his black silk, he said—

*To preserve one's life is generally speaking a duty, but it may be the plainest and the highest duty to sacrifice it. War is full of instances in which it is a man's duty not to live, but to die. The duty, in case of shipwreck, of a captain to his crew, of the crew to the passengers, of soldiers to women and children, as in the noble case of the Birkenhead; these duties impose on men the moral necessity, not of the preservation, but of the sacrifice of their lives for others, from which in no country, least of all, it is to be hoped, in England, will men ever shrink, as indeed, they have not shrunk...It would be a very easy and cheap display of commonplace learning to quote from Greek and Latin authors, from Horace, from Juvenal, from Cicero, from Euripides, passage after passage, in which the duty of dying for others has been laid down in glowing and emphatic language as resulting from the principles of heathen ethics; it is enough in a Christian country to remind ourselves of the Great Example whom we profess to follow.<sup>35</sup>*

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<sup>35</sup> *R v. Dudley and Stephens* [1884] 14 QBD 273 DC.

And he was dying anyway. We heard the bells roll deep under the water. As so many drowned ships bells, as so many huge and empty shells.

Everything is so muddled now. We did what we had to do. We followed custom. We had to live. We resolved, for each other, for ourselves, for our families, for the boy. We resolved to live.

What, me?

Yes, my boy. It's time.

Me. What, me. I search for my tongue amongst the breakers, that fleshy squirm of mollusc. Muscle. Shake off the sand, put it back in my head. I did not turn to pearl, or coral. I was all ate up by man and shark, the rest of me is blowing in the wind.

So.

Of all the rest you've heard from, and what is left to say? What's left of little me? Dead at the age of a flower, thin in the face, orphaned. Inexperienced. Could make tea, that black-tar bully-o tea. Sailed inland waters, never out of sight of land. My family all sailors, with salt water in the blood, and dead too. Skinny. Desperate. I was once as you are now, although doubtful that what I am is how you shall one day be. My brother shook their hands as if to say; we understand. We give thee pardon. Job, 13:15. And what, me? What of me? Well, there is time perhaps. And now, there is time, just enough, a splash of spray upon the wavetop. One last word. All those white-horses have sped me on ahead. Over hoaming humming sea. Listen, you will hear it, hear it blowing in the wind.

What, me.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Emma Dee** is a PhD candidate for the University of Kent, Writing the Novel; Practise as Research. She is interested in literary depictions of taboo and transgression with particular focus on the Gothic. Her poetry and prose has appeared in anthologies both in the UK and in *Le Menteur* in Paris. She is currently working on a novel of Gothic Horror proportions and content.

# GOTHIC NATURE



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Michael Belcher

## Sea-stories

*Sachini K. Seneviratne*

*'...the stories had simultaneously enchanted and disturbed...'*

### **Critical accompaniment**

The theme 'haunted shores' suggested the unease of disturbed boundaries to me. Blurred boundaries between certain landscapes, such as the land and the sea, raise questions about how we can define them. Using this as a starting point, I also attempted to map 'disturbed boundaries' on to physical and non-physical elements in addition to haunted shores. For example, I wanted to keep 'Aatha' as a kind of outsider on the fringes of society. I feel disturbing boundaries helps to provoke thought about definitions and relations (for example, to think about how so-called 'outsiders' are perceived, and what relationship one might have with them).

I have also always been intrigued by the idea of telling stories, so I tried writing about the creation of local legend and stories infusing and informing a character's afterlife. I also wanted to explore how stories and superstition could suffuse a landscape, so I tried conflating the seashore, stories, and the storyteller.

I drew inspiration from the sea itself, as well as photos, audio clips, and local legend. I am from Sri Lanka, and we have myths and legends about spirits haunting various beaches. While I have invented the story details, I have also tried to retain the sense of unease that pervades Sri Lankan tales of the supernatural and haunted shores.

## Sea-stories

With her feet sinking into grey sand, Nalini gazed out at the evening waves. It had been almost ten years, but the ashes were still there.

There had once been a time when this particular beach had been almost pleasant. In fact, there had once been a seven-year-old self who had gone scampering over dunes that tried to embrace her feet, leaping unscathed over the prickles of beach creepers, romping her way down to the rough waves, stopping just short of them.

It had also been in those days that Nalini's great-aunt (Aatha she had called her) would secretly tell her sea-stories during dark evenings, instead of cooking dinner. Family ties and corresponding obligations had meant that Aatha's needs had been met, but Nalini had felt even then that she was a strange woman. She had heard that the childless Aatha had used to babysit while she was living in the village close to the beach, but the children's parents had quickly shied away from her services for reasons she, Nalini, had not known.

As she'd sat, hidden in Aatha's darkened rooms, the stories had simultaneously enchanted and disturbed Nalini. The way she had spoken of the sea was unsettling, almost reverential. Aatha had been a creature of the water, and had known that beach well because of her fisherman father, but when she whispered about the local *diyasuliya*, the whirlpool beneath the cliffs, young Nalini thought she sounded like a priestess of the depths. *It is alive, my child. It is a womb. It is a storied heart. It entices. It entrances. Children, children* (gripping Nalini's wrist, mouth working and tasting the next words). *They sing child. You can still hear them.*

Her mother had said Aatha had lost her mind years ago, but the words had still kept Nalini awake at night. She'd had visions of engulfing, unforgiving water, which swallowed her, ensnared her in its throbbing heart, and finally slipped inside her. After hearing the stories, the sea had begun to trouble her, appearing to her like a burial ground of childhood. She had preferred the wind instead, audible yet unseen. She had not wanted Aatha to talk about the wind, to take it away from her, but in the dead of the night, she would hear her whispering 'Listen, listen to the swirling, singing sands', in breathy, raspy tones.

Then, like the sea, things had changed.

One late September evening, while digging her toes into wet brown sand, Nalini had heard a snatch of something lingering just beneath the wind for a split second. It was a ghost of a sound, a childlike voice, singing somewhere, somehow. 'It's just the wind acting up,' her mother had said that day while ensconced in the car, out of the way. Nalini had scuttled off, a quarry to doubt and superstition.

That night, Aatha had suddenly died. The doctor had said that there had been fluid buildup in her lungs. She had wanted to be buried at sea, but the cremation had taken place on the beach in view of the cliffs, a few words said, a few salt tears shed.

Then the stories had begun. At first, they were anecdotes, plotless half-tales. Someone said they picked up a new, mournful note in the wind during the *gomman welawa*, around sunset, the fringes of the day, when people were cautioned not to go out because malevolent spirits roamed. Another spoke of footprints leading into the water and none out of it. The stories then multiplied, the raw material of local legend. There came strange tales, never told above a whisper, about a moaning woman, lost in the waves at night, struggling, burdened. These stories bore others in which she lured people, especially children, into the water, when the moment they came within touching distance she vanished like a thought, leaving the hapless victims at the mercy of powerful currents. No bodies were ever found, but the listener knew without being told that the *diyasuliya* had everything to do with that. The only thing that returned was their screaming, which the wind re-tuned and brought back to the shore in a muffled wail.

According to the lore, from the day Aatha died, the sand turned to grey, becoming ashes for the victims that could not be cremated.

As these tales clustered and developed, the beach changed. Formerly a quiet family spot, it grew heavy and brooding, a shore where the wind whistled uneasily. People dropped away from it, preferring the modern and un-memoried promenades closer to the city where Nalini now lived. Even the village nearby appeared now to steer clear of the beach, expanding

sideways and backwards rather than towards it. The beach was now populated only by gulls and crabs, indifferent to human superstition.

Nalini's mother had said the stories were just stories, but when she had wanted to hear them, she had said no.

\*\*\*

The wind now wafted gently through her hair. The cliffs were close. A seagull cawed and rode the stiffer breeze higher up, wheeled towards them ahead of her as the sun dropped lower.

Nalini's family had left the neighbouring town after Aatha had died, when the stories had begun taking on a life of their own and spilling over into half-formed truths. Nalini wished she had listened to her mother about not listening to the stories; she now did not care to hear any of them. After the move she had gradually recoiled from any mental images of Aatha, but that unsettling childlike voice that had sounded beneath the wind on the day she had died had returned last night. She'd felt herself running down the beach, a child again. The faint voice had edged in and out of her consciousness. Tendrils of ash on the ground had curled upwards against the backdrop of inky sea, coalescing into a small, vulnerable figure facing away from her. Nalini could see little footprints leading up to her. She'd stopped just behind and touched her. The voice had crystallised into the words 'Aatha, Aatha', and the figure had turned, with rivulets of saltwater running off her, with hair soaked and matted, with Nalini's own little face.

The seagull cried again, and she shook her head hard. She did not understand, nor did she care to understand what any of it meant. She stuck her hands in her pockets, but that did not reduce their shaking.

Then, without meaning to, her mind circled back to the evening of the cremation. The pyre had towered over her, silhouetted against a slowly darkening sky. The flames had begun licking the dry branches, consuming them eagerly and climbing rapidly. She had not been able to see the coffin. But now she imagined that she could remember how Aatha's ashes had drifted on the wind, curling in on themselves and crumbling and dissolving into the air. The beach was

now suffused with Aatha and the stories she had spun. The storied heart, now still, but not at rest.

At the sheltered cliffs at the end of the beach, Nalini dropped down beyond the reach of the waves. Beneath the overhang of the cliffs, Aatha's hallowed *diyasuliya* swirled on. A call from the seagull rang out from high above. A crushed crab lay in a footprint she had left behind. And the sun lowered itself into the sea.

Gazing at the broken shell in the footprint, her mind was drawn inexorably one more time, towards one last story. Footprints were not special; they only marked the human relationship with a beach. But with the cremation, their meanings had multiplied. The story that had absorbed them wound itself towards, and then around, Aatha's pyre, and kept it burning long after the flames had been spent. The story held that deep into that night, after everyone had left, the fire blazed higher than the palm trees and burned hotter than the coals in hell, attempting to scorch away the remains. But a silhouette had emerged from the flames and fled straight into the sea. As the stories grew, the figure developed too. She began carrying something heavy, something unwieldy, with her. In other versions, there was a tiny set of footprints beside the adult ones.

It was said that when the figure reached the sea, a voice from beneath the wind sang itself into existence, childlike and haunting.

Nalini did not believe any of this, although she had to admit that the stories gathered power in the evening darkness. Aatha's ashes lay all around her, inert, dead. But that was the problem. She was gone, but she still held on to Nalini. The stories still haunted her. They had washed over her, soaked into her like salt water into sand, then left pools of dream in the footprints of her memory.

As the sun sank under the horizon, she rose, the sand sticking to and then crumbling off her legs. The seagull cawed one last time. The wind whispered softly. Far off, in darkened rooms perhaps, the stories churned on.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Sachini K. Seneviratne** is a Lecturer and Coordinator of the MA/Teaching Literature at the Postgraduate Institute of English, Open University of Sri Lanka. She obtained her MA in ‘Shakespeare in History’ (Distinction) from University College London (2015). Her article ‘Rethinking the “Good Receipt” in *All’s Well That Ends Well*’ was published in the Oxford journal *Essays in Criticism* in 2020.

# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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**COVER CREDIT:**

Title: Balmoral dawn no. 7972 (2019)

Artist: Angie Contini

Medium: In-capture digital photography using material filters and macro lens

Location: Balmoral Beach, Sydney at dawn

Model: Stephanie Di Giacomo

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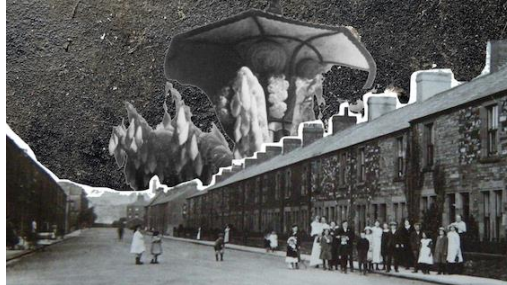
Emily Alder, Jimmy Packham, Joan Passey

**WEB DESIGNER:**

Michael Belcher

*The Man Who Fell to Millom*  
(Single channel video, 14 minutes, 2018)

Jane Topping



Screen Shot, *The Man Who Fell to Millom*. Image Credit: J. Topping

Watch *The Man Who Fell to Millom* [here](#).

### Critical accompaniment

*The Man Who Fell to Millom* (2018) is an atmospheric video which uses cut-up and collage techniques to suggest an alternative SF narrative for the Cumbrian coastal town of Millom. The work engages with the notion of a ‘haunted shore’ by examining and then re-framing the post-industrial present of a once thriving community. *The Man Who Fell to Millom* gathers textures of the Cumbrian landscape, memories of its people and the contradictory sounds of nature and technology, of geology and the digital.

Beginning on a calm shoreline, the film tells the absurd tale of a creature—perhaps awakened by iron ore mining works or perhaps deliberately hewn from the stone beneath Millom—and the humanoid that opposes it. The viewer follows in the footsteps of a hooded figure, literally a man who fell to Earth (David Bowie in Nicolas Roeg’s 1975 film), as ‘he’ walks a rocky coastal landscape and navigates a towering slagheap, pursuing the ominous presence which seems to threaten the past inhabitants of Millom.

In 2018 I was commissioned by Irene Rogan (Director of the *Moving Mountains Festival*) to make a film inspired by the town of Millom—its rich industrial past, post-industrial

present and residents. As a Glasgow-based artist commissioned to make a film set in Cumbria, I was acutely aware of my outsider status. Working with sound-artist Mark Vernon, my approach was to imagine discovering Millom—its rich industrial past and its people—as if I were an alien, sifting through and weaving together audio and images that I found in the ether. Using a collage technique, I worked to Vernon’s original soundscape, piecing together a science fiction narrative for the town of Millom, haunted by the poetry of Millom resident Norman Nicholson (1914-1987).

*The Man Who Fell to Millom* is atmospheric rather than mimetic and its Cthulhu-like creature might embody the Cumbrian industrial past or nuclear present. Paying homage to Roeg’s directing style, the film plays with notions of time and is more concerned with creating an experience of the post-industrial nuclear coast than a linear narrative. Within in the film, a fragment of Nicholson’s poem *Shingle* (1981) offers layers of texture—of grey waves, of stone and of, perhaps surprisingly, butterbeans. The result is an alternative SF narrative for the town, woven from digital fragments yet concerned with the geological foundations of time, industry, and poetry.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Dr Jane Topping** is a Scottish artist and academic, currently Lecturer on the MLitt Fine Art Practice programme at the Glasgow School of Art and formally Associate Professor of Fine Art at the University of Cumbria Institute of Arts. Her interdisciplinary practice draws from subjects including sci-fi, feminism, the archive, intertextuality and the life and works of writer Naomi Mitchison.

Contact details:

MLitt Fine Art Practice. Glasgow School of Art, Stow Building, 64 Shamrock St, Glasgow G4 9JZ.

Email: [j.topping@gsa.ac.uk](mailto:j.topping@gsa.ac.uk)

Web: [www.rabbitcottontoothcottonrabbit.com](http://www.rabbitcottontoothcottonrabbit.com)

# GOTHIC NATURE



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Emily Alder, Jimmy Packham, Joan Passey

**WEB DESIGNER:**

Michael Belcher

## Coracle

*Anna Orridge*

*'I let its gelatinous barrel of a body hang in the air, twin brown tentacles dangling. It is a diamond chain of clones, a transparent umbilical cord'.*

### **Critical accompaniment**

The giant Thetys vagina is an aquatic Gothic monster, although it is not a ravening beast in the manner of the kraken. The death it inflicts is one of memory and identity. The story is partly a modern take on the classic tropes of the disastrous voyage and the shipwreck. The once gleaming remains of the Saint Louis yacht provides a home for a thriving, if precarious, coral reef colony off the drowned shore of Poole. Coral polyps depend on the calcium carbonate-rich remains of dead organisms beneath them. It seemed to me this was a good metaphor for the reconstruction of a human civilisation ravaged by climate change and ecological crisis. We will have no choice but to rebuild from bones.

Inspiration came from finding out about the pyrosome, a colonial tunicate also known as the giant sea worm. It is a creature made up of hundreds or thousands of identical clones. I was captivated enough by this to do some further research. I discovered another tunicate with the very unusual name of the Thetys vagina. The waste of these creatures, and their carcasses, are full of carbon and sink very quickly. As the decline of the world's coral reefs was weighing heavy on my mind, I started to make connections.

## Coracle

Reina, my sister, had an infinity pool at the top of her block of flats. It took up most of the rooftop, but also extended beyond the building, with a perspex bottom that offered a vertiginous view all the way down to the river below, with the jigsaw of glinting roof tiles and roof gardens along its banks.

Reina would always dive right down to that bottom, letting her chest bump against it as she powered herself along with little flips of her feet, her black hair spread out behind her like a great parachute. I had the same hair, of course, since we were identical twins. But I always kept it in a bob. I could never believe mine would ever have that same sculptural movement as hers, even if I let it grow out.

When I went into the pool with her, I'd always stay at the shallow end.

She'd dive in and swim away from me, legs kicking up plumes of water. Then her hand would rise from the water, with that jet bracelet our mother had bought her. She beckoned, regally, Lady of the Lake style.

I never joined her, though. It was enough for me to watch my pale legs stretched out, rendered bloated by the water, and to feel her joy swelling out along with her hair, as she did her underwater acrobatics.

Reina was always meant for the water.

\*\*\*

Our research body named the initiative Project Coracle—a merging of ‘coral’ and ‘oracle’. We developed a hybrid species of coral that thrives on the carbon-rich excretions of the *Thetys vagina*, a salp now common on the southern coast of Britain. We started in what was once the harbour of Poole before it was submerged by rising seas. The coral garden that bloomed in the wreck of the super-yacht, the *Saint Louis*, has revived the local fisheries nearby.

But that is not what has made the headlines. It’s the twenty people, my sister Reina among them, who came back up from the water around Poole in waking comas.

There have been theories, of course: it could be chemical leakages, or the stings of one of the hybrid creatures that waft in our newly warm shores. At any rate, nobody risks diving around there any longer, apart from the scientists of Project Coracle.

Now the garden is not doing as well. *Thetys* vaginas are starting to wash up on the shore. We need them alive, to keep the coral healthy and the carbon buried.

\*\*\*

‘I’m going on a deep dive off Poole to check on the coral reef around the yacht, Reina. You’d be amazed to see it now, you know’.

Reina gazes at and through me, with eyes that have the same gleam as an insect’s captured in a macro photograph.

The nurse has told me she is doing better than the other patients in a fugue state.



‘Fugue’—I can never hear that word without thinking of the musical meaning. A short melody that is taken up by other parts, possibly until its original form is unrecognisable.

Is Reina still there, somewhere, under whatever infernal harmonies have drowned her consciousness?

\*\*\*

It is a calm day when we take the boat out with our precious salps in their tank. I plunge my hand into the water and scoop one out. I let its gelatinous barrel of a body hang in the air, twin brown tentacles dangling. It is a diamond chain of clones, a transparent umbilical cord.

When we reach the co-ordinates for the Saint Louis wreck. Ruslan switches the engine off.

‘Are you okay with this?’ he asks.

‘Why wouldn’t I be? I trust your expertise’.

‘This is not about my expertise’.

He knows about Reina. I told him I regarded this as a good opportunity to come to terms with what happened to my sister, as well as helping revive the coral. ‘Killing two birds with one stone’. Ruslan raised his eyebrows at that choice of idiom, but he accepted my reasoning.

‘Ruslan, we’re out here now. Let’s get on with it’.

Still looking troubled, he opens the chute on the tank. The Thetys vaginas pour over the side with a syrup-like grace, quick as a slick of oil.

Now my turn. As Ruslan helps me with the oxygen tank, I haul my wet suited legs over the side of the boat.

In all the shitty action movies, this would be the cue for me to give him a brave but rueful smile.

Instead, I close my eyes as I make the leap.

\*\*\*

I'm briefly disoriented as a shoal of fish whips around me. I sense the rush, but it is muffled, as though I were hearing the bass of a song in a far higher upper room.

I dive downwards. It is harder to see ahead, but I recognise the super-yacht in an instant.

It has not lost its distinctive shape: that great upper bridge. It used to be adorned with rows of solar panels, sun glinting down them like blades. Remarkably, it has not collapsed yet, held up by those great columns, covered in coral.

I've always called the Saint Louis Reina's yacht. Of course, on paper, it was Neal Ely's. But he was not the one who tended it. He was just a passenger with too much money and a dress-up fetish.

He was the one responsible for steering the yacht too close to the shore. When it hit rocks and sprung a leak, he insisted on going down to the engine room with Reina, to try and save it. Reina got out. He didn't.

The blush of flight from my torch spreads across the floor, with its shuddering mass of coral—the same that grow over Neal, leeching the minerals from his bones. *Those were pearls that were his eyes.*

\*\*\*

A starfish curls one of its arms. Flocks of fish, silver and cobalt blue, dart amidst streams of bubbles.

I take some samples from some of the ailing coral, to bring back up to the surface.

It's just as I'm adjusting the pressure on my suit that I see it. A huge gelatinous ring, at least my height. Long brown tentacles whip behind it. *My God—a salp.*

I try to push myself upwards, feet twitching, but the thing is too close. My own breathing in the helmet of the suit is suddenly cacophonous. I'm being sucked backwards. I try to cling to one of the rocky outcrops, but feel my feet encased in a terrible warmth.

\*\*\*

The ocean outside is blurred, but I can make out the great hulk of the yacht.

I know I should resist, try and fight my way out of this soft, frosted glass prison, but I am lulled. I see my mother's smile as she turned to greet me outside my school, my graduation ceremony with the champagne spurting over our heads at the party, and Reina posing in front of the yacht.

I am pushed downwards, towards those drifting tentacles. The pain is so intense I have to close my eyes.

Suddenly, the pressure has gone.

I take great gulps of air. The oxygen tank, remarkably, is still intact. But I know I have to get to the surface quickly now. I cast one look back at the giant salp, now drifting away from me. Then up and up I go, in a final burst of exertion.

\*\*\*

As I sit on the prow, gasping, Ruslan helps me get the oxygen tank off. I take a few moments before telling him what I've seen. He is stunned and excited, rattling through questions and speculations.

'So that must be why so many of the Thetys vaginas are washing up on the shore, dead. It's the competition posed by this giant. What is this? A mutation or a new species we're yet to identify...'

I nod, answer his questions. But my thoughts are elsewhere, with Reina and those other people in a fugue state. Because I think I know what happened to them.

When I was in the salp, that slide show of memories was not at my bidding. My life was not flashing before my eyes. It was more ponderous than that, more considered. The salp was sifting through my mind, flicking as one would do through a book.

It does not consume plankton. It sucks in living beings, absorbs their thought and memories before excreting them as husks.

Yet the salp did not want me. Being a clone, it knows a clone when it sees one.

Grief burrows through me, lithe and sinuous as Reina swimming up to the surface, towards the sun, split by the water into a molten ellipse of white light.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Born in Birmingham, **Anna Orridge** now lives in Croydon. By day, she works on sustainability in education. By night, she writes short stories and eco-poetry. She recently won the Hot Poets and #micropoem21 competitions. Visit her Twitter account to find out more about her writing and activism is @orrige\_anna

# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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Michael Belcher

## Oh, Daddy!

*Nadia Steven Rysing*

*'It oozed like brown sewage, draining slowly into the ocean'.*

### Critical Accompaniment

I write this today on my niece's sixth birthday. A clever and funny girl, fascinated by all things scientific and natural. I mention this because it was only a few months before her birth that I first saw footage of permafrost melt and had a minor crisis of faith in the future. What world was that little girl in progress going to face? The Arctic was breaking off into ocean. It was not a beautiful process. Not the calving of an iceberg or the slow drip of an ice cube in a glass. It was a visceral, chaotic process of an almost tarry substance dragging itself across the tundra before collapsing into the icy waters.

It terrified me. How could it not terrify me?

During this haunting, I was experiencing a particularly bad bout of auditory hallucinations. I've had these since I was young and because they are mostly musical in nature, they've never really bothered me. It's more of a living soundtrack than anything else, my subconscious curating a playlist for me as I go about life. But that is not the case for most with the condition and I was reflecting upon this at the same time. This filtered into the work, anchoring it as I let myself run head first into my climate change anxieties, likening them to the gory, slimy pulp horror of the past. It all came together in a nightmarish scene of drowning in the sludge of permafrost.



Today I saw my niece's face, bright and grinning, excited for another day on this planet. For her and all the other children turning six today, I hope that our future is not one of the inherently gothic horror of eroded coasts and rising oceans. I wish for her unhaunted shores.

## **Oh Daddy!**

*Content warning: Body horror, graphic violence, mentions of childhood sexual abuse, mental illness, drug use, climate change*

Across the vaguely green Arctic waters, she stood in only her bra and a pair of jeans, tapping her gloved hands on the railing of the sailboat. The white-blue sky shone with the midnight sun, almost blinding her. To never see the night sky, to see only that persistent, ever present sun...it felt as if it was watching her, baiting her. It was a staring contest she was badly losing.

The researcher came inside her cabin, kicking off her shoes. She started up the main computer, pulling out her field notes from the bottom drawer. She tapped her fingers across her desk, waiting for the screen to load. She stood, fanning herself. She went to the window, opening it to bring in the cool Arctic air. She took off the rest of her clothing, resting in her computer chair completely naked.

But not cool enough. She still felt incredibly warm, feeling sweat drip off her in little beads, all in the same tune as the tapping, the incessant song in her head again and again.

*Oh, Daddy*

*Just like a flower, I am fading away*

Twelve days. Twelve days the song had played again and again in her head. She knew the sound of Ethel Waters' voice better than she knew the sound of her own breathing or her

own heartbeat. Musical hallucinations were part of the package she had been told. Cursed with a living musical soundtrack, a living score.

But never had a song haunted her like this. In her ears with perfect, crystal clear sound. Again and again, as if the jazz singer had come back from the dead, only to croon perfectly in her ear, seducing her. Sometimes she embraced it, but in some moments, it nearly drove her to tears.

The only sound that shook her more was the glacier. It crackled through the evening air, each break announced. Sometimes a slow grind, like teeth scraped against each other. Sometimes a loud crash, like the roar of thunder, like being hit by a bus. It woke her once from a dream, her boat rocking to the side, as if letting it take control.

She loaded up her program, glancing over the previous day's results. The other sectors had revealed raising carbon levels in all of her samples of the shed permafrost. The sludge was stickier, thicker, more and more resembling mud than the cool slurry she had come to expect.

There were no new messages regarding the others. No one else had clocked in results for several days. Twelve days exactly. It was when she first refreshed the inbox, twelve days ago that the song began to play in her head.

*And if you care for me,  
You will listen to my plea*

She pulled up the report on Ethel Waters she had requested the computer to create. Before her musical hallucinations were often triggered by inherent memories or suggestions. An old psychiatrist, before she had stopped going to see him, had the idea that it was her subconscious trying to communicate with her. As her general practitioner pointed out, she was most likely just losing her hearing and her anxiety disorder was filling in the white noise with

whatever it selected. Like a drunken disc jockey, he had joked, signing off on her mandatory fitness exam.

She scrolled through the report, forcing her eyes to read it cleanly without skipping ahead. Yet still her brain jumped at the obvious pattern.

There was a gap in Ethel Waters' teeth. Just like her own.

Born to a 13-year-old mother and herself married at 13.

Discovered at a nightclub on Halloween in 1913.

13. 13. 13.

She closed down her computer and rose from her station. She changed her clothes and dressed in her coveralls, the plastic flapping in the cool winds. She anchored the boat, pulling the vessel as close to the surface of the glacier as she dared.

And then she stepped off.

The permafrost sloughed off the dirty ice in long slabs. It oozed like brown sewage, draining slowly into the ocean and at times, all at once like a mudslide. She stepped forth carefully, jumping onto a more solid chunk of ice. She leaned down, opening a glass container to scoop the ooze into. She sealed it, placing it carefully in her satchel.

*When you miss me and long to kiss me,  
You'll regret the day that you ever quit me.*

She found herself swaying along, a finger to her ear to drown out the plops of the sludge as it hit the water. Stepping forward, she lost her balance, slipping off the ice and into the slurry. She panicked, trying to grip back onto the ice. But the muck sucked her in further. She tried to hold her breath, but it still oozed into her mouth and nose. She stopped resisting and let herself float with the mire into the ocean.

Once under water, she managed to free herself, the ice water hitting her lungs through the thick tar. She felt blindly around, hitting the side of the boat. She swam up, pulling herself onto the deck. The sludge came with her, pouring across the wooden floors. She stripped off her soiled clothes, throwing them into the filth. She went inside her cabin, her hands shaking.

She set up the makeshift shower, her hands fumbling. She took a deep breath, running the warm water over her slime-covered form. She drank some of the stale water, spitting out the filth from her mouth. She watched the grime slide off of her, collecting at the bottom of the basin. She cleaned herself until it filled it completely, surrounding her feet.

The researcher got out, trying to dry herself off, but she could not get it out of her hair. She stared at the mirror, looking at the tar slowly dripping from her scalp, covering her body once more. She ran to the kitchen, still naked, rustling desperately in her drawers for a knife. She hacked at her hair, tossing it into the basin, shaving it off with her razor, and eventually throwing it too into the filth.

She stood before herself again, bald and bleeding, her skin still dirty and grey.

*Think when you're all alone,  
Why, you'll want me, just wait and see,*

*But there'll be someone else making love to me!  
Then, Daddy! Daddy! You won't have no lover at all.*

She reached into the medicine cabinet and grabbed a sedative. She swallowed it dry and continued to scrub the sludge off of her. When the drug finally kicked in, she slunk to her bed, wrapping herself in the sheets. She fell asleep shivering, tangling herself in the sheets, desperate to protect her body against the dirty air.

*When you miss me and long to kiss me,  
You'll regret the day that you ever quit me.*

She woke suddenly, the sun still bright in the sky. She grabbed her watch, checking the time. Just after midnight. It was the thirteenth day. She knew now, she knew that she would turn on her computer, load the inbox, and still, there would be nothing.

She took a deep breath. She should be logical about this. There was a rendezvous point not more than a few hours of where she was. If she went, maybe she'd find an explanation. She clearly had enough samples of this sludge and if it was—

She shuddered, feeling it still on her skin. She rubbed the sheets on her skin and hair, only to feel the hacked off pieces. It slowly came back to her, the ooze seeping through her, pulling her down, dragging her into the water, its nails—

She looked at the bottom of her feet, surprised to see the crusted blood on her ankles, the long, jagged cuts almost like—

Finger nails.

She started to panic and she breathed deeply again. She stood, shivering, her aching feet touching the floor. She walked towards the bathroom, closing her eyes as she fumbled for the bottle of sedatives. She clutched it to her and went back to the bedroom, her cuts breaking open. She took another, her blood pounding in her ears.

Her hands shook, but she managed to throw on a clean shirt and a pair of shorts. She locked the bathroom, not allowing herself to look at the ooze. She grabbed a few energy bars and a bottle of water, retreating into the bedroom. She put several pairs of socks on her feet to soak up the bleeding. Once she established that the bedroom was Clean and Safe, she left, going up on the deck.

She paused, feeling the air warm against her skin despite the several inches of snow beneath her bleeding feet. She was unnerved. It was absurd that there had been this much precipitation over one day in the tundra. And for it to feel so...warm.

She reached down to touch the snow, but it turned grey and she screamed as the ooze sucked in her hand. She pulled free, willing herself to set the sails and pull up anchor. She imagined long yellow and green fingers emerging from the sludge, long pointed finger nails clawing at her. Tearing. Dissecting.

Once she felt the ship was going in the right direction, she found a shovel and started to scrap the slurry off the deck, tossing it back into the sea. After the first gouge, she was satisfied to see the clear wooden deck. She continued her task, occasionally pausing to check her bearings.

Soon, she comforted herself. She would get to the base, have a very long shower, and have her colleagues explain to her their long absence. Until then, she would clean this entire ship. Maybe even tackle the washroom. The sludge could be dealt with, even if it was simply one scoop at a time. Oh they would laugh, seeing her hair, teasing her for going a bit sea-mad. Poor Prairie girl lost in the waters.

At the third shovel of sludge over the railing, the song began again, whispering softly, as if Ethel Waters was standing behind her, her arms around her as she serenaded her, sliding her hands down her hips. The researcher turned around, but there was no one behind her.

She went back downstairs, grabbing her MP3 player and sticking in her earbuds. Sometimes pretending she was hearing music from an actual source helped alleviate her anxiety. She clipped it to her shirt, focusing in on each scrape, tossing each drop of the grime into the ocean. When the song quieted again, she turned her MP3 player on and began playing a mix of current music. Nothing soft, nothing smooth, just the loudest and hardest music as she had in her collection. Drums and screams.

The deck was nearly cleared when she heard the blast. She popped her ear buds out, looking out onto the ocean. She could see the smoke rise towards the midnight sun, dark and thick.

She put away her music and went back into her office, trying to sign online. The server was down, the entire system unable to process her request. Her heart pounded in her chest and she gripped into the desk, willing herself to slow her breathing. She locked herself in the bedroom again and took two of the tranquilizers, chasing it with a protein bar. She put in her ear buds again, but the battery was dead. She curled onto the bed, grasping at her own hair, trying to hum, anything to drown out the sound.

*When you miss me and long to kiss me,  
You'll regret the day that you ever quit me.*

She felt the boat stop, a crunching sound as it grinded against something. Reluctantly, she stood, picking up the shovel from the floor. She walked slowly up the stairs, the song playing louder in her mind.

*Oh, Daddy! Look what you're doing!*

*Look what you're doing!*

The researcher froze on the deck, seeing the smoldering wreck of the research station. The glacier was advancing towards it, the permafrost oozing, enveloping it. She tried to dislodge the boat, but the sludge grasped at it, pulling it into the slurry. Panicking, she stripped off her boots and heavy winter gear and dove into the water, attempting to swim away.

But she felt hands wrap around her ankles, pulling her into the muck, pulling her towards the depths. She tried to scream, feeling the nails rip through her pant legs, her blood mixing into the ooze. The slurry entered her lungs and her vision filled with the black.

*Then, Daddy! Daddy! You won't have no lover at all!*

## **BIOGRAPHY:**

**Nadia Steven Rysing** (she/her) is an academic, poet, and speculative writer living on the Haldimand Tract in Southwestern Ontario. Her work has or will appear in venues such as Black Telephone Magazine and Gothic Nature Journal, as well as multiple anthologies including *FUTURES*, *Abyss*, *The Devil You Know Better*, and *Madwomen in Social Justice Movements, Literatures, and Art*. You can find her on Twitter @a\_tendency.



# GOTHIC NATURE



## GOTHIC NATURE III: HAUNTED SHORES

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## The Wanderer and Oakwood Isle

*Sandy Feinstein*

*'What does wild mean?'*

### Critical Accompaniment

Exploiting the sea should result in monsters, ghosts, hauntings. The poem 'The Wanderer' looks back to the Anglo-Saxon Wanderer who finds his way into my time and place (which, when I teach him, he does); the story, 'Oakwood Isle', glances back at the near past into present time. In both, the familiar becomes strange with unexplained phenomenon. The sea has been disturbed by irrational change and thoughtless presumption. More explicitly, I combined some of this issue's themes: 'eerie seaside places', 'haunted coastal communities', 'coastal ghosts', perhaps even 'aquatic monsters' while insinuating political issues: who does the sea belong to? What forms of violence done to it matter and how might it respond? Human beneficiaries may differ—the rich with exclusive private beaches and yachts and the general populace with public beaches and outboards. But the question remains, what does wild mean?

Oakwood Isle was visible from my parent's house in New York. It was not far from where my father dropped anchor near a private beach where we would clam. I remember when there was a proposal to 'develop' an island that my mother, a Brooklynite, favoured: building meant progress. I worked on that island as a Girl Scout, weeding a little of its wildness. I was then, even as a tween, skeptical about what was really for the best. That neglected island was saved from development the way Oakwood Isle would be saved: left undeveloped yet tamed for public use.

## The Wanderer

Boat-lost, companion bereft  
Harangues the skies, hail-heavy winds  
He yet feels, skinned flesh  
Of rock-bared seas  
Burial ground fathoms deep

Where I dive  
For Atlantic clams, quahogs,  
The wave-pull is gentle  
Light silver coins  
Eyes a-watch

No words need tell  
The tale, shipwrecks  
Horse-loss, promised boons  
entombed, anachronistic  
Sea-farer

He comes, he comes  
Only he still comes  
Between white caps  
Froth of ghost-beard  
Breath on divers' feet.

Where gulls he heard, I heard  
Circle, dive, call  
What's mine is mine  
Mine mine mine  
In air and sea.

## Oakwood Isle

Oakwood Isle was just beyond what I could see from my bedroom window. Not that there was much to see. A small white shingled house, overgrown weeds. I could swim or paddle there from the wooden dock down the hill. My view was the boathouse, raucous gulls, the mud of low tide, the dark waters at neap.

The stone bridge connecting the Isle to the mainland—the grounds of a Catholic high school—disappeared in the weather. It faded when the sky was blue. It disappeared into both morning mist and evening dusk. The moon lit up the brackish water, exposing white walls rising from nowhere apparent. The bridge seemed to redistribute its unseen masonry into the muddy shore.

I'd been in the little house once. Jill lived there. She said her parents were caretakers. She didn't say of what, and I never thought to ask. There was no lighthouse. A ridge of rocks between the inlet I could see from my room and the Sound could surprise anyone who didn't know the dam, as we called it. A light might have helped. Not that we wanted anyone from beyond the dam slipping into our ring of water, not even to eel or troll the horseshoe crabs we'd try to keep from disturbing when we swam.

The dock I'd dive from at high tide was really more of a ramp than pier. It led from a boathouse that looked like a big barn. It was mostly red, mottled with gray where the paint had flaked off. There were no lights and only one too-high-to-reach small window that had probably never been cleaned, like everything else in the old building. No boats blocked the stairs in a corner that led to a dusty second floor where we went to make out.

Boys would strip off their shirts to lay on the splintery floor, smothering the insects that had colonized that particular square of planking. Maybe some girls did the same. If they did, they didn't tell me. Even so, no one ever stripped down before getting into the water that lapped the stone foundation, its border walls, or the slippery tongue emitting from the maw of our trysting place.

We knew about the eels because we'd see Italian fishermen hauling them in, about the horseshoe crabs when low tide left them and the fiddlers exposed in mud, about the rats who we'd watch scurry into the rock crevices at a footfall. So, it wasn't those creatures that made us circumspect or modest. Even the boys swam with their shirts on, and none that I knew were worried about the sun.

Still, most of us swam there. Even my dog Princess swam, her paws pushing at the water, trying to catch up to me, to save me from something or just keep me company. I say save because I'd yell 'help, help', and into the water she'd come. Maybe 'help' sounds like 'here' to a dog, especially a spaniel with its long floppy ears muffling words. I've always wondered what she'd do if I did need help. It was all she could do to make the swim. But I could be underestimating her strength and will if not her resolve.

That's easy to do with animals, maybe with people, too.

Usually, I'd swim by myself. To the biggest jutting rock between the boathouse and Oakwood Isle. Then to the dam where I'd perch on an invisible boulder just below the water level. I'd watch the boats leave the harbor and return. The fishing boats often had their catch hanging from starboard and port, lobster boxes trailing along at the low harbor speed. When someone caught a shark they'd tie it to one side or the other, its guts trailing behind alongside it. A hooked shark halfway in and out of the water coughs up its guts. Scientists say they do it when stressed. Fishermen say they cause it with a purpose. It was the safe thing to do. Or custom.

How much do you need to know? That's always the question it seems. Maybe it's better not to know the details. What can it get you? Back to safety, maybe. Fear, grounded or not. It all depends, I guess, if you believe what you hear.

There were no sharks in the inlet. Minnows, yes. Silvery shiners, yes. They'd scatter with our splashing. Barnacles, too, but they don't move. We floated when we got tired. Touching the muddy bottom was avoided.

Sometimes the tide rose so high the water climbed the rock walls, lapped to the lip of the boathouse. The dam disappeared from the horizon. That's when the small motorboats would come explore our cove. They didn't check the area maps for rocks or dams. They just wandered in. Shirtless boys, bikinied girls, flooding their outboard engines, enviable gifts from indulgent or stupid parents. The smarter kids would make the tour of the inlet and head back over the rocks, likely unimpressed by the sights of isle, boathouse, cove.

But some hovered, loud music pounding, each measure a thread of time. Some might fish. Some drank and fished. They might not notice the sun shift or the rocks begin to reveal themselves until they pulled their lines or trolled as they headed toward the dam and the white house. We weren't surprised when even the flat-bottomed hull of a Boston whaler caught a crag. The harbor was close enough to rescue those who thought to wave down an incoming or outgoing boat. They'd get towed in easily enough.

My one-person red boat often lost power, on the harborside; I never took it into the cove, close as it was to my house. I had a paddle, though when I was feeling lazy I'd halloo a boat to pull me into the marina. The salt isn't good for little inboard-outboard motors. It eats through them, corroding the invisible struts and wires.

As the dusk settled, the water by the rocks frothed. It could be hard to see one side from the other if you didn't know where you were.

Not everyone called for a tow when their boat caught a jagged edge. Or maybe it was too dark to see the swaying vessel with its hailing crew. A gaggle of geese or gulls in a tight group could resemble the black and white of a skiff. Feeling adventurous or tired of staying put and waiting for the tide to change, or for the spotlight of patrol boats, someone might test the waters. The isle looked so close, an easy swim.

Shirtless, the bare bodies might seem to glitter, attracting an attentive underwater patrol. Eyeshine to eyeshine. The little white house closed up like an unread book, its pages clean of warning or rescue.

'Hey. Didya see the jerk's boat on the dam last night'.

‘What boat?’ Jill said. ‘I heard the waves. I always hear the waves’.

We didn’t read much of the local paper, *The Standard Star*, and, when we did, it was for the comics. It never crossed our minds to read obituaries, or even news. The tide tables came in second to *Brenda Starr*, and school sports last if at all. Missing boats, pilots and their crew, might have made an appearance in its pages. But I doubt it because someone would have told someone who told someone who told us.

As to bodies, none ever drifted back over the dam to our cove and none ever landed at the Isle, at least that’s what Jill said.

We knew the eddies widened at night, that the whorls looked wing-like and scaled in the weak light of the moon on green-gray water.

Theories were abundant. Sun blindness. Night blindness. Disorientation. Alcoholic haze. Untold stories to protect the families. Unrecorded salvaged boats. On occasion a boy or girl was pulled bedraggled and blithering from a mucky snag. They swore they saw strange things, or felt them. A girl like a sunfish who didn’t speak. A big green thing. Dull nails or paws or fins or something at their ankles. All they knew for sure they’d say, ‘it was weird and large and dark’.

We liked to think there was something that fed on those who didn’t know the rules, those who touched the muddy bottom where horseshoe crabs pierced bared toes, where a naked white back was too much light for dark water.

Our guardian. We respected it. It protected us.

But something must have happened. A discarded shirt or bra floating toward the spit of Premium Point, beyond the overgrown coast of the Isle, snagged by barnacles, maybe tangled in sea grass, and unseen for however long it took for a stranger to spot, some remnant from one of those intruding boats checking out the cove at high tide and remembering to leave while the waterline was buried. What a fuss.



That's about when someone decided the boathouse was unsafe. It wasn't the structure, at least we didn't believe anyone when that's what was claimed. If anyone had gotten pregnant we didn't know about it. The ramp was replaced, too, though the algae still kept it slick, and there was nothing they could do about the rats and eels or mud-bottom, though dredging was proposed. The changing currents would have mocked new laid sand. The dredger's quote was more than anyone wanted to pay for a temporary solution.

About the same time the boathouse was flattened down to a wooden floor, Jill disappeared. She wasn't at school anyway. No one had seen her. I paddled to the Isle. It was weeded over, strewn with fishbones and shells. There were what seemed like trails of slimy buttons, like tracks snails leave behind. They all led to the shore, or from it. I yelled Jill's name. The gulls and geese fluttered up then settled back down.

I thought I saw a large wing roiling the water. I sat and watched, paddle idle. It was my creature, whether it knew it or not. And I had questions for it. Not that it surfaced. Not that I saw its head, never mind its ears. I spoke to it anyway. Or maybe just smiled and waved. It was such a long time ago.

It didn't tell me what would happen, what did happen. The white house torn down. Even the weeds razed. The bridge rebuilt or reinforced. The revenge of the motored. It became a landing site, with picnic tables and loud music.

The gulls aren't partial. They learned to beg and got fed. They left their thanks on all surfaces. Still no lifeguards. So accidents will happen with or without the weather and currents.

There are no manatees that far north. But that's what we tell people: we once had manatees. No one questions that. Everyone likes manatees.

**BIOGRAPHY:**

**Sandy Feinstein** has published experimental fiction on Poe in *Non-Binary Review*. She has also written on chemistry in Stoker's *Dracula* (*Victorian Review*) and on teaching Gothic literature (MLA teaching volume, *NEA*). Professor of English at Penn State Berks, her scholarly interests, Medieval and Early Modern texts, inform her creative writing.

# **GOTHIC NATURE: HAUNTED SHORES**

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