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Gothic Nature: Decolonising the EcoGothic

New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic

Issue Five

Special Guest Editor: KIM D. Hester Williams

Founded by: Elizabeth Parker
Editors in Chief: Elizabeth Parker and Harriet Stilley

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New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic

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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:
DECOLONISING THE ECOGOTHIC

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Foreword

Elizabeth Parker and Harriet Stilley

'We must all decolonize our minds in Western culture to be able to think differently about nature, about the destruction humans cause'.

—bell hooks, Belonging: A Culture of Place (2008)

The previous issues of this journal, as well as the conversations and panels at our various events, have collectively covered a wide historical spectrum and geographical scope, contributing unique and intriguing approaches to a variety of topics that expand and enrich the critical contours of 'Gothic Nature'. As we continue to facilitate and encourage such topics and discussions, however, we are acutely conscious of the need to increasingly and proactively seek out and include a diversity of voices and nuances in these supposedly 'universal' environmental and bioethical debates. From the start of *Gothic Nature*, there has been a growing undercurrent around the real need to confront the extent to which ecocritical concerns are intimately entangled with imperialist ideologies, capitalist practices, and colonial hierarchies, in order to begin to disrupt and destabilise the interface between 'nature' and 'culture'.

Since moving to alternately themed publications in 2022, with the fantastic Haunted Shores issue,[1] we were keen for a future issue on 'decolonising' ecohorror and the ecoGothic to come into fruition. In recent years with the worsening climate—in every sense—the world has been ravaged daily by news of ever-increasing and seemingly never-ending civil war, genocide, mass migrations, race riots, economic crisis, disease outbreaks, and environmental destruction. There is an urgency to the imperative to focus our collective attention on explicitly tracing the complex interplay of ecohorror and ecoGothic with the social realities and histories embedded in their forms. Building in part on Rebecca Duncan's work with the 'Decolonising Gothic' special issue of *Gothic Studies* (2022), in which she questions both 'what it might mean to

[1] Special Guest Edited by the wonderful Jimmy Packham, Emily Alder, and Joan Passey and available here.

"decolonise" Gothic Studies, and on Gothic fiction's own decolonising possibilities' (p. 219), we sought to question what it might mean to 'decolonise' ecoGothic studies and to explore ecoGothic's own 'decolonising' possibilities.

So, we put out a Call for Special Guest Editors to take the helm with the Special Issue currently before you. We knew the task would require skill, expertise, and sensitivity, and was by no means an unintimidating one. We were delighted, therefore, with the richness of the response. Amidst the submissions we received was one from Professor Kim D. Hester Williams with an exciting and promising vision for *Gothic Nature V.* Co-Editor of the fantastic *Racial Ecologies* (2018) collection and author of the poignant poem 'Losing Count: A Re-Collection, by Numbers' (2021), Professor Williams is a bold and vital voice in the fields of ecocriticism, Gothic and horror studies, and decolonial theory and practice, and it has been an enlightening, empowering experience to assist her in the assembly of this remarkable collection of exceptional essays. It is no mean feat to bring together such an intellectually thought-provoking and eclectic variety of theoretical, literary, and cultural discussions. Kim's passion and commitment to the project of decolonisation is a shining light—one that is further illuminated by the inspirational, intelligent, and insightful work of each of the talented contributors featured in the pages that follow. The rich and dynamic perspectives and reflections to be found in the articles are testament to the heart and soul that has been poured into the decolonisation of ecohorror and the ecoGothic—and Kim, we cannot thank you enough for your work in leading this truly special issue.

In addition to the themed articles, readers familiar with *Gothic Nature* will also find the usual unthemed reviews sections, where they will be able to read about exciting recent ecohorror and ecoGothic texts in various forms, as well as our Creative Corner, where we feature new writing and artistic contributions on the darkness of the natural world. We extend our thanks, as ever, to our Book Reviews Editor Jimmy Packham and our Film & TV Reviews Editor Ashley Kniss. We are continually ever grateful to our Editorial Board: Stacy Alaimo, Eric G. Anderson, Scott Brewster, Kevin Corstorphine, Rachele Dini, Simon C. Estok, Tom J. Hillard, William Hughes, Derek Johnston, Dawn Keetley, Ian Kinane, John Miller, Matthew Wynn Sivils, Andrew Smith, Jennifer Schell, and Samantha Walton; and, in this issue, to the additional specialist peer reviewers, brought on board by Kim, who wishes to extend her own special thanks to these individuals in her

introduction. We are delighted, too, to continue our tradition of featuring original artwork on the journal's title page and cover sheets, this year inspired by the theme of 'decolonising the ecoGothic', with the beautiful image 'Gale' from artist Brian Sago.

Very importantly, we would like to thank each and every one of the gifted contributors to this issue for your scholarship, insight, and creativity—as well as for your patience in awaiting publication. And to *you* reading this, thank you for your interest, support, and enthusiasm. The *Gothic Nature* community is a warm and brilliant one, one that we are proud to be a part of, and to which we are committed to providing meaningful, high quality research that is freely accessible to all. We hope very much you will consider submitting to our Call for Papers for *Gothic Nature VI*, available now on our website!

We are delighted and deeply honoured to present you with this Open Access issue, led by Kim, and we very much hope it will inspire further work and creativity in this area. The backgrounding and exploitation of Nature, along with the 'radically uneven distribution of climate emergency and ecological plunder' continues, and worsens, as Capital at its root requires 'expendable lives and environments' alike (Duncan, 2022: p. 220 & p. 222). 'The history of colonial power', in Duncan's words, 'remains unconcluded' (p. 220), like the trope of the unanswered question at the end of horror film, 'is it over?', when we know the threat still very much remains. As Toni Morrison (2015) writes, when the world is in chaos, 'this is precisely the time when artists go to work […]. We speak, we write, we do language [and] this is how civilisations heal'. And indeed, the Gothic, as Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013) attest, is well situated to capture and express anxieties and instabilities (p. 5). We therefore welcome and encourage the multitude of Gothic texts and Gothic criticism that question the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano, 2000: p. 533)—and we very much hope you enjoy exploring and engaging with *Gothic Nature V: Decolonising the EcoGothic*.

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Introduction

Speaking of the ecoGothic—Decolonised:
Nature. Dispossession. Haunting. Fear. Blood. Escape. Return.

Kim D. Hester Williams

Picture credit: Still from the film, *Nope* (Dir. Jordan Peele, 2022)

‘EcoGothic from postcolonial societies has long pointed towards the need to reconceptualise the relation between humans and their environment as central to the project of decolonisation’.

—Kerstin Oloff, ‘“Greening” The Zombie: Caribbean Gothic, World-Ecology, and Socio-Ecological Degradation’, 2012

‘When do we become memory? If you do not remember us, do we cease to exist?’

—Carolyn Finney, ‘Memory Divine’, Foreword excerpt from *A Darker Wilderness: Black Nature Writing From Soil to Stars*, 2023

'I cannot walk through all realms—
I carry a yearning I cannot bear alone in the dark—
What shall I do with all this heartache?'

—Joy Harjo, 'Speaking Tree' from *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*, 2015

In Jordan Peele's film, *Nope* (2022), a sitcom Chimpanzee named Gordy violently attacks, gruesomely mangles, and emphatically kills all but one of his co-stars. In the horrific aftermath, we are left to question who exactly is the provocateur, given the undeniable exploitation Gordy has suffered at the hands, quite literally, of his human handlers. Gordy's animalistic violence magnifies the presence of the lone surviving child actor who is, conspicuously, the only non-White person of the cast, Ricky Jupe Park (Steven Yeun). Both Gordy and the child are decolonised actors of a different sort if we consider the ecohorror that ensues. They are rendered by Peele as change agents formed by the relentless rage—might we even say revenge—that Gordy exacts upon his human sitcom 'relatives'.

The common thread between *Nope* and similarly themed ecoGothic/horror stories is a pointed critique of settler colonial conquest and racialised erasure/disavowal—we might alternately say, more simply, the fear and retribution of difference. Amy Bride's (2025) review on Jordan Peele's ecoGothic discourses in *Nope*, included in this issue, helps to elucidate this point further. Bride posits a reading of the creature-alien, Jean-Jacket's, representation in the film as well as the larger meaning of the beings/nature conflicts:

> 'Not only […] does *Nope* portray a violent and vengeful ecology in which creatures fight back against sins inflicted upon their bodies and habitats, but Peele's film also highlights how humanity's actions are simultaneously self-damaging, with the pursuit of profit ultimately leading to death and devastation' (p. 453).

My own reading, in conversation with Bride's review, is that *Nope* draws critical attention to the dialectical interplay between liberal humanism, the entertainment industry, capital consumption,

and benign consumerism. *Nope* is particularly poignant when it is showcasing the injurious implications of the coalescence of these forces that ultimately results in the subjugation and destruction of nature—a result which necessarily entails our own self-destruction, as Bride argues. Ultimately, Peele prompts us toward a greater consideration of the haunted presence of the 'othered' colonial subject and their responsive decolonial discourse within the ecoGothic/horror narrative.

Nope is but one example of a 'Decolonising ecoGothic' discourse. The film meticulously reflects back to the viewer moments in which the 'othered' colonial subject awakens both recognition and fear in the coloniser, a fear of reversal—and refusal. In this way, we are asked to reckon with an unsettling of the very notion of home and belonging especially in colonial relations and colonial spaces. As Juan Pablo Gutierrez (2023) discusses, it is a 'decolonization of thought' in which '[t]his world that constitutes our "whole" is the product of a will to organize reality in a specific direction' (p. 181). The coloniser's desire for and will towards a monolithic and homogeneous reality is constantly met with the Other reality—and presence—of difference and resistance. The possibilities inherent in such a decolonising project, of an unravelling and 'decolonization of thought', strikes the kind of fear that provokes horror and racial terror—both real and imagined. Yet, what is also provoked are the possibilities of renewal.

As the great granddaughter of a Cherokee woman and an enslaved Black man and, subsequently, the granddaughter of Black American Southern sharecroppers—all of whose attachment to the land was both intensely beautiful and profoundly complicated—I think often about the deleterious and horrific effects of (ongoing) colonial relations and the decolonising thought and resistance necessary to confront and transform said relations. I think often about my grandparents and great grandparents' love for the land and for their descendants. I wonder about their constant struggle to preserve, to nurture, and to maintain their interrelations and interconnections, their sanity. What did it take to maintain their self-determination and being-ness? While the answer to this question may seem elusive, I always understood the inextricable connection my ancestors had to the natural world that sustained them and their family, even as a child travelling back to the South during the unrelenting heat of the summer months to visit relatives who lived amongst the most majestic trees, forest, and fields that I had ever seen while

being afraid that I, myself, would somehow get lost 'in the woods'. Nonetheless, these magnificent environs also exacted sweat, blood, tears and sometimes deep heartache for my ancestors, evoking the poetic epigraph above from Joy Harjo. They ultimately had to participate in the commodity and capital processes of exchange and exploitation that continued, throughout their lifetimes, to influence their relationship to the land, to one another, and to the larger community of living beings and their environment. Yet, they persisted and remained on and with the land building a life with their families against the insatiable hunger of the colonial past-present, racial discrimination, and the constant threat of dispossession—the taking of everything—that always lurked and threatened to devour them. How might their lives have been different without the forces and ghostly spectre of colonialism?

Nikole Hannah-Jones poignantly encapsulates U.S. colonial history by recalling the fraught relations exacerbated by the 'terrible transformation' of African subjects into perpetually enslaved, objectified peoples and 'property' in the English colonies that would become the United States. She queries, in the preface to *The 1619 Project* (2019), a recounting and foregrounding of the arrival of 'some twenty to thirty captive Africans' to Virginia on the *White Lion* ship who would become the first enslaved Africans in the English colonies: 'What would it mean to reframe our understanding of the U.S. history by considering 1619 as our country's origin point, the birth of our defining contradictions […]?' (p. xxix-xxx). She goes on to further query: 'How might that reframing change how we understand the unique problems of the nation today—its stark economic inequality, its violence, its world-leading incarceration rates, its shocking segregation, its political divisions, its stingy social safety net?' (p. xxix-xxx). This 'reframing' and rethinking is core to decolonisation discourse and praxis. In my previous work, particularly co-editing and co-curating the *Racial Ecologies* (2018) collection, we sought to rethink ecological relations and climate crisis through the lens of people like my Black and Native foremothers and forefathers and the ancestors that came before as well as the descendants of all dispossessed colonial subjects who continue to be formed by and against the horrors of colonialism, slavery, genocide, and the many attempts at the degradation and erasure of the racialised 'other'. Colonialism exploited and altered the historical attachment Indigenous and enslaved Black subjects had cultivated in relation to the natural world. It produced a disfigured and complicated association with the land—and its human and non-human inhabitants—perpetuated by the trauma of performing extracted, capital labour

that was antithetical to the intimate connection and knowledge of the natural world that had existed prior to the 'taking' of peoples, land, plants and animals as property and possessions. To be possessed was to be dispossessed. As Toni Morrison succinctly put it in her novel, *A Mercy* (2008), speaking in her Gothic authorial voice, '[t]o be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing' (p. 174). In response to the wickedness of colonisation, particularly as represented in this special issue on 'Decolonising the ecoGothic', the reimagining of colonial relations takes the form of decolonisation, that is, transforming the 'dominion' into a reformation of relations, especially one's relation to the natural world and all of its inhabitants.

It is important, then, to articulate what is meant by the term 'decolonisation' and how we might view its varied iterations and functions in correspondence with the ecoGothic. In the introduction to the *Gothic Studies* journal special issue, 'Decolonising Gothic' (2022), Rebecca Duncan informs readers that '[d]ecolonial thinking orientates itself, in the first instance, toward the task of excavating this shadow history' (p. 222). By 'shadow history' Duncan is referring to a set of power relations that ensued when European explorers and settlers declared sovereignty over land occupied by the 'Other' Native/Indigenous inhabitants. The resulting effects manifest—then and now—as genocidal violence and subjugation in order to maintain both power and possession of the land, nature, and all inhabitants, producing what Duncan identifies as a 'racializing matrix, which links some lives that are deemed disposable to others for the benefit of whom they are disposed' (ibid). The life of the land is necessarily included here in the will toward rampant expansion and extraction of resources, both human and non-human. The resulting and continued effects of colonial relations entails the expansion of subjugation and violence which involves the capture, importation, and enslavement of Black bodies for their use value as free extractive labour.

Additionally, while Duncan positions decolonisation in relation to the Gothic—or, as she describes, the 'Gothic that decolonises', or 'decolonial Gothic', which enlists the Gothic to reveal further 'the coloniality of power' and the persistent 'capitalist production and Eurocentric categories of race, gender, and nature' (ibid)—there are other definitions and projects of decolonisation that also might be instructive: namely, the framing set forth by the Critical Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective in their introduction, 'A Sightline', to their *Critical Ethnic Studies*

Reader (2016). The editors there give forceful expression and clarity about their commitment to a decolonising discourse and praxis that functions as 'fugitive socialities, or ways of living, being, and relating that have taken flight from the dominant and can only be glimpsed in fleeting moments' (p. 13). They further insist that '[t]he urgency of identifying the fatal unfreedom that the monumental yet banal violence of colonialism continues to produce nurtures political subjectivities that are compelled to imagine decolonial futures' (pp. 13-14). In this way, we can think of these descriptions and definitional work concerning decolonisation as the foundation upon which to further build a critical edifice of decolonising the ecoGothic. That is, decolonisation involves an unveiling and reframing of the vexing European past of violent conquest and eradication/erasure and not simply making this history more visible and knowable. As such, decolonisation seeks to directly transform the ideologies that hold up the colonial edifice of relations: race, gender, nature—difference—and its capture by capitalist accumulation, exploitation and, importantly, the false claims of freedom in the face of its contradictory Gothic realities. It is these colonial ecologies of horror and terror that decolonial thought calls us to reveal, to reimagine and, ultimately, to transform.

Consequently, in the Foreword to this special edition, the *Gothic Nature* co-editors, Elizabeth Parker and Harriet Stilley (2025), remind us of the potential of ecoGothic and ecohorror texts to reimagine colonial relations by (re)conceptualising Gothic fears and Eurocentric frameworks in order to constructively imagine possibilities for alternate, recuperative ecological futures that are compatible with anticolonial politics. This is in dialogue with the aforementioned explications of decolonisation in *Gothic Studies* and as asserted in *The Critical Ethnic Studies Reader*. Importantly, in this special issue of *Gothic Nature*, we enter the conversation about decolonisation, and its dynamic and varied ideas and practices, through the lens of the ecoGothic.

Considering the journey of this special issue, which has been long and challenging but also quite gratifying, I cannot help but to contemplate our current epoch in which there is a decided (human) species devolution taking place. The current post-Pandemic, hyper-capitalistic, hyper-violent, precarious and climate crisis historical moment of indifference and waning empathy represents a simultaneous turning away from and a returning to the lessons of settler colonial history. What we seem to be experiencing—globally—is a terrifying re-enlivening of settler

colonial hegemony that has exacted a death toll at a scale that is beyond horrific. The body count continues apace. We need only look at the horrors being inflicted on the innocents in the Sudan: the starvation of children, rape and sexual violence against women and children used as a weapon of war, the forced displacement of thousands upon thousands of people in a civil war propelled by colonial actors whose greed is insatiable and is driven by men of the West and the East who traffic in death and the unnatural extrication of cobalt, copper, diamonds, gold, lithium, and tantalum from the raw, bare hands that dig—and bodies that die—for their mineral profit. Still, this is as much as ever before a historical moment that can and must be translated, indeed, it should be understood, through the critical lens of the ecoGothic and the resistances and refusals instructed in the logics, counter-narratives, and dynamic re-imagination and practices of decolonisation.

The scholarly essays included in this special edition of *Gothic Nature* respond in various ways to this impulse toward decolonising the ecoGothic. Working with these authors and their contributions to this special topic has been both enlivening and intellectually galvanising. The variety of work and sincere engagement with this complex topic also has been immensely fulfiling. The critical framing of this 'Decolonising the ecoGothic' volume begins with Mariangela Ugarelli's 'Revenge of the Condor: Fear and Gothic in the Andes' and her discussion of Franco-Peruvian author Ventura García Calderón's 'La venganza del cóndor' ('Revenge of the Condor', 1924). Ugarelli depicts and centres the Indigenous disconcerted and 'monstered' linguistic voice that 'speaks back' to directly confront Spanish colonisation and land dispossession evoking fear but also a move toward restoration—of the land. Relatedly, Cameron Crawford, in 'The Grounds Have a Number of Ghosts', continues the theme of Indigenous haunting in a reading of Erika T. Wurth's horror novel *White Horse* (2022). Crawford examines Wurth's and other Native American authors' uses of the ghost trope and figures in order to render and reckon with colonial trauma and concurrent violence and, at the same time, to make transparent Native presence and resistance.

The series of essays continues with 'Reclamation from the Ground: Predial Decolonisation', Crystal Thompson's reconsideration of the function of 'rootwork' (or conjuring) identifying, as she states, 'the locus where literature becomes the strongest transporter of historical examples of Black people's predial interaction (engagements with the land, but animals, plants, astrology, and elements must also be acknowledged)' (p. 68). Thompson's discussion foregrounds

the distinctive ways Black subjects engage with ecoGothic spaces and discourse—the magic inherent in the land—as a source of agency, self-determination, and healing. In *Red Nation Rising: From Border Violence to Native Liberation* (2021), authors Nick Estes, Melanie K. Yazzie, Jennifer Nez Denetdale and David Correia explicate the interwoven histories between the colonial condition for Native peoples and those peoples of African descent violently transported—against their will—to the American colonies and settler nation states as a historical relationship of interrelatedness and interconnection. It is, as Thompson shows, expressive of communities that extended beyond the human to include the land—flora and fauna—and its crucial role as a change agent for liberation and healing.

In 'Spectral Seals and Enslaved Africans', Jennifer Schell engages a reconsideration of Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno' story as an 'Anticolonial EcoGothic Tale', by foregrounding the violence exacted upon the 'more-than-human animals' in the story and, as such, their distinctive relationship and positionality to the settler colonial project, Black trauma, and the environmental haunting that ensues. Similarly, in '"It was the House that Disfigured the Land": Subverting the Eurocentric EcoGothic in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*', Stephanie Schoellman argues that Moreno-Garcia's novel presents a tale of haunting that repurposes the Gothic mode in order to reveal—and imaginatively subvert—the 'imperial and colonial presences in 1950s Mexico' (p. 122). Correspondingly, Costanza Bergo's 'Looking at the Garden to Understand the Tear: Haunted Landscape in Settler-Colonial Australia' riffs on the haunting of Australia represented in the work of two Indigenous artists, Julie Gough and Tracey Moffatt, and their aesthetic uses of ecoGothicism in order to 'call the history of the continent into question'—as both a response to the colonial whitewashing of Australian historiography and a decolonial discourse of refusal that, instead, 'highlight[s] the constitutive role of violence, and the denial of violence, within ongoing settler-colonial occupation' (p. 162).

It is not only environmental haunting that comprises this 'Decolonising the ecoGothic' volume. Christina Verano Sornito's reflections on 'Ethnographic Dislocation and Mari-it Ecologies in the Western Visayas, Philippines' employs 'Tropical Gothic' as a mode of inquiry to 'describe a range of human and more-than-human encounters as *mari-it*—a term that is variously regarded to mean "enchanted" or "taboo"' (p. 170). Sornito provides an enlarged view of the

'Tropical Gothic' that is further illustrated with compelling photos that emphasise the contradictions of 'postcolonial modernity' in the Philippines yet also, when confronted directly, offer the possibility toward alternate, radical futurist 'categories of knowledge towards a richer argot for world-making' (p. TBC). Jiwon Min also re-envisions the colonial project as it is imaginatively rendered and contested in Mary Shelley's novel, *The Last Man*. In her essay, 'Decolonising EcoGothic and Pestilential Colonialism in *The Last Man*', Min elaborates on Shelley's critique of the expansionist colonial project and the author's decolonial critique and insistence on alternate realities and relations that offer the potential of transforming environmental destruction to function as a decolonising 'generative force'.

The last set of essays bring attention to gender, sexuality, and constructs of the racial subject. In '"Of What Sex Is Your Friend?"' Charles Maturin's (Almost) Nonbinary, Ecosexual Paradise and Colonial Primitivism in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Desmond Huthwaite's discussion of the 'ecosexual primitivism' embedded in Maturin's novel (1820) makes clear that queer identity is crucially implicated and under threat by the colonial project of assimilation and hegemonic conformity. Huthwaite draws our attention to 'intersectional ecoGothic studies' as an avenue for expanding our understanding of decolonial resistances and reimaginings. Hannah Hellman's '"Life is Sacred in Syl Anagist": Decolonising Magic and Technology in N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* Trilogy' explores the futuristic worlds of Jemisin's novels wherein the oppressed and subjugated colonised beings take back their land, directly confronting and transforming the capitalist—and monstrous—death machine. In her illustrated discussion of Rob Guillory's *Farmhand* comic book series, '"Good Fruit Can't Come from a Bad Tree": Monstrous Bioengineering and Haunted Ecologies in *Farmhand*', Brianna Anderson considers the ecohorror that is represented by the symbolic meaning of the deformed Black body—and body horror—that also becomes a source of strength and resistance while not losing sight of disproportionate impact of bioengineering on marginalised communities. Anderson's analysis brings Disability Studies, necessarily, into the larger conversation and project of decolonising the ecoGothic. The collection of essays concludes with '"I Want to Walk in a World of My Own Making": An ecoGothic Reading of Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend*'. Here, Barbara Beatie offers a perceptive rendering of Ward's 2023 novel—an exemplary and compelling ecoGothic journey from slavery to freedom, from capture to escape where the state of fugitivity is at the core of its decolonisation discourse.

Accordingly, Beatie argues, regarding the symbolic function of the constructive presence of bees in the narrator's life, that 'Ward's bees remind that it is possible that bees can form new colonies, mate, have new queens, and begin again' (p. 331). It is in this decolonising ecoGothic mode of expression that we locate the possibilities of renewal, and of 'beginning again'.

In conclusion, I return to the possibilities of renewal and Kerstin Oloff's epigraphic imperative of our relations—and to my Cherokee great grandmother—a woman who joined with a formerly enslaved Black man and, together, ushered in generations of Native and Black children who, themselves and in their variegated bodies, symbolised a decolonising response to dispossession, capture, and the haunting of racial trauma. Out of the horrors of genocide and slavery, my Indigenous and Black ancestors forged renewed, and transformational, relations to the land and to one another. Indigenous scholarship and praxis inform us on the importance of paying attention to relations. As Melanie K. Yazzie (2023) reminds us, '[t]he caretaking of relations, human and otherwise, is at the heart of Indigenous movements for decolonization' (p. 603). Yet as we do this we must also reckon with the violence of dispossession and extraction in settler colonial relations. These are lethal relations: lethal to the land, nature, and its inhabitants. Enforced settler relations propel a 'slow violence' that is described in *Red Nation Rising* as a '[s]ettler citizenship' that 'entails a lethal obligation to kill Indians […]. More dead Indians, more settler land. The Indian killer had counterparts in the east who were slave patrollers hunting, capturing, and returning enslaved Africans to plantation overseers' (Estes et al., 2021: p. 11). However, as the authors insist by first recalling the protests against the murder of George Floyd, '[b]ut Native people and Black people are not hapless victims […]. There is nothing that terrifies a settler more than the words *Indian uprising* or *slave uprising* […]. These are our histories of resistance' (ibid). This is the condition of being that demands refusal against the violence and attempted erasure perpetuated by settler colonialism. 'Decolonising the ecoGothic' screams relations and resistance—as is evident in Jordan Peele's *Nope* film and the essays in this special edition of *Gothic Nature*.

It is with this thought in mind that I express my deepest gratitude to the illustrious executive editors of the *Gothic Nature* journal, Dr. Elizabeth Parker and Dr. Harriet Stilley. I recall my first introduction to the journal and the beautiful community of ecoGothic scholars, creative writers,

and artists. After I was fortunate enough to have my review of Jordan Peele's *Us* film (2019) published in the journal, I attended the *Gothic Nature* virtual conference in October 2020 where I met the lively editors and many of the brilliant contributors. I was immediately taken aback—in a most positive way—by the range, rigour, and imagination of the compelling work of the journal, as was evidenced in the productive space of that virtual conference and the pages of the inaugural issues of the journal being celebrated and that continue today, in earnest. The executive editors' ongoing work has produced a journal that is nothing less than stunning in its scope and distinctiveness.

As the curators of this journal, Drs. Parker and Stilley possess a keen ability to solicit work that engages with various dimensions of the ecoGothic—both scholarly and creative—and that is also provocative and enthralling. I am inspired by their inception of this special issue and their commitment to its final production. They have spent countless hours, weeks, and months helping me to bring their initial ideas for this issue to fruition. I am personally grateful to them for their generosity as editors and co-conspirators in this work. Their patience and profound kindness throughout this process has sustained me during some very difficult times that took us well past the initial planned publication date. Yet, I nevertheless and perhaps as a result have grown immensely as an editor—and ecoGothic thinker—due in great part to their excellent model, that is, their ability to balance professionalism and empathy, to devote meticulous attention to details and academic rigour directed to the scholarly and creative ecoGothic project of decolonisation. They remained empathetic and supportive, always leaning into their sharp awareness and sincere offering of humanistic care and communalism. I truly hope that they have felt my mutual respect and admiration for them as well as for all of our contributors to this special issue. This includes a special note of gratitude to our peer reviewers and readers who so generously devoted their time and expertise to vetting and helping to polish these splendid essays. Along with the comprehensive editorial work of Elizabeth and Harriet, the *Gothic Nature* community represents an indominable spirit of generosity and scholarly inquiry that continues to progress how we think about the possibilities for reimagining and transforming the difficulties, dilemmas, and contradictions of the human condition that are made more transparent and legible in the ecoGothic text and our will, ultimatiely, towards decolonisation.

As you engage with the writings and creative work in this special issue, you might consider how to further engage the ecoGothic with a mind toward 'rememory'—to use Toni Morrison's haunting term from her 1987 Gothic novel, *Beloved*—and, correspondingly, the project of decolonisation. Such a quality of feeling and affect brings me to a note on this special issue's 'delay' in being completed and published. I would be remiss, given the topic of this *Gothic Nature V* issue in particular, not to mention that in the beginning stages of working with contributors I became immersed in pro-Palestinian protests to bring awareness and a stop to the destructive assault against Gazans. I participated in activist rallies in Montreal, Canada, as part of a larger American Studies Association conference contingent and on my own university campus, as a mentor and ally to student protestors and part of a larger group of faculty and staff allies. It was all consuming and, unfortunately, resulted in ways we had not inteneded nor anticipated. I turned away from the editing work of this special issue upon discovering from an official email notice and local news outlets that our well-respected university president at the time was forced into retirement due to his attempt to meet student demands positively and progressively—and empathetically. Faculty subsequently became deeply divided and distanced from one another. Student protestors were reprimanded and threatened with sanctions and possible expulsion. There was a decided and eerie chill throughout the campus. It was clear that there was a grave (pun purposely here) attempt—an unsuccessful one I might add—to silence us; to intimidate us into looking away from the colonial horrors and ongoing death, destruction, and ecocide in Gaza. Yet, there was also the decolonial impulse toward even greater recognition of the widespread suffering—of beings and the (home)land inhabited and occupied—toward refusal and decolonising the ecoGothic.

As Carolyn Finney (2023) asks, rhetorically, quoted in the epigraph above, do those subjected to and by colonialism cease to exist if we do not remember the colonial past and its haunting presence? I ask, in present tense (pun, again, intended), how do we represent the ecoGothic and the ecohorror of colonial relations while engaging in a project of decolonisation that gestures toward, in one instance, the social justice *Decolonizing Design* work of Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall (2023) and her call to reverse 'the cost of evil' inherent in colonisation? (p. 98). How do we resist, refuse, and practise radical acts of connection and renewal? I invite you to engage with the various contributions of these authors who incite us to think differently about these

questions and more located within this special issue, *Gothic Nature V*: *Decolonising the ecoGothic*. As you journey throughout these pages you might keep in mind, as Lissette Lorenz (2023) delights in her essay and ecoGothic trope of the monster figure, 'We Are All Monsters: Radical Relationality During Planetary Crisis', that, '[w]hether imagined or materially manifested in consensual reality, telling more nuanced and creative stories about monsters is crucial to relearning how to relate to all the other parts of ourselves that we have abandoned, dismissed, or tried to destroy' (p. 51). As Mary Shelley might well have agreed… We are, indeed, all monsters.

BIOGRAPHY

Kim D. Hester Williams is a Professor in the English and American Multicultural Studies departments at Sonoma State University. She is co-editor, with LeiLani Nishime, of a collection of interdisciplinary essays on race and environment titled *Racial Ecologies*, published by the University of Washington Press in 2018. She has also published a chapter in *The Many Lives of Scary Clowns: Essays on Pennywise, Twisty, the Joker, Krusty and More* (2022), ed. by Ron Riekki, as well as several reviews/essays on race and horror. Most recently, she co-authored an essay on care work with LeiLani Nishime, 'Familial and Communal Histories as Environmental Care Work' for *Environmental Communication* (Dec 2023). She is currently working on a chapter, 'Black Pleasure, Pain, and Possibility in the Science Fiction and ecoGothic (Post)Apocalyptic Worlds of Octavia Butler, N.K. Jemisin, and Jordan Peele' which will appear in the forthcoming *Liverpool Handbook of Environmental Science Fiction* (2026). In addition to her academic writing, Dr. Hester Williams writes poetry. In fall 2021, her ecoGothic poem entitled 'Losing Count: A Re-Collection by Numbers', was published in the Canadian journal, *The Goose* (2021).

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Revenge of the Condor: Fear and Gothic in the Andes

Mariangela Ugarelli

ABSTRACT

As Alberto Portugal (2008) pointed out in his article '*¿Un gótico peruano?*' ('*A Peruvian Gothic?*'), Peruvian Gothic has been hiding in plain sight within forms of literature written about Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous writers. This perspective on certain forms of *indigenismo* sheds light on narrations such as 'La venganza del cóndor' ('Revenge of the Condor', 1924), penned by the Franco-Peruvian author Ventura García Calderón. This text deploys the Gothic mode to create a monstered representation of Indigenous peoples, Andean animals, and the Andes themselves, transformed into a single Body-without-Organs. 'La venganza del cóndor' mobilises the fear the criollo descendants of Europeans had of Indigenous peoples and the thought of them taking revenge for centuries of oppression originated with the Spanish Conquest. This article seeks to expand on what has been said by Portugal by employing a framework stemming from the Gothic, including Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* (1988) and the ecoGothic. The fear mobilised by García Calderón unintentionally circles back to the issue of land ownership triggered by the Spanish Conquest and presents the final consequence of the 'revenge of the condor' as the ultimate fear of the oligarchy: the restoration of land ownership.

On a dreary Parisian night, a writer dreams of the mystical lands from whence his family was exiled. A wondrous fantasy of gold and conquest turns into a sour nightmare by an enormous black shadow tapping at the author's window. The Andean condor, an envoy of Peru's plundered imperial past, has come to enact cosmic justice, and take revenge on the 'intruders' who have pillaged the land to feed the incipient national state that the author represents. Unlike the raven's interlocutor, the author does not need to ask any questions: the vengeance he has always feared is finally here.

This passage might be fictitious (the author in question never had such a dream that we know of), but, not unlike his own stories, it represents a real fear or, at the very least, a discourse on such fear that was mobilised by said author with artistic intent. This fear is summed up in the image of the vengeful condor, but extends to the whole of Nature, the opposing force in the dichotomy of civilisation and barbarism that guided Spanish American political thought throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. Franco-Peruvian author Ventura García Calderón's *La venganza del cóndor* stands as a paradigmatic example of how *indigenismo*, a complex array of discourse about Indigenous peoples penned by the non-Indigenous, can employ the Gothic mode as a way to abject their subject, simultaneously depicted as 'seductor y peligroso' ('seductive and dangerous') (Kristal, 1988: p. 66). The tenuous defence of Indigenous peoples García Calderón's brand of *indigenismo* purports is outweighed by the violence of the Gothic lens through which the Andes and its inhabitants are seen: a lens that deforms and mutates, that makes animals into monsters, traditions into satanic rituals, and nature into a hellscape.

Before addressing Ventura García Calderón's short story collection and the homonymous tale[1], we must clarify the context that gives meaning to the animal's vengeance. *La venganza del cóndor*, published in 1924 by Mundo Latino in Madrid,[2] portrays the titular animal pushing a white man off a ledge and to his death as revenge for said man's abuse of his Indigenous servant. Nonetheless, the story has far greater implications. In 'La rebelión de los animales: Zoopolíticas sudamericanas', Gabriel Giorgi (2011) posits that most instances of animal rebellion penned in the early twentieth century are purely literary: 'no hay rebelión animal sino a título de una metáfora, una alegoría o un tropo de otra rebelión, esta sí propiamente política' (p. 166).[3] Something similar can be said of García Calderón's story, where the condor's revenge is not only his own, not even solely the Indigenous person's: it implies a greater, historical vengeance for the social and political

[1] *La venganza del condor* will be used to refer to the entirety of the collection, and 'La venganza del cóndor' to the homonymous story.

[2] The original publication and immediate reception of *La venganza del cóndor* are areas of interest in themselves. The first edition of the book, published by Mundo Latino in Madrid, bore the image of an Indigenous person wearing a war bonnet. However, this headdress is traditionally worn by Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains in the North of the American continent, not the Quechuas or Aimaras of the Andes. This now-controversial paratextual element was not read as such at the time and did not hinder the book's popularity. It did not take long before *La venganza del cóndor* was translated into French, English and German to high praise from European audiences (André Malraux and Walter Benjamin were amongst said positive voices). Even Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral concurred. Further detail regarding the texts' reception history can be found in Benoit Filhol's (2013) dissertation.

[3] 'there is no animal rebellion but as a metaphor, an allegory or a trope of another rebellion, this one properly political'.

plight brought about by the Spanish conquest. The fashion in which this revenge is presented, however, serves to strengthen the barrier between the indigenous and the creole, the natural and the cultural: in other words, civilisation and barbarism. As Simon C. Estok (2019) theorises, 'Imagined as a menace to the fantasies about normalcy, stability, and control, the natural world in the ecoGothic imagination functions precisely to entrench such fantasies' (p. 42). What it meant to be 'Peruvian', 'normalcy', was a key idea in the debates that the García Calderón brothers spearheaded, particularly when dealing with 'el problema del indio' ('the indigenous question/issue').

Peru and 'El problema del indio'

Despite having spent most of his life in Paris, where he was born and finally expired, Ventura García Calderón was still a key player in the debates of Peruvian intelligentsia. Living in the aftermath of a disastrous war (the Saltpeter War or War of the Pacific, where Peru and Bolivia lost to Chile), national construction and reconstruction were paramount concerns for the Andean nation. Ideas concerning what the country is, was and would become and how to modernise it to prevent another defeat sparked heated debates. These pitted the *Novecentistas* ('Generation of the Nine Hundred'), led by José de la Riva Agüero and the García Calderón brothers (Ventura and Francisco), against *indigenistas*, represented at the time by Manuel González Prada. The ideas of the first group, made evident in their political and sociological works, would also give shape to what Ventura García Calderón penned in literary form, as Ricardo González Vigil (1990) cleverly notes: 'Le cupo a Ventura ser el creador que confirió vida literaria a esa meditación peruanista [de su hermano]' (p. 51).[4] A key element in this 'Peruvianist meditation' regarding the future of the country was the so-called 'problema del indio' ('the indigenous question/issue').

Walter D. Mignolo (2005) sums up the crux of this 'modernising' spirit when saying that 'to complete the incomplete project of modernity means to keep on reproducing coloniality' (p. xv). Thus, it should be unsurprising that, whilst González Prada and later *indigenistas* would advocate for Indigenous peoples (albeit in a flawed way characteristic of the late nineteenth and

[4] 'Ventura became the creator who gave literary life to [his brother's] Peruvianist meditation'.

early twentieth centuries), *Novecentistas*' set of beliefs regarding 'el problema del indio' were heavily inspired by Auguste Comte's racial determinism. Although both groups were antagonistic, both *indigenistas* and *Novecentistas*/*civilistas* strongly advocated for the idea of Peru first and foremost, at least during the early stages of this debate.[5] In fact, according to Natalia Majluf (2022), even the most neutral national discourse was ready to, under the banner of modernity, excise the indigenous out of the Peruvian social body: '[…] los indios debían convertirse en peruanos, ciudadanos iguales a todos los demás. Los discursos aparentemente neutrales de la nación liberal sugerían un proceso civilizador que acabaría por desindianizar el Perú' (p. 54).[6]

This holds true for the *Novecentistas*, who, despite their admiration for the Inca Empire, which prompted an abundance of texts classified under the nomenclature of *indianismo*,[7] held the Indigenous peoples contemporary to them beneath contempt. As José de la Riva Agüero (1962) makes clear in his bachelor's thesis, the idea of moral degradation tied to racial determinism was still the norm amongst the *Novecentistas*. When attempting to define national literature through carácter nacional ('national character'), Riva Agüero determines that, in the Peruvian case, said character is made up of two already degenerated characters: the criollo, degraded Spanish conquistadors now 'indolentes y blandos' ('soft and indolent'), and the *indio*, the remainder of what once was a citizen of the great Inca empire (pp. 68-69). This historical perspective made racial degradation, so feared by Victorian Gothic as per Kelley Hurley (2004: p. 68), not a possibility but a reality that could further deteriorate through contamination. Racial determinism was discursively supported by geographical determinism, itself bolstered by the geographical-political division of the country into three natural regions or ecoregions.

[5] González Prada would change his stance later on and become more radical. In addition, José Carlos Mariátegui's work shifted the debate away from ideas of national identity towards Marxist pragmatism.
[6] '[…] the 'indios' were to become Peruvians, citizens equal to all others. The apparently neutral discourses of the liberal nation suggested a civilising process that would eventually de-Indianise Peru'.
[7] Generally, texts that romanticise the Inca Empire are classified under this (usually negative) term. However, the line between *indianismo* and *indigenismo* is very tenuous, as "La venganza del cóndor" itself proves. García Calderón's text does not romanticise Indigenous peoples; on the contrary, it vilifies them. At the same time, it does not engage the political or social plight of modern Indigenous peoples. For this reason, some critics, like Efraín Kristal, have termed this variant of *indigenismo* 'indigenismo civilista'.

Costa, sierra, selva: Three natural regions?

The first instances of the tripartite, longitudinal, division of Peru can be found in the works of Spanish *cronistas*, who described the natural features of what they termed 'indias americanas'. These divisions had, in most cases, the geographical divisions of Spain in mind and, due to the chroniclers' ignorance of the native languages, did not incorporate indigenous territorial divisions.[8] One of the first instances of said type of description occurs in Pedro Cieza de León's *Crónica del Perú* (1553). In this highly detailed and extensive piece, Cieza de León pointed towards different 'tierras' (lands) into which the newly conquered territories could be divided. Thus, the tripartite division of the country is often attributed to him, as Franklin Pease (1984) states referencing Raúl Porras Barrenechea: 'Porras anotó, años atrás, cómo [Cieza de León] continuando una imagen de Pedro Sancho [de la Hoz] hizo clásica una división geográfica de costa, sierra y selva' (p. xxxvii).[9]

The Jesuit José de Acosta did likewise in his *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias* (1589), where he described the terrain of both Peru and Mexico. Not only did Acosta elaborate a geographical division of the country, but, in addition, he attributed diverse levels of civilisation to each of them. As Surrallés (2020) describes,

> 'Su sistema de clasificación o su "filosófica", como él la denominaba, que se fundamenta en el uso del lenguaje y sus instrumentos de transcripción, supone en América una diferencia entre básicamente dos tipos de sociedades, las que tienen

[8] According to Javier Pulgar Vidal (2014), who pioneered the serious questioning of the tripartite longitudinal division of the country, the lack of linguistic understanding between the Conquistadors and the Incas, the variety of languages within the Inca empire itself, the absence of an Inca writing system comprehensible to the Western episteme and the general 'poco aprecio que la mayoría de los inmigrantes subsiguientes tuvo por el saber del hombre común del Tahuantinsuyo' (p. 11), made the incorporation of indigenous knowledge to their geographical understanding a difficult endeavour for the Spanish.
Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (a descendant of both Inca royalty and Spanish aristocracy) is one of the few exceptions to this: his Andean descent and his knowledge of the Quechua language made him able to include the quadripartite Inca division of the Tahuantinsuyo (literally, four [*tahua*] kingdoms [*suyo*]), the indigenous name for the Inca empire (Olcina Cantos, 2017: p. 184). On the other hand, Indigenous chronicler Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala privileges the division in four parts. In his hand drawn maps and figures, Guamán Poma divides the Inca empire into Antisuyo, Collasuyo, Chinchaysuyo and Contisuyo.

[9] 'Porras noted, years ago, how [Cieza de León] following an image created by Pedro Sancho [de la Hoz] established the geographical division of coast, highlands and jungle'.

> un sistema de organización o jefatura y las que no. Si los incas se encuentran entre las primeras, los pueblos amazónicos se sitúan en estas últimas' (p. 242).[10]

This assertion, which attributes distinct levels of civilisation to different geographically determined regions, would continue and develop in parallel to the tripartite division of the country. The previously described partition of coast, mountain and jungle ('costa, sierra y selva') would remain virtually unchallenged up until the twentieth century. Prior to this, nonetheless, the division would serve the arguments of Francisco García Calderón, Ventura García Calderón's brother, regarding geographical determinism.

In his 1907 sociological study *Le Pérou Contemporain*, Francisco García Calderón divides the country into three natural regions and attributes various degrees of civilisation to each of them, the coast being the most civilised and the jungle the least:

> 'Le Pérou offre trois régions géographiques bien définies, la côte, la *sierra*, région froide des plateaux, et la *montana*, immense territoire de fleuves et de forêts. Cette diversité si marquée nui à l'unité nationale. Les climats différents laissent leur empreinte sur les hommes ; les races hétérogènes se mélangent difficilement ; et la nature, par ses divisions est ses oppositions, est toujours l'entrave á une organisation des forces nationales' (p. 5).[11]

Thus, the existence of three distinct regions was, for *Novecentistas*, a hindrance to the idea of national unity (becoming Peruvian). This is due to how each territory overdetermines the nature of their equally dissimilar inhabitants: coast (*la côte*), mountain (*sierra*), and jungle (*montana*). The three do not only determine the nature of the peoples inhabiting them, but are contiguous

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[10] 'His system of classification or his "filosófica," as he called it, which is based on the use of language and the instruments for its transcription, implies, in America, a difference between basically two types of societies, those that have a system of organisation or chieftainship and those that do not. If the Incas are among the former, the Amazonian peoples are among the latter'.

[11] 'Peru offers three well-defined geographical regions: the coast, the *sierra*, a cold plateau region, and the *montana*, a vast territory of rivers and forests. This marked diversity undermines national unity. Different climates leave their mark on men; heterogeneous races mix with difficulty; and nature, through its divisions and oppositions, is always an obstacle to the organisation of national forces'.

elements of a graduated scale of barbarism in which the coast and the jungle represent two extremes:

> ‘On peut donc établir un rapport inverse entre la nature et la civilisation, de la côte à la sierra et de la sierra à la “montagne”, la culture s’affaiblit et se perd ; et dans la même direction, de l’Ouest à l’est, la nature, d’abord pauvre et sèche, devient de plus en plus belle, jusqu’a “la montagne” extrêmement féconde’ (F. García Calderón, 1907: pp. 9-10).[12]

Within this ideological paradigm, the ‘sierra’ is the midpoint between civilisation and barbarism and thus a major source of fear for the criollo. Its territorial contiguity with the ‘civilised’ costa of the criollos and the in-between condition of the Andes as uncivilised but not completely Other makes the area a powerful source of seduction and contagion, as it will be made evident in ‘La venganza del cóndor’. Thus, the two polarities of national identity, ‘indio’ and criollo, came to represent ‘tradición y modernidad, pasado y presente, lo vernáculo y lo cosmopolita, lo oral y lo escrito' (Majluf, 2022: p. 33)[13], and, I would add, the natural and the cultural.

Geographical determinism functions in conjunction with racial determinism and characterisation. All the stories in *La venganza del cóndor*, without exception, refer to or represent racialised characters and/or make mention of racialised tropes. It can be argued that race and geographical origin make the central pillar of characterisation within the book. Races made subaltern by Western culture are depicted with broad strokes as crude caricatures. However, not all the stories address racial divisions in the same way. Characters from other racialised groups, particularly Afro-Peruvian and Asian, are also included in García Calderón’s narrations as servants. Unlike the Indigenous peoples’, the situation of these racial groups is never the subject of the stories. As we will explore when analysing ‘La venganza del cóndor’, the tension between the criollo and the ‘indio’ is depicted as a particular type of struggle that is still ongoing whilst the

[12] ‘One can therefore establish an inverse relationship between nature and civilisation: from the coast to the sierra and from the sierra to the “mountain,” culture weakens and is lost; and in the same direction, from west to east, nature, at first poor and dry, becomes more and more beautiful, until it reaches the extremely fecund “mountain”’.

[13] ‘tradition and modernity, past and future, the vernacular and the cosmopolitan, spoken and written word’.

subalternised position of Afro-Peruvian and Asian servants is *res iudicata*. Tensions between criollo and 'indio' are further stressed by the land issue implicit in these distinctions.

Nature/Culture and land ownership

Paradoxically, the García Calderón brothers' fixation on geographical determinism forces us to think back to the issue of land and land ownership. This, as the *indigenista* sociologist José Carlos Mariátegui (2007) would famously state in his *Siete Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana* (1928), is the crux of the indigenous question: 'La cuestión indígena arranca de nuestra economía. Tiene sus raíces en el régimen de la propiedad de la tierra' (p. 26).[14] For Mariátegui, all discursive forms that elude this fact are merely 'ejercicios teoréticos–y a veces solo verbales–condenados a un absoluto descrédito'[15] that try to 'ocultar o desfigurar' ('hide or disfigure') the real issue (p. 26). For Mariátegui, this was the process involved in the creation of texts such as *La venganza del cóndor*, which, although dealt with the 'problema del indio', did not attempt any political vindication. On the contrary, the Indigenous person is portrayed as an Other, instigator of a profound sense of fear.

Fears of land being taken away from the criollo, a new paradigm shift that would reverse the Conquista, appeared to be coming true with events such as Rumi Maqui's (Teodomiro Gutiérrez Cuevas) rebellion. As Alberto Flores Galindo (1994) explains in *Buscando un Inca*, Rumi Maqui was signalled in 1915 as the organiser of 'el ataque a una hacienda puneña, como inicio de una larga lucha que debería llevar a la restauración del imperio incaico' (p. 249).[16] Beyond the ambiguities regarding the factual reality of Rumi Maqui's actions and the questions surrounding his authorship of the attacks, events such as these were for some landowners nothing but 'la confirmación de esa temida "guerra de castas" y del temple vengativo de los indígenas' (p. 253).[17]

[14] 'The indigenous question has its origins in our economy. It has its roots in the regime of land ownership'.
[15] 'theoretical—and sometimes only verbal—exercises condemned to absolute discredit'.
[16] 'the attack on a hacienda in Puno, as the beginning of a long struggle that should lead to the restoration of the Inca empire'.
[17] 'the confirmation of this dreaded "caste war" and the vengeful mettle of Indigenous peoples'.

Events such as these reminded the empowered class of the precarity of their position. As Majluf (2022) posits, criollos held an 'hegemonía parcial' ('partial hegemony') that emanated from the cities, despite their numerical inferiority. Thus, the goal of 'sobrevivir en un país esencialmente rural' (p. 52)[18] elucidates the discursive insistence on the Nature/Culture and Civilisation/Barbarism divides; it explains the constant fear of a loss of control to the combined power of Nature and indigenous rebellion brewing within it. Estok (2019) reminds us that 'ecophobia is born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world. And control, or the lack thereof, is central to the gothic' (p. 39). The fear associated with losing control of the regions associated with 'Nature' to 'Barbarism' takes the shape of 'La venganza del cóndor'.

As we have previously discussed, for *Novecentistas* Nature is strongly tied to barbarism. In 'Nature, Post Nature', Timothy Clark (2013) argues that the former component of the Nature/Culture binary encompasses 'the sea, the atmosphere, people outside the "developed countries" and, above all, the future' (p. 82). Within a colonial understanding the collapse of said divide would also represent 'that the consequences of human action do not go away anymore' (Clark, 2013: p. 82). The case of the criollo is, thus, particular. The territories already colonised and to be re-colonised to continue the project of modernity are not transatlantic spaces located far away. On the contrary, they are too close for comfort; they might even be the lands criollos inhabit themselves. The consequences of colonialism never went out of sight and out of mind as it could be said to have happened (to a certain extent) in the centres of colonial power. The consequences, in the form of Indigenous peoples perceived as vengeful victims, have never been anywhere but here the whole time, pining for revenge.

Gothified Andes

Thus, establishing a discursive division between the geographical spaces of Nature/Barbarism is crucial to *Novecentista* criollo ideology. This division is established in Gothic terms. Regarding space in the Gothic, Gerald Hoglestates that,

[18] 'surviving in an essentially rural country'.

> '[A] Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space. […] Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story' (p. 29).

Similar ideas are also voiced by Alberto Portugal (2008) in his pioneer essay '*¿Un gótico peruano?* Representaciones de la violencia, el "otro" y re-configuraciones del pasado en la literatura peruana, 1885-1935', about the Gothified Andes of *indigenismo*. He explains that,

> '[E]se mundo [los Andes] es percibido como problema y amenaza: como el lugar del mal, real o potencial; un espacio anclado en el pasado, lo primitivo, lo irracional; una dinámica desde la cual esas fuerzas regresan y amenazan con destruir todo lo que la "civilización" ha construido entre "nosotros"' (p. 65).[19]

The Andes as a Gothic space is not only the locus of evil as Portugal states, but, also, permanently haunted by the spectre of the Conquista and the past glory of the Empire. This differentiates the Andean chronotope from the Amazonian one. Both are two shades of barbarous, but the Andes bear the constant pain of the open wound of the Conquest and the perennial haunting of their own past, something that the Amazonlacks completely. Within the ideological paradigm presented in *La venganza del cóndor*, there is almost no distinction between the dangers posed by the jungle itself (its poisonous animals and plants) and the cannibalistic 'indios witotos'. The Amazon and the Andes are two operating Gothic Bodies-without-Organs, but they differ in the degree of definition of their parts. The link between Indigenous peoples and Nature is perceived not as a neutral anthropological fact, but as a negative, degrading mark of barbarism. For the colonial *Novecentista* discourse, the Indigenous peoples of the Andes had extricated themselves from Nature, only to be tragically returned to barbarism by the inevitable 'fact' of the Conquista, perceived by the criollos of the Nine Hundred as a painful but necessary step in the walk of history.

[19] '[T]hat world [the Andes] is perceived as a problem and a threat: as the place of evil, real or virtual; a space anchored in the past, the primitive, the irrational; a dynamic from which these forces return and threaten to destroy all that "civilisation" has built among "us"'.

Thus, in stories like 'La venganza del cóndor', 'La momia', or 'La llama blanca', all within the pages of *La venganza del cóndor*, the elements composing the Body of the Andes, Indigenous peoples, animals, land, and sacred sites (*huacas*) are sketched out as distinct although the limits between them remain unclear.

The Andean landscape, thusly deformed, can also serve as a space to quell the colonial anxiety over an ever-shrinking field for exploration and discovery. This perception is not far from García Calderón's narrative of how *La venganza del cóndor* itself came about. As Benoit Filhol (2013) makes clear in his dissertation, García Calderón 'establece un vínculo directo entre su experiencia como prospector de minas de plata en los Andes y el proceso de escritura de sus cuentos peruanos' (p. 145).[20] In the author's own words (1947), as cited by Filhol (2013), 'Hélas! Je n'avais pas la vocation de prospecteur. J'avais trouvé là, néanmoins, les sujets de mes contes' (p. 145).[21] García Calderón himself makes the connection between the extraction of metals in the Andes and his own 'extraction' of content for his stories and establishes how the space is still full of both types of treasures, waiting to be exploited.

The fear of a lack of land to discover and colonise is one of the three elements that make up Patrick Brantlinger's (1994) definition of Imperial Gothic. Dawn Keetley and Matthe Wynn Sivilis (2019) point towards a similar goal in American literature of the nineteenth century, which was 'to make the region habitable (only) for humans' (p. 13). Wild and uninhabited within this neocolonial imaginary, the Andes become within criollo discourse an object of biopolitical development, a space to perpetuate and expand life, that is, only the life of what they consider to be 'human', Peruvian humans.

The other two elements that compose Imperial Gothic, fear of individual regression and the takeover of civilisation by barbarism, also come into play. The white criollo, an already degraded version of a historical-romantic archetype (the Spanish Conquistador), can degenerate further, giving way to violent, barbarous impulses. Simultaneously, the vengeful 'indio' awaits the right

[20] 'establishes a direct link between his experience as a prospector of silver mines in the Andes and the writing process of his Peruvian short stories'.
[21] 'But alas! I wasn't a prospector by vocation. Nevertheless, I found the subjects of my tales there'.

time to invade, execute a new *pachacuti*,[22] put the world upside down, and reinstitute their power as rightful descendants of the Incas.

In Ventura García Calderón's literary landscaping of the Andes, not a single trace of Western modernity can be perceived. Weaponry only appears in the hands of white criollos or mestizos who quarrel amongst themselves or oppress Indigenous peoples (like in 'La llama blanca'). The appearance of 'modern' weaponry, so common in the work of other indigenista authors like Enrique López Albújar, would break the spell García Calderón has cast over the Andes, transforming them into a distant land in space and, most importantly, in time.

Stripping away any trace of modernity from the Andes (politico-social movements in the Andes or firearms) for aesthetic effect is common practice *in La venganza del cóndor*. Since, unless explicitly stated, the stories in the anthology are supposed to be contemporary to their publication date, the incongruity between a supposedly modern nation and the atavistic produces a jarring effect. Given the context provided by the other stories of the collection, the Andes are, in García Calderón's text, the locus of mystery and magic of a dark kind.

'La venganza del cóndor'

The story that lends its title to the collection, 'La venganza del condor', is a Gothic aestheticisation of racial violence: a 'lindo látigo' ('beautiful whip'), like the one the story itself presents. The whip referred to in the story belongs to a white criollo captain who abuses his Indigenous servant. When it comes to the 'art' of oppression, he is the narrator's 'teacher'. His whip, described meticulously by the narrator, exhibits the tensions García Calderón's work represents for the Peruvian canon. The tale follows a first-person narrator, a criollo from Lima, the capital of Peru, 'bachiller en leyes' ('bachelor in law') traversing the Andes. In his travels, he meets Capitán González (a white criollo who lives in the Andes) and his Indigenous servant, whom he abuses with his 'beautiful whip'. However, once the captain is left to wander the jagged and treacherous path on his own, a group

[22] *Pachacuti*, the shaking of the earth, is an Andean indigenous term for a radical paradigm shift that occurs approximately every 500 years. An example of a Pachacuti is the Conquest itself, as Guamán Poma makes clear in his *Nueva Crónica y Buen Gobierno* (1616).

of condors swoops down close to him, and the man falls down a ravine to a slow, agonising death. Finally, the narrator wonders if this fall was a mere accident, if the Indigenous peoples commited the crimeor if the condors have a 'pacto oscuro' ('dark pact') with them that made the animals push Capitán González as a form of revenge for his brutality.

This story, an interpretation of a classic revenge plot, is set in a liminal space, in a stretch of the journey from Chimbote to Huaraz, Áncash. This is an ideal setting for García Calderón's colonial imagining of the Andes as a desolate and primitive land, the ashes of a once great empire. Almost completely devoid of buildings (except for a *tambo*, an inn), technology, or forms of indigenous social organisation, the space in which the atavistic revenge takes place is a colonial fantasy painted over the realities of the time. García Calderón's choice of making this a travel narrative also allows for romantic descriptions of the landscape (in which the author excels) that stress the overall Gothic effect of the story. Said journey, the transit between Chimbote, a port, and Huaraz, the Andean capital of Áncash, is also significant within the ideological paradigm outlined by Francisco García Calderón, since the coast is, supposedly, the 'least' barbarous of the three natural regions. As such, the journey is not only a travel akin to those of the male Gothic tradition, but, also, a reverse descent to Hell: 'aquel camino rebañado en la piedra y tan vecino a la hondonada mortal parecía llevarnos, como en las antiguas alegorías sagradas, a un paraje siniestro' (p. 12).[23] In addition, the liminality of the space itself is reiterated in the ambiguous voice of the narrator, whose identity as a 'civilised' member of the lettered city is constantly threatened by the seduction of barbarism, permanently in between the excessive brutality of the degraded criollo and the regressed status of the 'indio'.

The act of standing in between the two sides occurs literally in the story as the narrator stops Capitán González from further hurting the 'indio' with his whip. After the first strike, both the narrator and the 'indio' shudder, an action depicted using the first person plural: 'El indio y yo nos estremecimos; él, por la sangre que goteaba en su rostro como lágrimas; yo, porque llevaba todavía en el espíritu prejuicios sentimentales de bachiller' (p. 9).[24] The cause for the narrator's

[23] 'that path, rutted in the stone and so close to the deadly ravine, seemed to lead us, as in the ancient sacred allegories, to a sinister place'.
[24] 'The Indian and I shuddered; he, because of the blood that dripped down his face like tears; I, because I still carried in my mind the sentimental prejudices of a college graduate'.

shuddering, his 'prejuicios sentimentales de bachiller', in other words, his Western, formal education, is the only thing separating him from the captain's barbarous indolence. Nonetheless, the story implies that the captain's degraded nature is a response to the violence of the environment, one that has sanded away the so-called 'sentimentality' of the city and left a being just as barbaric as the 'indio' he derides so deeply.

On the other hand, and despite his initial feelings, the lettered protagonist and first-person narrator of the tale is fascinated by violence and by its symbols. This is made evident in the particularly detailed description of the whip the captain uses to beat the Indigenous man. Said 'lindo látigo' as a symbol for the fetishisation of violence does not end with its material beauty since the narrator explains that the object had to be 'en los flancos de las bestias y de los indios […] sin duda irresistible' (p. 10).[25] In a single phrase, the narrator groups 'las bestias' (brutes) and 'los indios' (the Indians). This gesture points towards how the story portrays a link between the two and anticipates the 'dark pact' ('pacto oscuro') at the centre of the tale, since both are elements of the Andean Body-without-Organs. They are also linked by the same oppression: the same whip serves both to beat the animals and the humans alike.

With this assertion, he separates himself from his initial misgivings about the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples and fully swings his affiliation towards Capitán González's or the criollo despot's worldview. As the voyage progresses, the narrator is seduced by both aisles of barbarism. The degraded shadows of a glorious combat, both the 'indio' and Capitán González are proven to be irresistible for the scholar who stands between them.

The Andes' landscapes are also a source of sublime contemplation for the narrator, bringing forth the seductive dimension of that which has been abjected. If, as *Novecentistas* posit, nature's hand is strong enough to mould its population's identity and racial degradation is taken as fact, the Andes are already influencing the narrator, dragging him to one side of barbarism. Once the captain, the 'indio' and the narrator leave the *tambo* for the final stretch of the journey, the scene depicted by the narrator is striking: 'Los Andes son en la tarde vastos túmulos grises y la bruma que asciende de la[s] *punas* violetas a los picachos nevados me estremecía como una melancolía

[25] 'on the flanks of the beasts and the Indians […] undoubtedly irresistible'.

visible' (p. 12).[26] The dramatic colours ('grises' and 'violetas') will serve as a backdrop to the violent 'picachos' ('peaks') and equally pointed ravines ('quebradas'), whose serrated pattern will be the captain's demise. The danger the mountains present is thus not only symbolic but material. The 'indio's' stories, the only time he speaks during an otherwise silent trip, are of the kind that 'espeluznan al caminante' ('scare the traveller') and concern 'viajeros que ruedan al abismo porque una piedra se desgaja súbitamente de la montaña andina' (p. 12).[27] The jagged and unstable path on the mountain serves as Chekhov's gun, a weapon hiding in plain sight. The vulnerability of the physical terrain is, also, an eerie reminder of the narrator's precarious footing. These very mountains are later depicted as 'gigantic vertebrae', a skeletal image echoed at the bottom of one of the deadly ravines as pointed out by the 'indio': 'Allí viendo, *taita*", en la quebrada agudísima, las osamentas lavadas por la espuma del río' (p. 12).[28]

The skeletons at the bottom of the ravine are a further reminder of the crucial vertical axis in this story. Who is at the top of the pecking order? This is a particularly important question when considering the most important natural element in the story: the condor, an immense black bird that feeds on carrion. Eating and being eaten, the 'edible and ecological order' (Keetley and Sivils, 2019) is a crucial matter for the ecoGothic imagination since it establishes the relationship between man and the environment: is nature a resource to be consumed (eaten) or a devouring threat to be destroyed? The fact that the condor feeds upon dead flesh can be unnerving in itself, an affect aggravated by the unknown origin of the skeletons at the bottom of the ravine. The story will later confirm the ecoGothic's fear (in other words, ecophobia): the condor is ready to kill and devour humans in the same way that the abject Indigenous is willing to kill the white criollo.

The dark halo that García Calderón paints around the condor is far from the indigenous perception of the same creature. Rather than regarding it as a monster, Quechua and Aymara belief holds that the condor is the messenger of the Hanan Pacha, the land above. The condor, the puma, a representation of *Kay Pacha* (*kay*, 'here'; *pacha*, 'land') and the snake or *Amaru*, ambassador of *Ukhu Pacha* (*ukhu*, 'below'; *pacha*, 'land'), make a triad of animals heavily featured in Andean

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[26] 'The Andes are in the afternoon vast grey mounds and the mist rising from the violet *punas* to the snow-capped peaks made me shudder as if it were a visible melancholy'.
[27] 'travellers who tumble into the abyss because a stone suddenly breaks off of the Andean mountain'.
[28]. "There you see, *taita*", in the deep ravine, the skeletons washed by the river'.

art and culture. The indigenous perception and representation of *vulture gryphus* is the opposite of what García Calderón presents in his story. A black, immense bird with irate eyes ('ojos iracundos') who will purposefully push people over the ledge to eat them, García Calderón's condor is more akin to a falcon of European tradition or Edgar Allan Poe's ominous animals. The American master of horror mentions the Andean bird within the verse of Ligeia's poem 'The Conqueror Worm'.[29] This semantically charged appearance is employed by García Calderón when creating his Andean landscape. Once the captain has reached the bottom of the ravine, the condors create a terrifying scenery: with their black wings ('alas pardas') they create a dark, gyrating, inverted cone 'como una tromba sobre los cadáveres' (p. 14).[30] The plural in this sentence indicates an ambiguous detail that remains otherwise unmentioned; the captain's corpse has fallen over others, perhaps the 'osamentas lavadas por el río' mentioned once before, the captain's horse, or other newer corpses piled up at the bottom of the ravine. An outstandingly unusual behaviour for a real condor, pushing people over the edge is García Calderón's monster's *modus operandi*. García Calderón appears to write with a rapacious bird in mind, a symbol the European reader can easily recognise, and thus bends the nature of the condor to fit said representation.

In addition to the condor's appearance, terrifying to the Western imagination, the condor has been linked directly to the Andes through synecdoche. Often featured in national and local imagery, state-sanctioned discourse, criollo culture and indigenous artwork, the condor holds a special place in the Peruvian semantic armoire as a stand-in for the Andean region and the country itself. This animal is also the protagonist of the revenge scene, which is worth quoting in full. Once the 'indio' leaves with the mysterious phrase 'Tú esperando, *taita*', both the narrator and his mule can sense the imminence of danger. He instinctively moves his hand towards his gun whilst the animal 'medía el peligro y escuchaba la muerte'.[31] Immediately after, the following scene unfurls:

> 'Un ruido profundo retembló en la montaña: algo rodaba de la altura. De pronto, a quince metros de mí, pasó un vuelo oblicuo de cóndores, y entonces, distintamente,

[29] 'Mimes, in the form of God on high / Mutter and mumble low / And hither and thither fly— / Mere puppets they, who come and go / At bidding of vast formless things / That shift the scenery to and fro, / Flapping from out their Condor wings / Invisible Wo' (Poe, 1843, cited in Quinn, 1984: p. 78).
[30] 'like a vortex over the bodies'.
[31] 'measured the danger and heeded death'.

> porque había llegado a un recodo del camino, vi rebotar con estruendo y polvo en la altura inmediata una masa obscura, un hombre, un caballo tal vez, que fué sangrando en las aristas de las peñas hasta teñir el río espumante, allá abajo. Estremecido de horror, esperé mientras las montañas se enviaron cuatro o cinco veces el eco de aquella catarata mortal' (p. 13).[32]

This meticulous scene set up and executed with theatrical purposefulness circles around the chief images of the story: the condor, the mountains, and their echoes. The captain's body bounces off the jagged rocks 'sangrando en las aristas de las peñas' until he becomes a dark mass that stains the river red. The deep noise ('ruido profundo') made by the captain's fall is echoed by the mountains 'cuatro o cinco veces'. Repetition, echo, and time are the key elements of the condor's revenge, a type of vengeance that is an echo of another, larger, wound; a vengeance that, like the fall, takes a painstaking amount of time and that, like an echo, comes back as an inverted mirror of the initial action. The captain's protracted death is also a warning that the condor's revenge, as a part of the larger Body-without-Organs of the Andes, can occur at any time and any place within the Andean space. It is not the 'indio' who directly and immediately executes the revenge, but the mountains themselves who unexpectedly tear the falling captain's flesh. The image of the protracted echo emphasises a crucial component of the criollo's fear of 'la venganza del cóndor': if Indigenous peoples are, as *Novecentistas* believed, teeming with uncontrollable anger and thirst for revenge, if they are interconnected with nature to the point of achieving dark, supernatural powers, their revenge is not a matter of how but merely when. The idea of the Andes, of the land itself with its multiple eyes, wings, and limbs, taking its revenge for centuries of colonisation leaves the criollo in a permanent state of fear.

The connection between 'indio' and condor is framed as part of 'secretos de mi tierra que los hombres de su raza no saben explicar al hombre blanco. Tal vez entre ellos y los cóndores

[32] 'A deep noise reverberated in the mountain: something was rolling down from the heights. Suddenly, fifteen meters away from me, an oblique flight of condors passed, and then, distinctly, because I had reached a nook in the trail, I saw a dark mass tumbling and crashing in the immediate height, a man, a horse perhaps, that was bleeding on the edges of the rocks until it stained the foaming river, down there. Shuddering with horror, I waited while the mountains exchanged four or five times the echo of that deadly waterfall'.

existe un pacto obscuro para vengarse de los intrusos que somos nosotros' (p. 14).[33] The wording of the phrase reiterates the narrator's ambiguous position since the indigenous secret belongs to 'mi tierra', his country, that is to say, Peru, but, at the same time, 'los hombres de su raza' cannot explain the secret to the white man ('hombre blanco'), which he also is. Is the secret that belongs to the country and the 'indio' also his own since they are both 'peruanos'? Nevertheless, the pact between man and condor belongs to 'ellos', whilst he recognises 'nosotros', us, the lettered people, as the 'intrusos' ('intruders'). The narrator paradoxically sees himself as an intruder in what he deems his land, 'mi tierra', once more revealing the precarity of his identity's footing. The characterisation of the link between Indigenous peoples and the local fauna as a 'dark pact' is the sum of the narrator's ideological and aesthetic position. This connection is, for him, an erasure of the Civilisation/Barbarism and Culture/Nature divides, divides which are necessary to bolster modernity. It is not seen in the positive light of contemporary permaculture, but as barbarous, denigrating fact, evidence of the caricatured 'indio's' premodern and puerile lack of discernment. He is one of the 'vencidos'('the defeated') whose 'resignación' ('resignation') it is 'imprudente algunas veces afrentar con un lindo latigo'[34]. The closing phrase of the story reiterates the aforementioned points. The story does not condemn violence as a whole but only its excess, since it is imprudent to exert violence only 'algunas veces' ('some times'). The Capitán's excessive *jouissance* when exerting violence makes him barbarous and, for this reason, a rightful victim for the 'revenge of the indio'. As in most of García Calderón's stories, the role played by the criollos of the lettered city is obscured and set aside.

The bond between the indigenous and nature cannot be conceptualised in the story as anything other than a 'dark pact'. As Gabriel Giorgi (2011) states when writing about other stories penned in the same time frame as 'La venganza del condor', it is as if in them the possibility of a 'un pacto, de un lazo, de un vínculo éticopolítico con lo animal […] esto es, un vínculo que no pasase por el régimen soberano, por la lógica de la soberanía y de su terror – fuese impensable e inenarrable' (p. 171).[35] Since the link cannot be expressed in anything other but these terms, it

[33] 'secrets of my homeland that the men of their race do not know how to explain to the white man. Perhaps between them and the condors there is a dark pact to take revenge on the intruders that we are'.
[34] 'reckless to confront with a beautiful whip'.
[35] 'pact, a link, an ethical-political bond with the animal […] that does not involve the sovereign's regime, the sovereign's logic, and its terror, was unthinkable and inexpressible'.

becomes a threat, and, as Estok (2019) points out, 'the problem for ecoGothic analysis is in determining what the threatening agent is and what it is threatening' (p. 48). Juan Carlos Ubilluz (2018) posits that the titular condor in 'La venganza del cóndor' is a stand-in for the revenge of the 'indio', threatening criollo hegemony. Although we agree with Ubilluz's analysis, we also believe it is incomplete. The revenge of the condor is not just a synecdoche for the revenge of the 'indio', which is, as Giorgi states, a political matter, but also the potential for revenge of the whole Andes, the conquered territory itself, its mountains and its animals, all subjugated for modernity's sake. The criollo's fear of the Body-without-Organs of the Andes is not limited to the humans in it, since criollo discourse barely presents them as such, but extends to the whole territory, which not only participates in this so-called dark pact, but has itself felt the pain that originates from the feared desire for revenge.

BIOGRAPHY

Mariangela Ugarelli is a writer and literary critic currently working as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Hamilton College. Ugarelli received her Ph.D. in Spanish from Johns Hopkins University and her B.A. in Hispanic Literature from the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Her work encompasses Spanish American Gothic, horror, minor literatures, the female Gothic, and eco-Gothic. As a writer she has published two short story collections, *Artilugios* (2022) and *Fieras* (2023), that explore her interest in the intersection between the Gothic and representations of nature.

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'The Grounds Have a Number of Ghosts': Indigenous Hauntings and the Urban EcoGothic in Erika T. Wurth's *White Horse*

Cameron Williams Crawford

ABSTRACT

This essay offers an ecoGothic reading of Erika T. Wurth's horror novel *White Horse* (2022). I examine the novel's Indigenous hauntings alongside the settings, mostly urban environments, to argue that, through its Native ghosts, *White Horse* gives visibility to the historical violence that continues to affect Indigenous communities. I also suggest the ways in which *White Horse* urges us to confront the ongoing ecological crisis of colonialism—in the form of gentrification—and ties this degradation of the land to the disproportionate violence experienced by Indigenous women. Ultimately, I contend that *White Horse* provides an important contribution to the tradition of Native authors writing Native ghosts, affirming the enduring presence and resilience of Indigenous peoples in the face of persistent colonial trauma.

Introduction

Indigenous hauntings are a familiar trope in North American literatures and in the settler-colonial imagination more broadly. As Colleen E. Boyd and Coll Thrush (2011) write, Native ghosts have long been a central part of 'colonial fantasy'; though sometimes seen as 'romantic remnants of "traditional" Indigenous cultures or as the nostalgic detritus of "local" history, Native ghosts have in fact shaped and informed colonizing encounters in significant ways, becoming stock characters in a quotidian North American drama of displacement, transformation, and belonging' (p. viii). Indigenous writer Erika T. Wurth's newest horror novel, *White Horse* (2022), reappropriates this trope. *White Horse* tells the story of Kari James, an 'urban Indian' of Apache and Cherokee descent, as she tries to solve the mystery of her missing mother. After being gifted an old family

bracelet, Kari is visited by her mother's ghost, which leads her to discover that her mother was murdered. She also begins seeing the ghost of her best friend, Jaime, who died of a drug overdose. 'The ghosting of Indians is a technique of removal', notes Renée L. Bergland (2000: p. 3). Rather, as I contend, in *White Horse*, these Native ghosts give visibility to the legacy of violence and historical traumas that continue to be acted out, particularly on the bodies of Native women.

Through its Native ghosts, *White Horse* recovers histories that have been repressed by settler-colonial discourses. Equally important to this endeavour are the spaces in which the novel's Indigenous hauntings occur. Drawing on Boyd and Thrush's (2011) call to 'ground Native hauntings in their cultural, political, social, historical, and environmental contexts' (pp. x-xi), this essay furthermore analyses the ecoGothic resonances of the novel's settings, paying specific attention to urban environments, which often subvert distinctions between the unnatural and the natural. The White Horse of the novel's title, for example, refers not to the animal but to Kari's favourite Indian dive bar. It is where Kari first encounters the ghost of her mother, a 'strange, mysterious' place imbued with supernatural energy that makes it seem almost alive (p. 1); as Kari describes at the outset of the narrative, 'there was a milky, dreamy quality to the red lights swinging over the pool tables, like the wind from the open doors was bringing them something new, something I'd pushed away for as long as I could remember' (p. 1). Its existence is also threatened by Denver's rapid gentrification. Approaching *White Horse* through this lens can illuminate how the novel furthermore reinscribes the history of Native Americans' urbanisation—a result of the Dawes Act of 1887 and other federal policies in the early and mid-twentieth century that forcibly segregated Indigenous peoples from their tribal lands and which continues now in the form of gentrification[1]—and ties the degradation of Native women to this degradation of the land.

Native Ghosts in North American Literatures

Indigenous ghosts appear with regular frequency in literature by non-Native American writers: from Puritan texts that depict Native Americans as demonic, such as William Hubbard's *A Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians in New-England* (1677), to contemporary fiction, like

[1] For a more comprehensive study of the history of Native Americans' urbanisation, see, for example, Donna Martinez, Grace Sage, and Azusa Ono's (2016) *Urban American Indians: Reclaiming Native Space*.

Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983), that continues to deploy the cliché of the Indian burial ground (Bergland, 2000). These stories serve a variety of ideological purposes. According to Boyd and Thrush (2011), in their introduction to *Phantom Past, Indigenous Presence: Native Ghosts in North American History and Culture*,

> 'First, they express the moral anxieties and uncertainties provoked by the dispossession of a place's Indigenous inhabitants. Second, and almost paradoxically, Indian ghost stories harness very real Indigenous beliefs in the power and potency of the dead, and then cast those beliefs as irrational "superstition" that must give way, like the believers themselves, to rational "progress". Third, and often ironically, Native hauntings disrupt dominant and official historical narratives as expressions of liminality that transcend fixed boundaries of time and space. For all their ubiquity and legibility, Indigenous ghosts are remarkably complex facets of the experience of colonialism and highlight the ways in which knowledge of place and past are constructed, produced, revealed, and contested' (p. ix).

Boyd and Thrush acknowledge that their study of the 'Indian uncanny' draws on the work of other scholars that similarly examines how Indigenous ghosts provide ways of thinking about the spectre of colonialism and the process of creating an American national identity. Bergland's *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (2000) most notably asserts that 'the interior logic of the modern nation requires that citizens be haunted, and that American nationalism is sustained by writings that conjure forth spectral Native Americans' (p. 4). Building on Lucy Maddox's *Removals* (1991)—which ties the disappearance of Native Americans from early nineteenth-century literature to their physical removal from American territory—Bergland interrogates the ghosting of Native Americans in literature as a symbolic form of Indian removal. In American literature and in the American imagination, Indigenous ghosts are 'triumphant agents of Americanization' (p. 4), as well as signifiers of national guilt.

While analyses that favour the discursive function of Indigenous hauntings are certainly vital, they too often overlook the importance of environment. Boyd and Thrush (2011) therefore emphasise the necessity of moving 'beyond the realm of the primarily imaginative and immaterial

into the world of storied places and embodied practices' (p. xi); doing so, they suggest, reveals how Indigenous ghosts 'are more than metaphors in the settler imagination, or silenced victims of removal. Rather, they are active participants in the shaping of uncanny narratives as a form of both resistance and persistence' (Ibid). These studies also focus mostly on Indigenous ghosts in the literature of white authors. Attending to their presence in Indigenous American literatures further reveals the complex political and sociocultural workings of Indigenous ghosts. Eric Gary Anderson (2016), in Raising the Indigenous Undead, argues that Indigenous literatures privilege hauntings that encourage a sense of Native community and act as anti-colonial critique. Citing Thrush and recognising the necessity of grounding Indigenous hauntings in their physical landscapes, Anderson notes how 'examining ghost stories can be a sort of place-based methodology, in which hauntings gesture toward salient conflicts and patterns in the history of conquest. A ghost, in effect, is a place's past speaking to its—and our—present' (p. 324). Michael Mayerfeld Bell (1997) elaborates on this idea in The Ghosts of Place. Places are 'personed', he writes, even when they are physically empty of people (Bell, 1997: p. 813). The 'places of our lives' are haunted by ghosts of both the dead and the living; while 'the cultural language of modernity usually prevents us from speaking about their presence, we constitute a place in large measure by the ghosts we sense inhabit and possess it' (Ibid). As Anderson explains, Native ghost stories

> 'reanimate the dead—or, perhaps more accurately, reaffirm the living presence of the dead—to strengthen Indigenous familial and tribal connections and to help solidify their presence and encourage their continuation. While these spectral returns to loved ones and significant places do not entirely cancel out the traumas of removal, dispossession, and other forms of violent departure, they open up spaces for re-considering, re-interpreting, and re-claiming colonized land. They are a conduit and a portal; they suggest Indigenous counternarratives and/or they decenter settler colonial narratives, presenting *them* as counternarratives' (p. 325, italics in original).

Ghost stories, then, are essential to Native peoples' enduring fight for their rights to cultural identity and return to ownership of their traditional lands and territories.

Indigenous Hauntings in *White Horse*: Jaime as 'EcoGothic Revenant'

This context provides a useful way of looking at the Indigenous hauntings in *White Horse*. Through its ghosts, the novel recovers repressed histories and makes visible the historical legacy of trauma and violence that continues to be acted out, particularly on the bodies of Native women. Jaime provides a powerful example of this. Kari sees Jaime's ghost for the first time in the shadows of the skating rink, Roller City, where she appears 'like a dream, like a goddamned childhood nightmare […], as if she'd never gone […], her shy, yet defiant expression, her curly chestnut hair floating in the soft, evening wind. Her beautiful Blackness like a dream' (p. 18). This encounter prompts Kari to remember the beginning of their friendship, when the two were thirteen years old and smoking cigarettes behind their school. Kari recalls how some boys from their math class saw them and came over to join them: 'They're white boys', she remarks, 'not that we talk that way, we don't, we pretend we're not different, but we know they know. We know it's part of why they've come for us. They've come to tell us what we can do with our bodies' (p. 19). Here, Kari articulates white men's perceived entitlement to the bodies of Indigenous women. She also implies the ways that Indigenous women have historically been subjected to and continue to disproportionately experience sexual violence. Research shows that the lifetime prevalence rates of sexual assault for American Indian or Alaskan Native women is 28.9% and 31.8% for multiracial women; for white women, the rate is 19.9%, according to the most recent National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (The Blue Bench, 2024). The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (2024) similarly reports that Native Americans, who are two times more likely to experience rape/sexual assault than other races, face the greatest risk of experiencing

sexual violence. And this data is grossly inaccurate because of underreporting—as marginalised communities are less likely to report assault because of systemic racism—and bad data.[2]

Kari speaks to this in more detail when she describes how Jaime was sexually abused while in foster care: 'in almost every place she'd lived, she'd been touched, against her will, by a foster brother, father, or friend of the family. She'd never thought she had a choice […] like it was just part of life' (p. 202). The sexual exploitation of Indigenous women is by no means a new phenomenon, but one that has roots in the period of colonisation. Rape was a fundamental weapon of conquest for European colonisers. In fact, as Robin Whyatt (2023) asserts, in traditional Indigenous communities before colonisation, women were revered and were indispensable to the maintenance of tribal cultures. Violence against them was extremely uncommon; one Cheyenne proverb even states that a tribal nation is 'not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground' (Whyatt, 2023). Organisations such as Amnesty International (2011) contend that this tactic is what 'now fuels today's high rate of violence against and sexual abuse of Native American women, as well as the impunity enjoyed by their [predominantly non-Indigenous] attackers'. Sarah Deer (2012) further observes how the problem of sexual assault has become normalised in many Indigenous communities and beyond, yet it remains one that is 'mostly invisible' (p. 45). It is this erasure, entrenched in colonial history, that *White Horse* thus seeks to correct through its representations of Indigenous hauntings.

Jaime's ghost pointedly gives visibility to the pervasive legacy of colonialism that Indigenous women still experience today. She further makes conspicuous the importance of the spaces in which the novel's Indigenous hauntings occur. As Boyd and Thrush (2011) remind us,

[2] Jaime is Black and Mexican. While she is never explicitly described as Native, there is a case to be made for reading her as an example of Native ghosting. A comment from Fredrico, the ex-cop who helps Kari learn more about her missing mother's case, helps us understand the complexities of Indigenous identities, along with the racist history of census-taking and data-keeping associated with Native Americans. When talking with Kari about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Fredrico points out that 'no one thinks of [Mexican women] as Indian because they speak Spanish' (Wurth, 2022: p. 81). Kari herself reveals that she has Black-Indian cousins and explains that some of her own family originates in Mexico (p. 132). Wurth addresses this in an interview with *Lit Hub*, referring to a lack of data on urban Indians in general 'because in the United States there's a real resistance to seeing urban Indians as Indian at all' (*Lit Hub*, 2022). She says, 'In America, I think because of anti-Black sentiment, census takers were told until even the 1960s that even if a person looked full-blooded—I don't like that phrase—but if they looked completely Native, if they didn't speak any English whatsoever, to mark them down as Black or white. […] In addition to the fact that there are a lot of Black Natives, there are a lot of Latinx Natives […] [but] [p]eople just don't see them as American Indians at all and that's another problematic aspect in terms of getting the numbers right' (Ibid).

it is imperative to read Indigenous hauntings within their environmental contexts (p. xi). Kari's memory of Jaime and the boys from math class notably occurs outside in the natural environment. One of the boys asks Jaime 'if she wants to go behind that tree, that one right there with the bright, pungent sap leaking out' (p. 20). Kari watches this and 'learn[s] how Jaime talks to boys, to men. As if they aren't anything to fear' (Ibid). In *Gothic*, Fred Botting (1996) discusses the way Gothic landscapes often evoke 'isolation […], vulnerability, exposure and insecurity' (p. 4).[3] The atmosphere of isolation and vulnerability in this environment is underscored in Wurth's novel by the emphasis on the solitary tree off in the distance. Jaime and the boys do not go off into *the woods*; they go behind '*that tree*' (p. 20, emphasis added). The sticky sap dripping down the trunk also reads as vaguely threatening—as leaking sap is usually an indication that something is wrong, that the tree is somehow damaged (bleeding sap, as it were)—which Kari perceives when she remarks on Jaime's absence of fear about the situation. Though it is not named, we of course know what the boy wants to do with Jaime behind the tree; still, it bears reiterating that, as Kari tells it, '[t]hey've come to tell us what we can do with our bodies' (p. 19). They have also come to tell them *where* they can do it. The boy expresses a kind of entitlement to the land, like it is *his* tree: his to conquer and defile, to use as he pleases. What is more, Jaime and the boy 'move like ghosts, talking and smoking and they disappear behind the trees like they've never existed at all' (p. 20). Jaime is rendered as 'ghostly' in Kari's memory, a spectral being even before her death. When she 'disappears' behind the tree, she is discursively removed from the landscape. But this discursive ghosting is not a technique of Indian removal, as Bergland would see it. Rather, it illustrates the profound ways that 'violence against the land and against women […] are very much intertwined' (Munro, 2018). As Native American activist and co-leader of United American Indians of New England Mahtowin Munro (2018) explains,

> 'When you hear Indigenous people saying that "the Earth Is Our Mother", that is not just a quaint expression. It is an attempt to explain how deeply interconnected we are. In a traditional Indigenous view—and Indigenous nations are not all the

[3] For a compelling discussion of Gothic literature by Native American writers, see Michelle Burnham's (2013) Is There an Indigenous Gothic? Drawing on Burnham, Anderson (2016) suggests that Indigenous narratives of hauntings 'are not driven by the Gothic; they are not primarily about the feelings of white settlers, although they are happy to note the irony of residual settler guilt. Instead, Indigenous hauntings challenge borders and border crossings in other ways, opening up possibilities for a more richly and pointedly Indigenous tapping into the power of ghosts, haunts, and various other incarnations' (p. 327).

> same, this is generalizing—the land and water are our lives, our communities, entirely part of our bodies, not separated from our bodies. […] When we are removed from our land, when our land and water are abused, those are attacks on our bodies'.

Jaime's discursive removal, her ghosting, signifies the connection between land and body that Munro articulates. This scene conflates Jaime's sexual exploitation behind the tree with her physical removal from the land. As a ghost, Jaime makes material the repressed traumatic histories of violence against Native Americans, particularly women. She is what Sharae Deckard (2019) would term an 'ecoGothic revenant', a ghost through which 'environmental histories and geophysical forces outside the capacity for memory of individual human protagonists manifest as apparitions that disturb the present' (p. 175). With a long history of being abused and exploited by (white) men, Jaime is a spectre of the ecological disaster that is colonialism.

Haunted Urban Environments: Roller City

The aforementioned haunting occurs outside in the natural landscape, but it is the urban environments in *White Horse* that are the most interesting sites of Indigenous hauntings, especially as they often subvert distinctions between the unnatural and the natural. The destabilising of fixed categories is a central tenet of Gothic literature. As Anne Williams (1995) writes in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, the Gothic is 'pervasively organized around anxieties about boundaries (and boundary transgressions)' (p. 16). At the heart of the Gothic is fear, which largely emerges from this collapsing of boundaries, such as that between self and other, good and evil, human and non-human. Kari explains how 'Roller City had closed at one point, and when it reopened, like much of Denver, it was full of polish, suburban charm; its carpeting a thick neon and black, *ROLLER CITY* in fancy green cursive embedded into the fabric' (p. 14). Roller City is one such urban environment that blurs the boundaries between natural and unnatural worlds. As a haunted space, it too makes conspicuous the bodily correlations between land and place that Munro describes. Kari remarks on the unnatural, very human qualities of Roller City's interior: that which is 'suburban' and 'polished' is human-made. She also emphasises the carpet, again something that is human-made and in an unnatural neon colour, that proudly bears the name of this establishment,

the word 'City' marking the space as decidedly urban. Yet, there is something almost verdant about the green cursive in the carpet, something grass-like. This is remarkable when thinking about roller skating as an activity that itself blurs boundaries, as it can be performed both indoors and outdoors. There is something uncanny about Roller City as well. While skating around with Debby, as Tiffany's 'I Think We're Alone Now' plays, Kari is overcome with a strange feeling, 'like the past was here, was linked to us as surely as our arms were linked into one another's, as if a portal had opened and allowed us in, just for this one moment, back into the best parts of both of our adolescence' (p. 14). Roller City is a place at once unfamiliar—with its new, 'suburban charm'—and oddly familiar. Kari also describes it as being almost alive with the past; the past is personified, linking arms with Kari and Debby as they skate around the rink.

Roller City is alive with the past when Jaime's ghost appears outside, too. A strange mist rolls in and 'roil[s] up under the light, under the awning' (pp. 27-18), then takes the shape of a person. We can similarly read Jaime as an ecoGothic revenant here, as her manifestation outside Roller City elucidates how the novel also reinscribes the history of Native Americans' urbanisation. The Dawes Act of 1887, along with other federal policies in the early and mid-twentieth century, forcibly displaced Indigenous peoples from their tribal lands; this continues now in the form of gentrification. Auntie Squeaker, related to Kari on her mother's side, reflects on this history in a conversation with Kari: 'You too young to remember', she tells Kari, 'but when Reagan was elected, he did all kinds of shit to Indians. Took land. Reduced monies going to reservations. Denver's been a hub for Indians for forever' (p. 126). Squeaker furthermore comments on how expensive it is now to live in Denver, causing many 'folks' (presumably Indigenous and from other marginalised communities) to leave. 'Even the Springs getting pricey. Never thought I'd live to see that happen' (p. 126), Squeaker says, indicating how development is spilling into the more rural outskirts of Denver and driving up the property values and the cost of living and driving out the original residents who can no longer afford to live there. Kari alludes to Roller City as an example of Denver's increasing urbanisation when she explains how it 'had closed at one point' and later reopened, 'like much of Denver', as a place 'full of polish [and] suburban charm' (p. 14).

Roller City is a real place in Denver and something of a landmark. Located in the Lakewood area, it was built in 1957. In 1996, it closed and was turned into a thrift store. It existed

in this capacity until 2018, when it was bought by couple Bry Duncan and Kelli Fischer and redeveloped back into Roller City (Worthington, 2018). In 2021, Denver was ranked the second most gentrified city in the US (Courtney, 2021); Lakewood, where Roller City is located, is one such township undergoing rapid growth and redevelopment (Vasudevan, 2023). This gentrification is a continuation of colonialism. As Munro (2018) asserts, 'the constant demand of settlers is for property and expansion. Settler colonialism and capitalism reduce our relationships to land as being no more than relationships as property to be bought and sold and exploited'. Furthermore, Tony Birch (2018) explains, it is an ecological crisis:

> 'The impact of a changing climate and the related extreme and erratic weather events is linked to histories of dispossession and the appropriation of Indigenous land to service agricultural and industrial expansion. Five hundred years of colonial violence have contributed directly to the environmental crisis that many Indigenous communities face today' (pp. 139-140).

It is interesting that Kari sees Jaime outside Roller City, of all establishments. As an ecoGothic revenant, Jaime's ghost forces us to confront how settler-colonial conquest continues to affect Indigenous people, specifically women. Importantly, ecoGothic revenants are subversive (especially from postcolonial societies). According to Deckard (2019), they 'write back' to previous iterations of Gothic nature, 'reversing the valence of green monsters in order to embrace their capacity for transgression or to attribute terror to unjust operations of power' (p. 176). It should therefore be noted that when she appears to Kari as a ghost, it is 'as if she'd never gone' (p. 18). Jaime appears 'like a dream', ephemeral, but her expression is 'defiant', her Blackness 'beautiful' (Ibid). She exemplifies Boyd and Thrush's (2011) claim that Indigenous ghosts 'are more than metaphors in the settler imagination, or silenced victims of removal. Rather, they are active participants in the shaping of uncanny narratives as a form of both resistance and persistence' (p. xi). Jaime is an active agent who demands recognition. She is a potent reminder of the unresolved historical traumas that continue to haunt Indigenous communities.

Haunted Urban Environments: The White Horse

The White Horse is another haunted, ecoGothic urban space that further draws attention to the ways in which the novel uncovers a legacy of violence and dispossession that continues to shape the lives of Native people, women in particular. It is Kari's favourite Indian dive bar, and it is a strange space that blurs the distinction between the unnatural and the natural, the human and the non-human. The name of the bar, for example, denotes the animal and highlights the bar's non-human qualities. Additionally, it is an indoor, urban bar, but one that is pervaded by outdoor, natural, non-human elements and saturated with echoes of the Gothic. Stray cats frequently roam in and out. The structure is old and decaying, and rain pours in from a leak in the ceiling, bringing the outside in (p. 27). The wind blows in, too; Kari observes the 'eerie, lonely sound of the wind whistling through the open door' (p. 4). She also has the strange sense that 'the wind from the open doors was bringing […] something new, something I'd pushed away for as long as I could remember' (p. 1). The wind is a recurring element in *White Horse*. It stirs the pines when Jaime disappears with the boy from math class behind the tree, and it blows through Jaime's hair when Kari sees her ghost in the shadows of Roller City (pp. 18-19). In other words, in this novel, the wind seemingly marks the presence of something supernatural or is itself supernatural. Like Roller City, the White Horse is also uncanny and alive with the past. Kari sees mysterious things at the White Horse, such as a painting that she has never noticed before, despite coming to the bar regularly. The painting is on a handheld drum; it is of a white horse, but it also contains the symbols of a war club and a rain cloud, both of which appear on the old family bracelet that Debby gives Kari (p. 22). Kari tries to ask Nick, the owner of the White Horse, about the painting, but is surprised to find that it has disappeared, and Nick has no idea what she is talking about (p. 29). She also sees a couple of 'old Indians' standing in the back:

> 'one with long hair, the sides shaved, the other, with a full head of hair, glistening in the dim, red light. They smoked, sitting back in the booths as if in their own living rooms. They wore the most beautiful, old-fashioned suits, one of them with round, metal earrings—the kind I'd only seen in books fading in the backs of houses now long-abandoned' (p. 55).

Kari calls them 'otherworldly, strange'; their presence makes her feel 'lit-up, light-headed' and 'out[side] of time' (p. 55). When she sees them, Kari has a weird, out-of-body experience in which the White Horse disappears and she finds herself 'in an empty lot', surrounded by trees, the Eagles' 'Hotel California' 'coming from somewhere deep in the woods' (p. 57). The wind plays a prominent role in this instance, again suggesting its supernatural nature: it gusts right as one of the old Indians lifts his drink and winks at Kari (p. 57). The wind and the 'old Indians' exemplify the ecoGothic elements of the White Horse; it is an urban environment 'charged with the consciousness of spirits and ancestors' (Deckard, 2019: p. 176). The atmosphere of the White Horse is alive with the past, reverberating with the non-human and supernatural energy.

The existence of the White Horse is threatened by Denver's gentrification. The White Horse is a relic of 'old Indian Denver' (p. 270), as Kari tells us, and it is been owned and operated by Nick for decades. Back in its prime, it was a popular spot with the local Indigenous community. Nick thinks wistfully of the good old days of the White Horse when '[t]here were so many Indians' who would patronise the spot (p. 299). But now, Nick is old, and the White Horse is in a state of disrepair (hence the rain that leaks in, among other structural issues). Nick is also forgetful in his old age and has missed some mortgage payments. Kari wants to buy the White Horse to save it from being redeveloped. She worries that if she does not buy it, the White Horse could be foreclosed on or someone else could buy it, and 'one of the few places that was old Denver—old Indian Denver—would be lost to time, forever' (p. 270). Her loan officer, Chris, makes a similar comment about the future of the White Horse if Kari does not buy it, indicating that a white person would only want to buy it to 'bulldoze it, and put a set of condos up' (p. 270). Like Roller City, the White Horse is based on an actual location in Denver. A 2022 *Denverite* article on the White Horse—for sale at the time for $1.5 million—calls it 'a home away from home for Native people' and details how the bar 'is trapped between life and death, old and new Denver, a rich history and an uncertain future' (Harris, 2022). The realtor representing the property, Sofia Williamson, expresses concerns about potential investors buying the property: 'Somebody called the other day, and they want to put a drive thru' […]. There's enough drive thrus' (Ibid). The White Horse's owner, Richard Senst, similarly worries about how 'Corporate America' has 'pushed the little mom-and-pop restaurants out of business' (Ibid). Williamson also comments on how the area around the White Horse already has 'too many apartments to justify […] building more'—which

speaks to the area's rapid redevelopment—but concedes 'that is one likely outcome in a city with too few houses for the number of people who now live here' (Ibid). In Wurth's novel and in real life, the White Horse exemplifies the ways that gentrification is a continuation of colonialism and is an ecological crisis. The upsurge in development devastates the environment, as well as it has created a housing crisis, leading to a shortage of affordable homes and an increase in the number of unhoused or displaced people, many of them from lower income and underrepresented communities.

Cecilia as Native Ghost: At the Intersection of Ecological, Sexual, and Political Violence

The ecoGothic 'represents ecological crisis and mediates cultural anxieties about the human relationship to the non-human world through uncanny apparitions of monstrous nature' (Deckard, 2019: p. 174). As an urban ecoGothic space, the White Horse draws our attention to the ways that colonialism continues in the form of gentrification and ecological crisis. It is no surprise, then, that the White Horse is where Kari first encounters the ghost of her mother, Cecilia. Like Jaime, Cecilia's ghost can be read as an ecoGothic revenant, a manifestation of past environmental devastation, one that exposes an inextricable link between ecological violence and violence against Indigenous women. Cecilia appears after Kari touches the bracelet, which is engraved with symbols 'common for urban Indians, or that had been lifted from plains culture' (p. 4), such as a thunderbird, a spiral, a war club, and a figure of the monstrous shapeshifter from Chickasaw lore, the Lofa. When she touches it, Kari is overcome with a 'strange feeling […] of darkness, dread. Pain even', and she senses something 'unnatural' (p. 29). Then, she sees a woman with her head down, 'long, dark hair covering face', standing by the pool tables (Ibid). She has skin that is brown, 'but gray—not the color of a living person. At all' (Ibid). Suddenly, Kari recalls, 'A sound like bones cracking came from her limbs, and abruptly, she moved jerkily a few inches in my direction, her head still down. […] She raised her head up sharply, her eyes white, her mouth pouring blood, and screamed' (p. 30). Kari's encounter with her mother's ghost is markedly more terrifying than when she sees Jaime's ghost at Roller City. Indeed, Cecilia's ghost amplifies the novel's concerns with gender and environmental exploitation. Kari learns that her mother was involved with the American Indian movement in the 1980s, and she wonders if the FBI 'disappeared' her mother because, as Auntie Squeaker puts it, 'she got into some deep shit with Indians at the Center' (p.

126). Cecilia was a staunch proponent for the return of tribal lands to Indigenous peoples; she advocated for 'the full return of all so-called American lands to its original peoples' (p. 301). In suggesting that the FBI was responsible for her disappearance, *White Horse* hints at another kind of Indian removal that may have occurred well into the twentieth century (and into today through police killings), again underlining the violence that settler colonialism enacts against Indigenous bodies. It furthermore demonstrates a profound connection between Cecilia and the land; her ghost therefore serves as an embodiment of these environmental concerns.

Like Jaime, Cecilia's ghost is a manifestation of the ecological disaster that is colonialism, as well as the sexual and political violence that most profoundly continues to impact Native women. Through Cecilia, *White Horse* compels us to confront the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. This problem, like the problem of sexual abuse against Native women, is entrenched in the history of colonialism and conquest. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (n.d.) affirms that 'advocates describe the crisis as a legacy of generations of government policies of forced removal, land seizures and violence inflicted on Native peoples'. Kari meets with Fredrico, an ex-cop, who tells Kari about her mother's disappearance and how the case went cold. He explains that he had to let the case go because 'no one gave a shit if […] some Indian ran off back to the Rez' (p. 80). He also tells Kari that it only occurred to him later that Cecilia might be 'one of those […] Missing and Murdered types'—'not that we talked about it that way, then' (p. 81), he says. Kari then realises, 'I would've never thought about my mother in that regard, though now that he said it, it made sense. Who was going to go looking for a poor, brown woman back then? Who was going to now?' (p. 82). Kari's conversation with Fredrico points to the ways that Indigenous women who experience violence are rendered invisible. As per the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the 'staggering' national averages of murder of Indigenous women are inaccurate and actually 'hide the extremely high rates of murder against American Indian and Alaska Native women present in some counties comprised primarily of tribal lands'. Citing the National Violence Against Women Survey and the National Institute of Justice Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2008), the Bureau indicates that fewer than half of incidents of violence against Native women are reported to the police. More shockingly, cases that are reported all too often fall through the cracks. In 2016, 'there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls', according to the US Department of Justice's federal missing persons database; however, the

National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)—the leading information centre for missing persons cases in the US—'only logged 116 of those cases' (Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.). This data really only accounts for rates of violence on reservations. There is no research on the rates of murder of Indigenous women living in urban areas, 'despite the fact that approximately 71 percent of American Indian and Alaska Natives live in urban areas' (Ibid). Missing or murdered Indigenous women are also frequently racially misclassified in paperwork, either marked as being of another racial category (Hispanic, for example) or not classified at all. Cecilia provides a compelling example of the ways that the system fails Indigenous women. Like so many other women, Cecilia's is a case that fell through the cracks. Her ghost makes this issue visible and reinforces the necessity of reclaiming Indigenous narratives and histories, especially those of women, from erasure and invisibility.

Adding to the significance of Cecilia's ghost is Kari's discovery that Cecilia was murdered by her own father, Michael. She was also sexually abused by him. Michael is the Lofa, a physical manifestation of the stick figure monster from Kari's bracelet. The Lofa is a 'Chickasaw bogeyman […], a version of Bigfoot. Skins people' (p. 95). According to the owner of Orr's, the Native shop that Kari visits,

> 'Supposedly, they smell bad. Bones of their victims bad. Live in caves. There are stories of warriors trying to hunt them down, eliminate them. They say they like to kidnap women. Also, sometimes kind of described as, you know […] a shapeshifter, I guess? Just because some folks describe him as a hairy man, others a monster' (p. 95).

Appearances of Cecilia's ghost are often accompanied by the smell of rotting meat. Kari also has visions of the Lofa, even one in which she sees Michael transform into something beastly and 'otherworldly', with long hair and a smell 'like nothing from this Earth' (p. 256). He is the monstrous embodiment of colonial violence against Native women—and he is himself a Native person. After Michael is arrested for Cecilia's murder and after he reveals where he buried Cecilia's body, Kari reflects on this fact: 'I thought of my mother, her life taken by a man who, if not a literal beast, was a beast nonetheless, someone shaped by the shape of someone else's pain,

who only knew to take that pain and try to give it to someone else, thinking that it would take the pain away from himself' (p. 304). She is talking about the way that Michael was a victim of sexual abuse, too—he was abused by his own father—but there is a larger meaning to take away from this: that colonial violence begets further violence. It becomes internalised and normalised and (re)cycled in ways that continue to oppress marginalised peoples, like Cecilia. Her experience of being sexually abused—and murdered—by her own father reveals how violence against the land and against women 'are very much intertwined' (Munro, 2018).

Conclusion

The Indigenous hauntings in *White Horse*—the ghosts of Jaime and Cecilia—urge us to confront the problem of violence against Indigenous women, which is so often rendered invisible. Through them, *White Horse* uncovers buried histories, revealing how the traumatic and violent legacy of colonialism persists today and continues to disproportionately affect Indigenous women. Grounding these hauntings 'in their cultural, political, social, historical, and environmental contexts' (Boyd and Thrush, 2011: pp. x-xi) is essential. An ecoGothic analysis of the novel's urban spaces therefore additionally shows us how *White Horse* reinscribes the history of Native Americans' urbanisation and calls on us to recognise the ways in which colonialism is an ecological crisis that continues today in the form of gentrification. In so doing, Wurth's novel serves as an important example in the tradition of Native authors writing Native ghosts. Anderson (2016) writes that 'Indian ghost stories insist on Native presences and staying power even as they also mark losses of land, blood, language, and people. To raise the Indigenous undead is to unsettle *and* to re-settle, to re-enter and re-claim old home places' (p. 334). It is fitting, then, that at the conclusion of *White Horse*, Kari—along with Cecilia's sister, Sharon—purchases the White Horse. Its ending imagines a reclamation of land and home place, one Kari thinks her mother would appreciate, especially as she meditates on her mother's arrest statement: 'I believe in the full return of all so-called American lands to its original peoples. Let us be the stewards of the earth that holds the bones of our ancestors, and the seeds of our future ancestors' (p. 301). Through its Indigenous hauntings and urban ecoGothic spaces, *White Horse* affirms this belief and asserts for us the necessity of making Native presences and histories, especially those under threat of erasure—of themselves becoming ghosts—visible in our present and enduring into our future.

BIOGRAPHY

Cameron Williams Crawford received her PhD in twentieth/twenty-first-century American literature and feminism, gender, and sexuality studies from Florida State University. Her work has been published in *The South Atlantic Review*, *The Southern Quarterly*, and *Gender Forum*. She is co-editor of the collection *Telling an* American Horror Story*: Essays on History, Place and Identity in the Series* (McFarland, 2021). She is an assistant professor at the University of North Georgia in Gainesville.

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Reclamation from the Ground: Predial Decolonisation

Crystal Thompson

ABSTRACT

Rootwork: its practice has historically been demonised as black magic, devil worshiping, and evil. Though current terms like ancient knowledge and cultural knowledge are used to attempt an altruistic, broad inclusion of rootwork in the humanities, especially literature, they are all insufficient for demystifying its retention among a growing number of Black people, including millennials. Those who grew up practising rootwork—generational conjurers—have increased their belief in its power, while novice workers who have recently discovered the practice are coming into their own understanding of how it works. Regardless, at the genesis of conjuring, or 'rootwork', is the use of land and nature. This is the locus where literature becomes the strongest transporter of historical examples of Black people's predial interaction (engagements with the land, but animals, plants, astrology, and elements must also be acknowledged).

Unfortunately, too many White ecoGothic authors have characterised nature as mysterious and unpredictable, ominous and terrifying, while surrounding passages describe its unparalleled beauty, though often conflated as 'eerily' beautiful. Charles Chesnutt and Randall Kenan created literature that offers counter-stories where the land is prized not as much aesthetically but as a functioning constituent of decolonisation. This response is monumental given that the most prevailing image of Black people's predial interaction has been attached to horror, violence, and terror associated with slavery. Lynchings, stereotypes of disinterest in entering outdoor spaces or participating in outdoor activities typically dominated by White people for fear of being harmed, and sentiments that 'we don't belong' in nature are grievances that prevent many Black people from enjoying the outdoors. Forwarding to present times, the determination for many Black people to reclaim a positive, spiritual interaction with the land is manifested in hiking clubs, spiritual

journeys oriented solely toward nature, being present in outdoor spaces the ancestors walked on, and compelling literature that offers candid implications for the future and a call to turn back to the land for healing.

I intend to demonstrate how Black people's perceptions and use of the land, as seen in Kenan's 'Let the Dead Bury Their Dead' (1992) and Chesnutt's *Stories, Novels, and Essays* (2002) exemplifies the decolonisation of nature in order to promote the reclamation of spirituality and belonging, reduce the impacts prevalent images of horror have, and restore faith in the functions and benefits the land can offer. The investigation into nature for health is particularly important during this time when conversations about mental health and spirituality centre around communal activities defined by culture and race. In the works employed, these subjects are used to both question characters' credibility and excuse their personal behaviours. Simultaneously, and unlike the works of their White counterparts, these authors interchange mental health statuses as a cause for the land being disturbed or destroyed with the changing landscapes being the cause of changing mental health statuses. Ultimately, the predial interactions camouflage the implications of counter-stories of revenge: counter-stories where Black people are in control of their own futures and fates *and* the land.

Keywords: *Black Spirituality, Nature Writing, ecoGothic, Rootwork, Conjure Tales*

Introduction and Brief History

Before diving into a comprehensive examination of ecoGothic texts written by Black authors, it is necessary first to understand the origins of contention surrounding land, especially purpose, and consecration of specific properties. Equally important is how inextricable land and spirituality become for Black existence. According to Mary Bourke (2024), 'African cultures have a deep understanding of the healing properties found in their local flora. Indigenous plants and herbs have played a significant role in African medicine for centuries'. For Black Americans, the implications of post-Civil War land ownership and usage were restrictions from certain areas during a certain

time (sundown town codes that were socially enforced, often by law enforcement and Jim Crow segregation laws) and violence frequently leading to lynching. This led to the decline in Black land ownership. As Dania V. Francis et al. (2023) explain,

> ‘In addition to theft by state-sanctioned violence, intimidation, and lynching, Black farmers also lost land due to discrimination by banks and financial institutions [...] and through longstanding, coordinated discrimination by U.S. Department of Agriculture agents who wield power and control over access to credit and essential resources’ (p. 3).

As a result of this disenfranchisement, Francis et al. note that, ‘By 1997, Black farmers lost more than 90 percent of the 16 million acres they owned in 1910’ (p. 3). The loss is well-documented but does not highlight how the decline impacted the cultural purposes of land use, primarily ritual healing through food and medicine. And this is the site where response meets counter-narrative and authors like Leah Penniman return to the anchor of spirituality, health and wellness, and a muted facet of Black culture: the land, nature.

Arden Powell (*Winter’s Dawn*, 2022; *Obsidian Island*, 2022), Cormac McCarthy (*Suttree*, 1979; *The Road*, 2006), and many other White ecoGothic authors have characterised nature as mysterious and unpredictable, ominous and terrifying, while surrounding passages describe its unparalleled beauty, though often conflated as ‘eerily’ beautiful. Black authors like Jesmyn Ward (*Salvage the Bones*, 2011; *Let Us Descend*, 2023) and Octavia Butler (*Kindred*, 1979; *Parable of the Sower*, 1993) utilising this same genre make no such distinction of land’s quality. In fact, land is itself a character, whether it metaphorically holds the secrets to the past like a venerated ancestor or literally bears the spirit of a human. These stories are often categorised as fiction, sci-fi, fantasy, and, most popularly, magical realism. However, what is often overlooked is that history holds that the best way to preserve culture is by passing it down. Although there are varying methods for distribution, none are more effective than weaving them into stories that will be read or listened to for generations. Notably, the Gothic genre has offered a stable anchor for addressing predial engagements. To be more specific, the Black Southern Gothic genre’s frame is the nucleus for transforming narratives of nature from land viewed as destructive and mysterious by White authors

to land acknowledged as decisively protective and a resource. I intend to demonstrate how Black people's perceptions and use of the land, as seen in Randall Kenan's 'Let the Dead Bury Their Dead' (1992) and Charles Chesnutt's *Stories, Novels, and Essays* (2002), exemplify the decolonisation of nature in order to promote the reclamation of spirituality and belonging, reduce the impacts prevalent images of horror have, and restore faith in the functions and benefits the land can offer.

These two texts require a different approach to analysing how 'ownership' dictates a new rationale. These stories can best be defined as counter-stories where Black people are in control of their own futures and fates *and* the land. This remarkably deviates from the aforementioned White ecoGothic authors who often characterise nature as an 'other' or foreign entity to be disliked, distrusted, and rebuked. For Kenan, and Chesnutt, their texts are exemplum, demonstrating how the rhetoric of land supports a decolonised view of it, despite the horrors that creep not only into the memories of land but as a central component of the Gothic genre frame. Here, it is crucial to navigate through the differences between Eurocentric and Black ideologies of land and nature towards an understanding of how the respective literature introduces and defines engagement with land. I point to Stephen Nathan Haymes' (2018) explanation: 'the meanings and uses assigned to their surroundings were defined around a popular memory of black rural southern culture, which was rebuilt through shared folk traditions related to gardening, by exchanging medicinal plants and delicacies, and by fishing and feasting' (p. 41). Contrastingly, Haymes posits that Eurocentric or Western notions of land are embedded in discourse surrounding conservation and the rhetors 'are blind to these orientations and practices. Furthermore, their perspectives reflect a Eurocentric environmental ethic that narrows the definition of ecological knowledge, cares, and concerns' (p. 42). An Afrocentric perception of land is communal between land and people, negating the notion of a hierarchical relationship. Eurocentric notions, on the other hand, are based on utopic prescriptions that deny broader, varied and more distinct, purposeful engagements with the land.

This Eurocentric restricting of the relationship between human and land positions the natural world as both exotic and an entity of trepidation. I point to Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils' (2018) eco-focused conceptualisation of this relationship:

> '(1) a repository of deep unease, fear, and even contempt as humans confront the natural world; (2) a literary mode that uses an implacable external "wilderness" to call attention to the crisis in practices of representation; and (3) a terrain in which the contours of the body are mapped, contours that increasingly stray beyond the bounds of what might be considered properly "human"' (p. 4).

In Chesnutt's oeuvre, the land and natural world account for much of the dread of looming, haunting, and nonhuman elements. For instance, in 'Po' Sandy', Sandy's metamorphosis into a tree represents not only an interrogation of the boundaries between humans and nature but dismantles the idea that there is a hierarchical categorisation between the two. When he is destroyed at the sawmill, it is a broader inspection of the relationship Black people have with the land—both used for capitalistic purposes and injured or impaired without regards.

As Keetley and Sivils point out, 'Advocates of the nonhuman turn recognize the ways in which the human and nonhuman are thoroughly entangled' (pp. 11-12). Keetley and Sivils also offer an analysis for genre conventions: 1) 'The ecogothic develops the dictum that the present remains in thrall to the past' (p. 5); has a 'representation of a haunting "wilderness"' (p. 6); 'turns to the inevitability of humans intertwined with their natural environment' (p. 7); and 'grows in a soil too often fed by the blood of violent oppression' (p. 8). For this article, I will use those conventions as the benchmark for demonstrating how Kenan and Chesnutt illuminate the decolonisation of land. Numerous other texts[1] would have sufficed and could arguably replace the ones I have chosen; however, Kenan and Chesnutt in particular push the genre boundaries, and each include clear purposes for reclaiming the land by showcasing their strict placement of it within their respective texts. Kenan, whom I will start with and briefly analyse, meanders back and forth between fiction and reality, all the while propping his story up with a countable measure of truth. Chesnutt, who deserves, and is given, the bulk of this article, does both: he moves between fiction and reality with truth being the element of suspension for belief; the land is nearly personified but still independently present; and the stories have been passed down by a multitude

[1] See, for example, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Percival Everrett's *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985), and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011).

of individuals, but they still carry the same essence of mysticism, even given the level of variations that occur.

Land-centred Tale

Before Kenan delves into the heart of 'Let the Dead Bury Their Dead', he provides footnotes, some based in fact, and some based in fiction. However, the story itself is a handed-down version of an oral folktale known to be heard in varying African American communities and cultures. The mound is meant to be the same phenomenon that has owed its presence to rootwork or some other nefarious occurrence, as relayed by the character Ezekiel Thomas Cross and often interrupted by Ruth Davis Cross: 'Anyhow, that there mound you ask me about. Some say ain't no earthly explanation. Just is' (p. 285). Afterward, he describes the alternate reasons others give for the mound's appearance. This preface sets the tone for the type of mystery unfolding and the kind of people involved with circulating it. Yet, to the untrained eye, the footnotes Kenan provides might serve as mere elaborations and guidance toward a better understanding instead of a culturally oriented explanation. In both footnotes pertaining to the findings at the site of the mound Kenan lists items that are commonly used by people known as rootworkers, conjurers, witches, and by numerous other names. He references persimmon wood and provides footnoted details. What he does not mention is that this wood is preferred by rootworkers and conjurers (witches in some circles) because not only is it considered the greatest provider of protection, warding against negative forces during divinations, but it is also strong and durable enough to grind the pulverised granite found at the site. Granite, though also used as a form of protection, like most gems and rocks, is typically a source for sealing a space after it has been blessed or marked. In the long list of chemicals, rocks, compounds, and elements that Kenan details emerges a reconciliation of the land.

The story Ezekiel is narrating adjacent to these footnote commentaries would not be considered unfamiliar or unique to many Black readers. Variations are a common trope of oral folktelling, as is alluded to in the narration. The idea that a story has been told many different ways by many different people appears as a direct link to its origin. In other words, if an octogenarian, like Ezekiel, or nonagenarian, like Ruth, heard the story from their great grandfather, it holds more

value, authenticity, and truth because it has been passed down from an ancestor of high regards who was an eyewitness, and, in all likelihood, had indisputable firsthand knowledge. This is to bring attention to the fact that Kenan chose a tale that is popular in its own right and has been retold throughout the generations. More importantly, he focuses on the composition of the mound in the footnotes. Clearly this is an acknowledgement of the land and how it is being used to combat colonisation and misuse. The background Ezekiel provides, 'Won't nothing grow on it cause it's a cursed people in the soil' (p. 285), is a long uncontested explanation for grounds where mysterious events occur, or, as the Gothic genre frame necessitates, nefarious loomings abound. Kenan sets the telling of this story in 1985, long after the Civil War, even longer after the mound mysteriously appeared. What makes 'Let the Dead Bury Their Dead' so significant in ecoGothic narrations of counter-stories is that the most factual descriptions are housed in the very land the story centres. Furthermore, even if the story Ezekiel passes down to his great nephew is untrue, the events implicated are factual and documented. Similar to folktelling, the details, however well documented, vary from person to person and generation to generation. The result is a counter-story of unknown and unnamed individuals who have used the land for spiritual practices in order to resist colonial narratives that would otherwise deem the land unfit due to the mystery that is the mound.

Kenan granted the story of the mound minimal space in the short story despite the lengthy footnotes providing additional information about the land composition. Afterall, Ezekiel makes it clear that the ancillary phenomenon does, indeed, have an explanation. Of course, it also has to be the most credible because Ezekiel, who is 84, retells the story from memory, as *his* granddaddy told it to him. He solidifies the story's credibility by evoking this information when Ruth challenges the validity of it: 'Hush, woman. Was my granddaddy told me now. You's calling him a lie' (p. 284). As the story progresses, the land becomes more than merely a place of mystery. It morphs into a vessel for spiritual activity, and even given the fear of the unknown, the possibility of communicating with and through the land and nature is prevalent. All forewarn of the horror to come. After Ezekiel explains that the men digging 'Had to light lanterns […] Said hoot owls beginned to hoot. Said bats come out flapping after bugs and such' (p. 289), he describes the enslaved man's box (casket) as being made of persimmon, once again, circling back to using the land for purposes of spirituality and ritualistically. This time it appears in burial traditions and

rootwork. Kenan's inclusion of how this particular site of land was used helps concretise the transference of ancient cultural knowledge. It is no coincidence that the deceased enslaved man's name is Pharaoh and much consideration goes into the fact that the bats and owl foretell of the curse placed, no doubt by witches, on the grave. If Kenan's intention was to mark the land as cursed to all who disturb it, the contradiction is the incorporation of African folktales of the ndzumbi. Mose appears at the empty grave soon after the 'seal' was broken and *that* was the only aspect of fright the men digging up Pharaoh experience. They were primarily reluctant to dig on the grounds due to knowing the power that an unknown force, likely conjurers, held over the site. Adopting a specifically Gothic ecocritical lens, Keetley and Sivils explain the extent to which '[h]umanity's continued abuses against the land and its denizens, human and nonhuman alike, have spawned a culture obsessed with and fearful of a natural world both monstrous and monstrously wronged' (p. 11). To this end, it seems there is no neat resolution or answer to the mystery; however, what Kenan is presenting is a decolonised ecoGothic narrative through which the inexplicable can be demystified and is not nefarious workings. The unseen, unnamed lurking horror that persists is not the result of an eerie and dangerous site, but rather the product of Black people purposing the land for healing and existence. This very message can be found repeated in many Black stories of conjuring,[2] and Chesnutt creates characters and scenes highlighting this.

Charles Chesnutt's Land Format

Because Chesnutt, in his writings, uses one of the most effective modes of persuasion––recycled first- hand experiences and accounts told through Uncle Julius, a single character who reappears in multiple stories––there are more details to analyse through the character's eyes. Therefore, it is best to consider multiple tales instead of focusing on just one, since they all illustrate Uncle Julius' sundry interactions with the land. Additionally, there exists a formula for decolonising and interacting with the land in these short tales. Uncle Julius is a fixed character in all of the short stories covered. He narrates traditional oral folklore tales with a powerful voice that travels across time, transporting the horrors of slavery and efforts for post-emancipation reconciliation. He tells them in a different way that champions his motives and favours an outcome of unseen retribution.

[2] For the most comprehensive compilations of conjure tales, see Newbell Niles Puckett's *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926) and Richard Dorson's *American Negro Folktales* (1967).

His cryptic, cogent parables are the epitome of predial narratives, though he attaches oracular nuances that convey gnostic functions for him. His connection to and use of land is apparent throughout 'The Goophered Grapevine', 'Po' Sandy', and 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt'.

To genuinely acknowledge the full scope of land ownership and decolonisation, it is necessary to explore how and why Uncle Julius uses the land to weaponise the knowledge that binds him to it; warn and ward away those seeking to use or own it for commercial industries; maintain place and belonging; continue his narratives through the power of the land; and give the land power through his narratives, orbiting back to his knowledge. While an analysis of Uncle Julius' storytelling might seem cut and dry initially, there are overarching connections and frameworks that also must be considered; otherwise, any conclusions generated may be premature and purely conjecture. A discussion of narrative style should be framed within a compelling concept of Black cultural storytelling and folklore: nommo, or the power of the word. In the introduction to his anthology of Black African and African American stories, Ishmael Reed (1970) concisely explains the ways in which '[m]anipulation of the word has always been related in the mind to manipulation of nature. One utters a few words and stones roll aside, the dead are raised and the river beds emptied of their content' (p. 44). This moves discursive engagements of the land into a more Afrocentric space of conjuring as counter-narrative. Therefore, if there are boundaries that exist for examining how land is foregrounded in the spectrum of utility, they will need to supersede a generic overview of how the land appears, adapt to a decolonised perspective, and be situated outside a limited scope of conservation. Lastly, Uncle Julius is the main storyteller, but he is not the only one. It cannot be forgotten that John is the main narrator but lends no power to, or dissuasion from, the stories Uncle Julius tells. Similarly, though he does orate the stories to John and Annie, he is not the originator or owner of these stories. Nevertheless, it would be remiss to ignore the power he extracts from and inputs into them. They have a similar impact on him.

The Knowledge That Binds

predial | prēdēəl | adjective

- *archaic* relating to or consisting of land or farming
- *historical* relating to or denoting a slave or tenant attached to farms or the land

— *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989)

Uncle Julius is an enigma. He has an undeniable connection to the land that propels his level of knowledge above that of other characters. However, he hyperbolically establishes this with cunning and craft. John and Annie desire his stories because he prefaces them with his own anticipatory proclivity. He cannot wait to tell the story, but he resists enough to lure interest. Doing so substantiates his predial omniscience, an invaluable and unmatched entertaining intelligence. In 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt', Annie requests that John read to her to alleviate her boredom. He, like Uncle Julius who is arriving to interrupt, is strangely too eager to accommodate her. Annie is more interested in listening to Uncle Julius' story. It is more entertaining and palatable. John says of this, 'I had never been able to interest my wife in the study of philosophy, even when presented in the simplest and most lucid form' (p. 70). This is a subject John has suggested he reads often, but he has no true connection to it other than just reading it. Uncle Julius, on the other hand, is indisputably intertwined with both the story he tells and the land that appears in them, best defined as predial. For context, here predial is used to describe both the narratives Uncle Julius tells and Uncle Julius the narrator due to his relation with the land and the stories he tells. The two are inseparable, and it is important to note that Uncle Julius is most powerful when he is narrating due to his knowledge of and experience with the land, and his narration always depicts the natural world as the most powerful character in his stories. This is observed when he reacts in a matter-of-fact manner to the winds howling at the end of 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt'. It occurs also at the conclusion of 'Po' Sandy' when he makes use of the same building he had not long ago told John and Annie would produce ill effects if they used the wood from it for their new kitchen. Most brazenly and frequently, though, it occurs in 'The Goophered Grapevine'. When John and Annie meet Uncle Julius for the first time, John reveals that 'He went on eating the grapes, but did not seem to enjoy himself quite so well as he had apparently done before he became aware of our presence' (p. 8). In order to convince Annie that there is even a modicum of truth to his tales, he

ties his stories' plots into that utility of land previously mentioned. He depicts himself as knowing the history of the land and implies that he alone knows the land like he would an 'old friend'. This intertwining he creates between himself and the natural world deepens the impact of his stories. He metaphorically becomes nature, and that world is communicating the storied past to John and Annie. Furthermore, this link Uncle Julius has with the land enables him to maintain a connection to the past while continuing to live in the present.

The conclusion of 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt' is exemplary of Uncle Julius' correlation with the land and how he embodies predial sensibilities, presumably his instinct or intuition. Chesnutt writes, 'As Julius finished his story and we rose to seek shelter within doors, the blast caught the angle of some chimney or globe in the rear of the house, and bore to our ears a long, wailing note, an epitome, as it were, of remorse and hopelessness' (p. 81). Regardless of whether the story he just finished orating is true or not, it is possible that he had prior knowledge of that type of storm in that area from experience. Realistically speaking, elders in certain Black cultures often teach how to 'read' the land and nature to predict the weather. The idea comes from the concept of being close enough to them to understand their changes and signs (i.e. a silvery looking tree that is normally grey in colour indicates ice and/or snow, or typically straight tree limbs curling toward the sky signal rain, as a bent top warns of a storm). This method of weather prediction is not exclusive to the southern region of the United States or to any particular race or class of people. According to the American Geosciences Institute (2016), 'In earlier times, before the telegraph and the telephone were invented, weather observations from faraway places could not be collected in one place soon after they were made. In those times, the only way of predicting the weather was to use your local experience'. If this is applicable to Uncle Julius' knowledge, he planned his storytelling at the perfect time to invoke the sounds of nature and make John interpret the winds in a different way. To be successful, Uncle Julius has to be inseparable from the land so that when John and Annie glimpse even a modicum of evidence of his credibility and sincerity, they will take him more seriously, take the narratives seriously, and heed the discouragement to disturb those grounds.

A more exhaustive reading of Uncle Julius' character proves that he, himself, is predial. He has exceptional historical knowledge of the land, he uses the changing landscape to predict the

weather, and he is sentimental and protective of it. Although difficult to do, a hypothetical reading of Uncle Julius' character as merely another townsperson unveils a new approach to interpreting his relationship with the land. He is unaffected by it. Uncle Julius is known for prefacing his stories with embodied reactions to the horrors and incredible events he intends to depict for the sole purpose of manipulating listeners into believing them. Immediately, his disposition changes when he realises it is story time. At the end, John discovers that Uncle Julius has been living on the grounds he claims are no good without reaping a single consequence in the meantime. His explanation for this is that he 'knows de old vines fum de noo ones' (p. 17). This pronouncement secures his authority of the land, history, and over the story. The knowledge of knowing which vines are hexed connects him to the past and the land, but more powerfully, binds him to it.

The Oracular Warnings

Every narrative Uncle Julius lends to a desiring ear is predicated on a repeated warning that the land has mystical powers to exact revenge—in the worst way—on those disturbing it. He has a distinct formula for introducing his oracular warning. First, he establishes his connection to and knowledge of the land, a step that makes his warnings more daunting. Next, he historicises his knowledge to empower it and make it readily creditable. Finally, he issues the warning, often for the second time, but not without first conceding to tell the story. His warning in 'The Goophered Grapevine' appears before telling the story and again when it is over. Then, with slight hesitancy, as an act to entice interest, Uncle Julius answers John's inquiry about how he even knows the grapevine is bewitched. He says,

> 'I would n' spec' fer you ter b'lieve me 'less you know all 'bout de fac's. But ef you en young miss dere doan' min' lis'nin' ter a ole [*term omitted for sensitivity purposes*] run on a minute er two w'ile you er restin', I kin 'splain to you how it all happen' (p. 9).

He uses the term 'fac's' (facts) to embolden what he says next. Shortly after Uncle Julius offers his story, he has gained John and Annie's undivided attention. John says, 'his language flowed more freely, and the story acquired perspective and coherence' (p. 9). Surely, this clever addition

to the storytelling was designed to later give depth and weight to his warnings. Uncle Julius' desire to be transparent and recount a story with fluidity and openness to strangers planning to purchase land he is attached to serves the purpose of captivating John and Annie so he can more easily play on their sympathies, making his warnings seem to come from a place of care. His continued use of 'slave dialect' as a linguistic freedom provides him with narrative power, shielding him from a colonised engagement with the land. As Reed (1970) diligently asserts, 'What distinguishes the present crop of Afro-American writers from their predecessors is a marked independence from Western form. This holds true even for the authors of the "Neo-Slave Narrative"' (p. 44). Uncle Julius does not author the stories he tells, but his character benefits by being in both a proximal (to the land) and linguistic position to tell them in a way that dismantles Western ideologies about ruinous lands. In fact, Uncle Julius counters those ideas by demonstrating slave owners' destruction of land with the sawmill in 'Po' Sandy' and wolves' natural habitat being encroached on in 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'ant'.

In 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt', Uncle Julius changes course and uses a different, shrewder tactic to warn John. He initially passively warns him. When probed about it, he feigns disbelief about a part of the story he is about to tell, but that does not stop him from eagerly orating it. He says, 'De gray wolf's , some folks call it,—but I better' (p. 72). His cunning continues when he casually speaks about Dan's temperament, an uncanny similarity to how he also speaks about the land. He says, 'Soon ez eve'ybody foun' Dan out, dey did'n many un 'emter 'sturb 'im' (p. 72). This additional information allows Uncle Julius to parallel the land with Dan and vice versa. Moreover, it signals another warning about 'disturbing the land'. His attempt to concretise the power and viciousness of the land manifests in his descriptions of Dan. Dan is strong, powerful, resilient, and has an unmanageable temper—nothing can kill him, not even conjuring. All of these traits equate to a warning about the potential repercussions of intrusion. Switching to a more physical, tangible consequence, Uncle Julius, pseudo-lamenting John's impending mistake and doom, explains what might happen. He tells John, 'But ef you gits rheumatiz er fever en agur, er ef you er snake-bit...I neber wa'ned you, suh, en tol' you w'at you mought look fer en be sho' ter fin' (p. 82). Not only is Uncle Julius reiterating his knowledge of the land as a way to be powerful, but he is defending the sanctity of the land. In doing so, and knowing that John and Annie seek to capitalise economically from the land, he is guarding it from the harmful tendencies of ecophobia

he has witnessed in the past. According to Simon C. Estok (2018), 'Ecophobia in people derives at least in part from learned behavior, and it is our ecophobic disavowal that enables us to cut down magnificent (and carbon-sequestering) trees without shame or guilt' (p. 23). Estok's assertion precisely explains the circumstances Uncle Julius faces; he uses his knowledge of the land and its history to plea with John not to desecrate it. However, John does not consider it beautiful, sacred, or essential to life. He can only view it as an opportunity to create wealth. On a grander scale, the reality of it is that Uncle Julius' anecdotes represent the inextricable relationship Black people have with the natural world and the land.

Uncle Julius has a strong predilection for affecting sympathy from John and Annie, especially Annie, but this is trademark for any story he tells. This appears more transparently in 'Po' Sandy' when he says of the sawmill noise, 'Ugh! but dat des do cuddle my blood!' (p. 20). Uncle Julius places himself in the nucleus of Sandy and Tenie's ruin. Because he was present unabridged, the firsthand account he shares is incontrovertible. Anchoring his credibility in his own experience privileges him to assign meaning and caution to the contents of the story. Likewise, the delay in candidly addressing what causes him to react so aggressively is not due to his reluctance to re-traumatise himself recalling the events. Rather, it is due to allowing time for his audience to react. At this stage in the storytelling routine, he has captured their attention and directed their minds to enter into a specific thought process, one he can continue to exploit and control. If he can manipulate their vision of land and redirect them to consider land not as beautiful for the financial gains it can offer but as a site of horror, they might be compelled to leave it alone and dismiss the notion of owning it. In a sense, this is Uncle Julius' way of reclaiming land where terrors tied to slavery happened regardless of his stories' truthfulness. He and other formerly enslaved individuals worked the land, sweated and bled on it, and experienced and bore witness to the unthinkable. Annie and John may not believe his stories, but his aim is to at least demonstrate how the land does not belong to them.

Uncle Julius Knows His Place

At this juncture, it is important to examine who Uncle Julius was, and is, and where he comes from. To say he is a former enslaved or free man of colour seems inconsequential, and that fact

carries only a brief and subtle weight in characterising his narratives, as explained later. It is apparent that he is popular, oddly enough, mainly among the outsiders who are intruders travelling from the city or up North. They are keen to engage him in interactions that rely on his knowledge as a response. As such, it empowers him to exploit John and Annie's ignorance of the land and provides him with a platform and audience to situate his tales as the consummate narratives existing within the area. All John has to do is mention a locale and Uncle Julius can, without great effort, begin to orate a story in a manner that makes him credible and the events plausible. He is able to use his knowledge of the place to create a sense of pity and dread in the couple.

Chesnutt's characterisation of Uncle Julius adjacent to John—and in some respects Annie, with her eagerness for a substantial narrative to be presented—is momentarily highlighted when John reads a Herbert Spencer excerpt in the chapter 'The Instability of the Homogenous' from *First Principles*. John is interrupted and prevented from reading the rest of this passage, but it should be noted that its omission is a remarkable commentary on the evolutionary theory of the 'survival of the fittest'. Spencer (1880) wrote next, 'that the condition of homogeneity is a condition of unstable equilibrium' (p. 412). His social theories, prescribing to the tenets of eugenics, meant that in order for a 'better' set of people to exist, they have to progress towards refinement, and in order to be refined, subsequent generations have to continually inherit the so-called 'improved' genes, traits, and characteristics, leaving Uncle Julius in a unique, lone category. As John reveals of him in 'The Goophered Grapevine', 'He was not entirely black, and this fact, together with the quality of his hair [...] suggested a slight strain of other than negro blood' (p. 8). This description moves Uncle Julius' character in the direction of hybridity and ambiguity. But on closer examination, this is exactly the type of metamorphosis that (dis)orients and ruptures the ideology that identity and land are synchronic. In other words, if Uncle Julius is not 'entirely black', then his distinct relationship with the land he loves must be borne of his own metamorphosis into that very land and not due to his identity binding him and land together.

Knowing place as in location and knowing place as in the social constraints applied demographically by a select few members of communities are two distinct constructs Uncle Julius is encouraged to maintain. The more meaning his place has, the more meaning he can attach to his own social status. However, at the very end of 'Po' Sandy', it is implied that he has a more organic,

felicitous place. Annie tells John, 'Uncle Julius says that ghosts never disturb religious worship, but that if Sandy's spirit should happen to stray into meeting by mistake, no doubt the preaching would do it good' (p. 29). Again, it is not clear which scenario is befitting his place. On the one hand, Uncle Julius is still using his wile and knowledge to propel his agenda by deceiving Annie into believing his narratives. The church for him, most notably while he was still enslaved, would have represented a safe space to practise religion but not Christianity. Slave religion (modernly and commonly referred to as Black spirituality) depended on the region in Africa that the slaves were stolen from. Banned from practising all forms of African spirituality, including vodun/voodoo, the church functioned as a 'meeting place' to continue practising these religions. Within the walls, clapping, stomping, singing, and dancing were all ways to cast out spirits, communicate with spirits, and conjure spirits. Uncle Julius was not quite being deceitful, but he already established that he told tall tales, so divulging the truth to Annie would have had minor, if any, consequences, even though it is implied that she secretly believes his stories. The people who separated from the old Sandy Run Coloured Baptist Church to form the new are, to this end, representative of the split between the spiritualists and religionists. The implications present the probability of Uncle Julius being a conjure man and capable, in reference to Reed, of manipulating nature with his words. If so, he would have reason and means to continue the goopher on the grapevines, conjure Sandy's spirit, and invoke the wolf's howl. Uncle Julius, as indicated by his age and knowledge, would have the perfect combination of awareness and experience to recreate the conjure work included in his stories. Outside of this character, Chesnutt himself was very knowledgeable about this practice as a result of interviewing conjure practitioners. He writes, 'During a recent visit to North Carolina, after a long absence, I took occasion to inquire into the latter-day prevalence of the old-time belief in what was known as "conjuration" or "goopher"' (p. 864). He later references a woman, Old Aunt Harriet, whom he was privileged to hear stories from. I believe that, ancillary to inspiring his stories and the recurring linchpin Uncle Julius character, Chesnutt's experience and opportunity to hear those tales positioned him to have a clear view of just how crucial the natural world and the land are to Black people, especially conjurers and rootworkers.

Narrative Power From the Land

The land serves the greatest function in Uncle Julius' narrations. Without the land being overwhelmingly present and anthropomorphised, his stories would not work. Chesnutt creates him to mediate an ever-transitioning narrative phenomenon. Heather Russell (2009) explains, 'Conventional literary forms take shape in accord with widely agreed-upon rules, or social contracts. Breaking such traditional or canonical social contracts becomes integral to liberating, revolutionary poetics of form engendered by African Atlantic narratology' (p. 2). Uncle Julius' narrations of stories that have been generationally memorised and altered over time follow the one rule of breaking the conventions. Though the elements of warning, oration, and participation by both narrator and listener are frequently present in the stories he tells, they are merely tropes intended to represent Uncle Julius' idiosyncrasies. Furthermore, they have no direct pattern or scheme. When this is applied to how he describes land as character, it is obvious that the view of land presented in the stories is countering the Eurocentric ideas that do not consider or value Black people's engagement with the natural world, which must also include history, experiences, uses of, and knowledges of the land. Likewise, these stories are reinventing the views on land, especially when Uncle Julius refers to how it has been used to carry out the horrors of plantation life. This forces readers to acknowledge a different set of framings for land, one that involves reclamation.

Why is the land so important? Paulinus Odozor (2019) takes note that, 'On the lowest rung of the ladder are spirits, who are active beings distinct from humans and reside in nature and phenomena such as trees, rivers, rocks, or lakes'. This is not only ancient African knowledge, but it is also the type of knowledge Uncle Julius commands in preparation for his stories and while orating them. While the general essence is sustained no matter who he is telling them to, why, or how, he continues to draw power from repeating them. In light of his appearance in each of the stories he tells, it is not far-fetched to assume he is actually more integrated inside the story than not. For example, his history includes being enslaved on a plantation he has remained on. This link makes ambiguous an actual or estimated age for him. Significantly, the concept of time, when read through an ecoGothic lens, is not linear or stable; as Keetley and Sivils explain, '[i]n the ecoGothic […] time is not just familiar, social, cultural, and political but evolutionary' (p. 5). The presence

of this convention in Chesnutt's text thereby reemphasises the horrors of slavery; the duration alone means Uncle Julius spent his whole life enslaved, at least to old age, and that is an age no one could know. What seems constant is the land. When change threatens the land, even in the slightest, Uncle Julius is there to mount an opposition. The most compelling aspect of this is that he *has* been around long enough to witness individuals being turned into a tree, gradually become grapes, embedded in the church wood, and many other activities of the supernatural nature involving land being irrevocably changed. The worst horror is how other characters still consider those pieces of land beautiful, worth owning, and capital, and dismiss the abject terror associated with them, justifying Uncle Julius' inability to remove himself completely from plantation life. As Estok points out, 'Only the ecophobia hypothesis— and its characterization as the irrational fear, dread, dislike, antipathy, apprehension, avoidance, and indifference toward nature—allows us to acknowledge, and attempt to redeem, our collective human mistake' (p. 23). Uncle Julius intentionally uses the horrors of slavery and human violence towards nature, symbiotically, to consistently confront the perceptions of the land he loves. Another possibility for reconciliation is that he is recognising that Annie and John will feel more sympathy toward the land they are about to purchase if they orient their thinking away from having dominion over the land toward considering it being stained with Black people's blood, with the awareness that they are also indifferent toward Black people.

Uncle Julius' orations of these particular stories are powerful. If the subject was different and not consistently about the land, his narration would not influence the plot or determine alternate approaches to interpreting character responses. The stories do not belong to Uncle Julius, but he imparts the significance of their contents to other characters. Both John and Annie have been impressed upon by the end of the narration and the warning continues to plague their memories, or at least the horrors and mysteries remain in the backs of their minds as they try to sustain a normal life. John, for instance, admits that he has sought out signs of his vineyard being hexed in 'The Goophered Grapevine'. He says, 'I have not noticed any developments of the goopher in the vineyard, although I have a mild suspicion that our colored assistants do not suffer from want of grapes during the season' (p. 17). This is evidence of the difference between Black and Western ideas of land. John is still thinking of it in terms of capital while the 'colored assistants' are benefiting in a more natural, sustainable way, just eating the food it is producing. It

follows, too, the reciprocal, communal engagement Haymes (2018) points to as a critical way of interacting with the natural world.

Power of the Land Through the Narratives

Uncle Julius' narration of these folktales transforms the land into a magical, mysterious, and ominous portal for retribution and vengeance, but he is also hypervigilant in making sure no harm comes to it. Consequently, his character perfectly counters Western assumptions about Black people's apathy toward the natural world. Haymes (2018) asserts that '[c]olonializing racial ecologies perpetuate the idea that African-descended communities are historically incapable of having ecological experiences and concerns' (p. 38). The obvious power of the land is inherent in its own mysterious nature. Uncle Julius seeks to protect it and proves his knowledge of it. He consistently upholds that the Black characters are one with the natural world, a part of it, and *are* it. One example of this is his comparison of Dan to the land. It has unpredictable power that it rarely uses until provoked. But there is no comparison made between the constant narrator and the land. The connection is exhaustively featured, but there is not any substantial mention of how, like Dan, Uncle Julius is like the land. The stories he tells are about a past filled with varying horrors that he himself has witnessed and experienced. He has persisted to share those stories with others. However, he is capable of telling and retelling stories about events he has not witnessed but were passed to him. That, coupled with the fact he empowers the stories he tells by interjecting himself, is a characteristic the land has in Uncle Julius' narratives.

He does not predate the land, but when he speaks of it, he wields a quasi-ancient knowledge concerning it. He exclaimed to John on their initial meeting and discussion of the vineyard, 'I knows all about it. Dey ain' na'er a man in dis settlement w'at won' tell you ole Julius McAdoo 'uz bawn en raise' on dis yer same plantation' (p. 8). He situates himself in tandem with time, and as discussed earlier, time is a significant indicator of evolving. He does not have to proclaim Elder status or reveal his age. Because he has evolved from being enslaved to being free, it is evident he has interacted with the natural world that existed during slavery and saw the horrors. More compelling is the fact that he, like the land, is still somewhat restricted and bound by the plantation and plantation life; Uncle Julius still lives on the plantation. Interestingly enough, most everyone

in his stories is deceased, but he is still alive and the possibility of him being a spirit is valid. Uncle Julius substantiates his own likeness to the land in the above scene and he had not done this before. The fact that it is still there, that very place (plantation and land), and he is as well, is an eerie connection he brings up. In fact, when reading this passage, there is a sense of pride radiating from his words. Within those words, though, is also the curiosity of his age. His initial words are 'Lawd, bless you, suh' when John asks him, 'Do you know anything about the time when this vineyard was cultivated?' (p. 8). Uncle Julius clearly is thankful for the chance to discuss the *time* and not just the vineyard. Again, he never claims to predate the land, but in this announcement, he lays claim to time. This is the moment the ecoGothic becomes exemplified. As mentioned before, time is elusive in the ecoGothic, especially in this story where time and place are significantly bound. Land has no origin, time, or spatial boundaries unless projected by humans. Likewise, neither does Uncle Julius. Even more revealing is the fact that he challenges John and Anne to seek out others who will attest to his always being there, born and raised. No other character his age or older is present to verify his claims. These claims actually become claims on the land, time, and stories he tells.

Another serene moment when he casually likens himself, inadvertently, to the land also gives the land power. When he first starts explaining how the grapevine became 'goophered', he discusses the genesis of the grapevines and his presence at the plantation when they started growing. He says, 'Ole Mars Dugal' McAdoo [...] bought dis place long many years befo' de wah, en I'member well w'en he sot out all dis yer part er de plantation in scuppernon's. De vimes growed monst'us fas' (p. 9). The land was there to witness it all, and Uncle Julius was there to witness the scuppernongs grow and make a profit. Because of his fluency in speaking about the land in the same temporal terms he speaks about himself, he can insert the land into his orations and have it hold more power than the actual story while he is telling it. He carves out and frames, between the mystery of the tale and the imagination of those listening, the untouchable nature of the land. In 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt', Uncle Julius describes Dan in much the same way: undefeatable and resilient. However, he does not award himself that same description, despite having existed and persisted from being born into slavery to being a free man who lives a fairly independent and uneventful life.

When considering the land independent of Uncle Julius or any other narrator, it holds its own ecoGothic power, which is then infused into the narration. Of all the characters, it is the most resilient. The land witnesses and participates in changes and in changing the characters. If Uncle Julius' recounting of the stories is a genuine indication of how much the land has actually had to endure, then there is no wonder why it appears to have the gothic potential to be mystical, ominous, and angry when threatened. Each time he warns Annie and John of these dangers, of harming the land, he is reiterating a decolonial counternarrative to the idea that Black people are not advocates for protecting the lands. Additionally, he is presenting the land as he does the characters in his stories: as sentient, endangered beings that function reciprocally for sustainability. It has not been damaged through poisoning, transformations, or war. It is primordial, outdating Uncle Julius, the war, and the conjure tales. Unfortunately, they each have power over the other. More alarming is John's seemingly flippant reaction to and treatment of the land and its power, even after listening to several stories. He sees for himself the state of disrepair the land is in when he arrives to vet the McAdoo plantation. At first, there is no cause for alarm, as the plantation went through years of a legal battle between the heirs and was left unattended and uncultivated. Besides, it started blooming a new life after the war, but with no one there to tend to it, it continued to die.

After John meets Uncle Julius and is told the story, he never wonders about his mishap on the way to the plantation, why there was so much land uncultivated, or why Uncle Julius would tell him such a story upon an initial meeting, as strangers. John's ignorance works in Uncle Julius' favour because he has the ability to fill in the gaps with a powerful narration. How a story is told depends on who is listening. They are impromptu but fitting for the moment and situation and meant to teach, warn, or entertain. Uncle Julius provides his story for all of these reasons. He has to tell a story about the land that will entertain enough to keep John's attention, has a modicum of truth for believability, but contains enough horror to warn and drive him away. Choosing to use the horrors of slavery for his stories allows him to control, literally and figuratively, the narrative. His narratives, especially the characterisation of the land, promotes the sentiment that no one should own or build on that area. Uncle Julius becomes the premiere advocate for reclaiming the land, countering the horrors committed on it, and avenging those who were victims of slavery. Thus, he is *the* decolonised counter to texts that separate their characters from the land and natural world through a hierarchical chain, and he, as the sole protector of the land, dismantles Western

ideas that Black people are not apt to make space in their sentiments for caring about the land. Uncle Julius does not just narrate the counter-story: he *is* the counter-story.

Conclusion

In most African and Black American cultures, being a griot is a great honour and generational blessing. As someone who comes from a family of well-known griots, it is interesting to witness others in action. Ezekiel, though written as a creation of time and circumstances to redistribute the popular story of the mound, stands firm in his memory of how he was told the story and its validity. Though not in person, Uncle Julius' telling of stories that repeat concepts familiar and common is simultaneously frustrating and interesting. The way he tells them is interesting, and that he tells them without sincerity to any point is frustrating. These are but characters. The writing itself is literature that offers counter-stories where the land is prized not as much aesthetically but as a functioning constituent of decolonisation. When determining what the purest definition for conjure tales is, the predicate must be that these stories are of retribution but not redemption, of reverence but not revenge. Proof in point: Kenan does not provide an exact, undeniable translation for what the mound is, how Mose lives after being buried, or why the grave is empty. All that is known is that decades have passed and no one, not even klansmen, will dare set foot on grounds that seem more hallowed than haunted. Chesnutt does not finish the stories, removing the possibility of Uncle Julius being right and truthful. He does not write that the goopher renders the scuppernongs spoiled and John is unable to make wine from them. Being defiant costs him in the long run and he ends up continually plagued by bad luck, though he has now sold the vineyard to another unsuccessful soul who suffers the same fate. These stories will continue in this manner through the generations: the land exchanges hands many times, but no one is ever able to make a profit, 'tame' the land, or remain on the property. Over time, future unexplainable happenings and coincidences will recall specific cautions from these bone-chilling tales.

For Black and African practitioners of conjuration, conjure tales are not just a way to embrace the practice. It also is not just a way to preserve it. It is a means to participate in it comprehensively and continually. When these practices are allowed to exist without arbitration, characters, real and imagined, like Uncle Julius, are understood as part of counter-narratives that

consider a world where the impossible thrives and Black imagination disrupts the norm. Though there were significant differences between realistic practices of rootwork and the details Kenan presents, most of the stranger-than-fiction recollections remain staple orations. Likewise, though there are deviations between actual conjure tales and Uncle Julius' versions, there are certain cultural adaptations that appear trans-modally. That is, they may be featured in a tale, movie, literary work, piece of art, song, dance, or many other cultural mediums. The point is to immerse them back into communities and support all efforts to de-stigmatise and isolate them from other existing and similar artifacts. This necessarily means to also decolonise how land is perceived. The ecoGothic provides a wider scope of possibilities that can build on the work already being done in literature to progress away from the harmful rhetoric displacing and muting the Black voice. Kenan and Chesnutt centre Black conceptions of land while focusing more on Black culture, traditions, and folklore rather than a generic definition and perception of land that decentres connections to it.

The continued investigation of how the land is used in oral folklore and narratives is important in establishing a connection between literature and predial spirituality, comprising part of the knowledge of how land was used in the past. According to the Carter G. Woodson Center at Berea College in Kentucky (2018), 'To the Akan, it is this wisdom in learning from the past which ensures a strong future' and 'the Akan believe the past serves as a guide for planning the future'. Looking back over conjure tales and understanding what they truly meant during the times in which they were written means a connection is being formed with the past so that the present and future can be created through deep thought and concrete valuing of what previously existed, even if it will be altered and amended to be applicable to the present. This also means the present and future must necessarily disrupt colonial structures and genres: in other words, mass decolonisation of standards, practices, and canons.

The determination for many Black people to reclaim a positive, spiritual interaction with the land is manifested in hiking clubs, during spiritual journeys oriented solely toward nature, being present in outdoor spaces the ancestors walked on, and within compelling literature that offers candid implications for the future and a call to turn back to the land for healing. This reimagining of the land, as necessary to spiritual practices like conjuring and to applying Sankofa

to new understandings and appreciations for Black storytelling and folklore, is crucial to interrupting hegemonic, Eurocentric, and normative ideologies and practices. To decolonise how land is perceived—as capital, mysterious space, and owned and controlled—especially when it appears in texts, is to unsettle the notions of arbitration that emerge from past practices. The horrors committed during slavery have creeped into the minds and thoughts of Black people and the results of generational trauma have redefined what it means to be outdoors, where storytelling, conjuring, and healing occurred. Mainstream texts centering land rarely indicate the fact that land was used to commit horrors during slavery, so when it is incorporated into ecoGothic stories, it is not fully represented. On the contrary, it is used to create plots of demise for characters and as terrific spaces of wonderment and beauty. This is dismissive of the reality land carries, and it is therefore important to reconsider how land is a powerful character with its own traits. Understanding how it functions as a source of practice for conjurers and rootworkers is the most powerful representation and rupture to colonised perceptions.

BIOGRAPHY

Crystal Thompson is currently a third-year PhD student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her scholarship and research include African American literature, Black rhetoric(s), Black spirituality, the Black Southern Gothic, and Blacks in the Environment. She is an affiliate in the UNCG African American and African Diaspora Studies Department where she is the Multivocal Oral Histories coordinator. Crystal hosts The Black Chatta podcast and is the feature stories editor for *The Carolinian*. She is currently researching religion and rootwork in the Black American South, Black expression from the early 19th century to the present, and Black rhetoric(s) in literature. She is a member of Phi Kappa Phi.

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Spectral Seals and Enslaved Africans:
Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno' as an Anticolonial EcoGothic Tale

Jennifer Schell

ABSTRACT

An example of historical fiction, Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno' (1855) reimagines the events surrounding the *Tryal* slave ship rebellion of 1805. I argue that this story takes the form of an anticolonial ecoGothic tale that condemns the destructive legacy of the European invasion and occupation of the Americas. My essay highlights the narrator's constant invocations of the American sealing industry, which serve to haunt the text. As I contend, the presence of these spectral seals indicates that the same settler colonial ideologies that enable American sailors to slaughter marine mammals for profit enable them to murder African freedom fighters with impunity. Intertwining its discussions of social and ecological issues, 'Benito Cereno' offers striking criticisms of the violence inherent in resource extraction, chattel slavery, and anthropogenic species extinction. As it does so, it also addresses ideological concerns, identifying and denouncing the discursive formations—many of which involve more-than-human animals—that serve to justify settler colonialism and perpetuate it into the future.

On 22 December 1804, the *Tryal*—under the command of Spanish captain, Benito Cerreño—departed from Valparaiso, Chile, bound for Lima, Peru, with a cargo of seventy-two enslaved Africans. Five days into the voyage, the Africans launched a surprise attack, ambushing the guards and seizing the vessel. In the process, they killed eighteen Spanish sailors. Not equipped to operate or navigate the ship themselves, they demanded that Cerreño take them around Cape Horn and across the Atlantic to either Senegal or São Nicolau. He refused, so they drifted about the South Pacific until they encountered the *Perseverance*, an American sealing vessel from Duxbury, Massachusetts, commanded by Amasa Delano. Instead of greeting the interloper with violence,

the Africans orchestrated an elaborate subterfuge in which they pretended to be slaves belonging to the remaining Spanish crewmen. Exhausted from their aimless peregrinations, they sought to avoid conflict with the New Englander, whom they hoped would sail away none the wiser about the rebellion. Though the ruse worked for a time, Cerreño eventually revealed the truth of the situation, and Delano responded by arming his sailors and dispatching them to recapture the *Tryal*. During this violent assault, the sailors slaughtered seven of the Africans. Afterwards, they tortured the survivors—disembowelling some of them with sealing knives—and took them to Talcahuano, Chile, for legal punishment (Grandin, 2014).

After returning to Boston in the *Perseverance* in 1807, Delano spent three additional years at sea before retiring for a job at the Boston Custom House. To alleviate his debts and supplement his income, he published *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817), which includes a detailed account of his role in subduing the *Tryal* rebellion. For some reason, the book did not prove popular with readers—Delano possessed seven hundred unsold copies at the time of his death—and it probably would have fallen into obscurity had it not been for Herman Melville, who used it as the primary source for his novella 'Benito Cereno' (Grandin, 2014). Serialised in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in 1855 and republished in *The Piazza Tales* in 1856, Melville's Gothic tale brought the story of the *Tryal* rebellion to the attention of antebellum American readers interested in stories of mystery, intrigue, and deception on the high seas.

In 'Benito Cereno', Melville describes the encounter between the *Tryal* and the *Perseverance* in much the same manner as Delano. Instead of altering the historical events for dramatic effect, he follows the relation in the narrative, telling the story in an apparently straightforward and truthful fashion. He even adopts Delano's strategy of appending legal documents—translated from the Spanish—to the narrative to provide additional details about the incident. Admittedly, Melville changes the names of the ships to the *Bachelor's Delight* and the *San Dominick*, and he shifts the point of view from the first person to the third person. These alterations have no bearing on the plot of the story, however, which mimics the original insofar as its most salient details are concerned.

For the most part, scholars who address issues of historical verisimilitude in 'Benito Cereno' contend that it serves as important social and political commentary on the operations of slavery in the Americas. Jean Fagan Yellin (1970) argues that the story 'probes the problem of reality and nature of evil' through the characters and their relationships as 'masters and slaves' (p. 682). Joyce Adler (1974) argues that it elaborates Melville's 'philosophical conception of the nature of slavery and the violence that is its inevitable accompaniment' (p. 19) while Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey (1982) discuss 'Benito Cereno' in terms of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. All four scholars regard the tale as very critical of nineteenth-century settler Americans and their attitudes toward the enslaved and free Black people living in the United States in the antebellum era.

While this scholarship is cogent and compelling, I want to add an important anticolonial and ecological dimension to it. Therefore, in my analysis of 'Benito Cereno', I examine the narrator's constant invocations of the American sealing industry. *Although no actual pinnipeds appear in the story, these references serve to generate myriad spectral seals, who haunt the text.* Thematically speaking, I argue that they serve as reminders of the deadly effects of the exploitative extractivism that undergirds the colonisation of the Americas. I also underscore the numerous instances in which the narrator describes the African revolutionaries as more-than-human animals—sheep, dogs, bulls, bats, deer, leopards, and wolves. This figurative language, as I contend, indicates that the same settler colonial ideologies that enable American sailors to slaughter marine mammals for profit enable them to murder African freedom fighters with impunity.

In the end, I conclude that 'Benito Cereno' represents an anticolonial ecoGothic tale that condemns the destructive legacy of the European invasion and occupation of the Americas. Intertwining its discussions of social and ecological issues, it indicates that the fate of the fur seals in the South Pacific mirrors the fate of the enslaved Africans aboard the *San Dominick*. In so doing, 'Benito Cereno' offers striking condemnations of the violence inherent in resource extraction, anthropogenic species extinction, and chattel slavery. As it advances these criticisms, it also addresses ideological concerns, identifying and denouncing the discursive formations—most of

which involve more-than-human animals—that serve to justify settler colonialism and perpetuate it into the future.

Toward an Anticolonial EcoGothic

In her introduction to a special issue of the journal *Gothic Studies* entitled 'Decolonising the Gothic', Rebecca Duncan (2022b) argues that the field of Gothic studies needs to move beyond postcolonial and global modes of analysis. According to her, the problem is that 'the present is not post-colonial, or even neo-colonial'; instead, it 'provides stark evidence that the history of colonial power remains as-yet unconcluded' (p. 220). To account for this difficulty Duncan explains that colonialism—defined as a set of practices—is very different from coloniality—defined as a set of power relations. Not insignificantly, the latter can and often does exist without the former, maintaining and sustaining colonialist attitudes, beliefs, knowledges, systems, and structures.

Insofar as the field of Gothic studies is concerned, Duncan proposes 'decolonial thinking as one productive response to this situation' (p. 219). Drawing on the scholarship of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, she explains that a decolonial approach engages with 'the coloniality of power' by stressing the 'fundamental connection […] between colonisation and capitalist expansion' (pp. 221-222). It also emphasises the importance of centring the perspectives of peoples who have been marginalised and exploited by these systems. Thus—unlike postcolonial or global modes of analysis—it is capable of addressing and criticising the enduring manifestations of colonialism and coloniality that appear in Gothic texts across time. In her own contribution to the special issue, Duncan (2022a) demonstrates the viability of this approach, highlighting a number of decolonial Gothic texts that 'mobilise supernatural figurations of threat and anxiety to grapple not with colonialism or its aftereffects, but with coloniality as the enduring alliance between Eurocentric master narratives of race, gender and nature, and capitalism as a set of economic/ecological relations that link regions and communities unequally together' (p. 319).

While I regard Duncan's scholarship as both insightful and convincing, I wish to make some adjustments to her terminology. In place of her decolonial Gothic, I substitute anticolonial ecoGothic in my analysis of 'Benito Cereno'. Nowhere in either of her contributions to the special

issue does Duncan address the ecoGothic as either a genre or mode of writing. Throughout both pieces, though, she discusses many of the ecological issues caused by settler colonialism and its attendant forms of coloniality. In 'Decolonial Gothic: Beyond the Postcolonial in Gothic Studies', she mentions resource extraction and climate change, and she quotes Sylvia Wynter (2003) and Jason Moore (2015), two scholars who explicitly link coloniality and capitalism with the exploitation of more-than-human organisms and ecosystems (p. 316). Several of the Gothic fictions that Duncan examines at the end of the article also address ecological concerns. To better describe these kinds of cultural artefacts and highlight their environmental themes, I deliberately position them as ecoGothic. I make this distinction because by definition ecoGothic texts appropriate traditional Gothic tropes—including those involving spectrality—as a means of commenting on human anxieties about and problems with the natural world (Schell, 2017a: p. 104). Addressing both fear of *and* fear for the environment, they tend to be very critical of human beings and their ecologically destructive activities (Tidwell & Soles, 2021: p. 14; Schell, 2017b: p. 177). As I contend, 'Benito Cereno' represents a particularly remarkable example of a text that adopts the ecoGothic mode to condemn the social and environmental problems inherent in settler colonialism.

Because a number of different thinkers from around the world have contributed to the field of study, definitions of 'decolonial' and 'anticolonial' can be both complex and contradictory. For her part, Duncan draws upon ideas advanced by South American scholars—such as Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Walter D. Mignolo—who tend to address abstract, theoretical issues. Other decolonial scholars—especially those from North America—tend to focus their attention on more practical problems, engaging in the work of decolonisation by arguing for the repatriation of stolen land to Indigenous peoples. They also discuss theoretical concerns, but they do so using different terminology. In their influential essay, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor' (2012), Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) and K. Wayne Yang argue that the term 'decolonization' has been appropriated by Euro-American academics and transformed into a metaphor for various social justice projects. According to them, the danger lies in the fact that 'when metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future' (p. 3). To put it another way, it enables a series of what Tuck and Yang call 'moves to innocence', which

'problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity' (p. 3). For this reason, they insist that 'decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land' (p. 7). In this formulation, decolonisation must involve what has come to be called the Land Back movement. A number of other North American Indigenous scholars—including Billy-Ray Belcourt (Cree) and Max Liboiron (Métis)—have endorsed Tuck and Yang's definition of decolonisation. Belcourt (2020) contends that many Euro-American decolonisation projects fail to demand 'the abolition of the settler state and a repatriation of land to Indigenous communities'; thus, they 'whitewash decolonization' and 'place settlers at the core of a social justice project that is against the position of the settler as the a priori subject of the world' (p. 20). Liboiron (2021), meanwhile, positions their ideas in the larger context of global decolonial studies, explaining, '[t]here is a tradition where decolonization refers specifically to knowledge, and this tradition comes largely out of Latin America and parts of Africa. While those theories and activisms are crucial to where they come from, so, too, is a definition of colonialism that gives up no ground, here in occupied territory' (p. 26). Instead of decolonial, then, Liboiron prefers to use the term 'anticolonial' to describe their scholarship, which they explain does not 'reproduce settler and colonial entitlement to Land and Indigenous cultures, concepts, knowledges (including Traditional Knowledge), and lifeworlds' (p. 27).

As a settler scholar, who lives and works on land stolen from the Dena of the lower Tanana River—first by Russia and then by the United States—I wish to honour the definition of decolonisation advanced by Tuck and Yang and endorsed by subsequent Indigenous scholars and activists. Like Liboiron, I prefer to use anticolonial 'to describe the diversity of work, positionalities, and obligations that let us "stand with" one another as we pursue good land relations, broadly defined' (p. 27). Note that my use of this term is not meant to downplay or dismiss the importance of Land Back; rather, it is intended to reserve space—and the term decolonial—for that work. It is also meant to differentiate between the practical, material work of accomplishing repatriation and the theoretical, immaterial work of criticising coloniality, both of which are crucially important projects.

Another reason why I prefer the term 'anticolonial' is because Melville was writing in the nineteenth century when many settler colonial regimes in North and South America were still

firmly entrenched. Over the course of his career, Melville denounced nineteenth-century American attitudes toward Indigenous peoples, mostly notably in *The Confidence Man* (1857) in the chapter satirically entitled 'Containing the metaphysics of Indian-hating, according to the views of one evidently not so prepossessed as Rousseau in favor of the savages' (p. 144). He also advanced sharp criticisms of American imperialism and extractivism in *Moby-Dick* (1851) in his comments on Nantucket whalers and their insatiable desire to claim the 'watery world' as their own (p. 64). Melville never advocated for the repatriation of Indigenous lands, though, so he was not a decolonial thinker in that sense of the term. Given these contextual, historical, and theoretical details, I believe that the phrase anticolonial ecoGothic better describes 'Benito Cereno' and its commentary on the impact of colonialism and coloniality on the lives of human and more-than-human organisms.

Reconsidering the Dreaded Comparison

Before turning my attention to 'Benito Cereno', I want to address the fraught history of scholarship that juxtaposes the exploitation, oppression, and suffering of human and more-than-human animals. Marjorie Spiegel's *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* represents one of the first such texts. First published in 1988 and reprinted in 1996 (with a forward by Alice Walker), this provocative book draws various examples from Euro-American history as a means of highlighting the similarities between racism and speciesism. In her first chapter, Spiegel explains that she does not mean to 'oversimplify matters' or 'imply that the oppressions experienced by blacks and animals have taken *identical* forms' (p. 27, italics in original). Nevertheless, she argues that these 'systems of oppression' share certain 'commonalities' because 'they are built around the same basic relationship—that between oppressor and oppressed' (p. 28). A bit later in the book, she adopts a less conciliatory and more incendiary tone, proclaiming that 'comparing the suffering of animals to that of Blacks (or any other oppressed group) is offensive only to the speciesist', who has 'unquestioningly accepted the biased worldview presented by the masters' (p. 30).

Perhaps not surprisingly, *The Dreaded Comparison* has been regarded as troublesome for the way in which it equates the oppression of human and more-than-human animals. For critical

theorist Che Gossett (2015), this analogy is problematic because activists and scholars tend to regard liberation movements as teleological, such that 'first slavery was abolished and now forms of animal captivity must be, too'. In her discussion of this issue, Bénédicte Boisseron (2018) provides insightful historical context, explaining that for many Black Americans the 'fear of racial concerns being overshadowed by the animal reaches back to the founding of modern America and is symptomatic of a historical malaise surrounding the question of value of life in our society' (p. 32). While these cautions and criticisms are important to mark, I want to highlight the claims proposed by Claire Jean King in *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (2015). According to her, activists need not 'choose between the interests and needs of racialized humans and the interests and needs of nonhuman animals' because 'the ultimate fates of these two groups of beings are irretrievably caught up together' (p. 283). Simply put, liberation is a both/and—not an either/or—proposition for human and more-than-human animals.

Other scholars address this issue through the lens of postcolonial, decolonial, and anticolonial theory. Philip Armstrong (2002) and Juno Salazar Parreñas (2018) concede that human-animal comparisons might seem insulting at first glance. Armstrong attempts to diffuse some of the controversy by arguing that 'ideas of an absolute difference between the human and the animal (and the superiority of the former over the latter) owe a great deal to the colonial legacies of European modernity' (p. 414). Adopting a similar claim, Parreñas contends, 'the insult of animality and the deprivation of humanity both depend on a colonial hierarchy in which some people are treated as less human than others' (p. 24). She goes on to posit that 'Rejecting colonialism also requires rejecting the refusal to acknowledge the possibility of shared experiences with nonhuman others' (p. 24). For Parreñas, this last point is a crucially important one, because as she later concludes, 'our existence on this planet is shaped by relations with others, including and especially nonhumans' (p. 30).

Of all these authors, Billy-Ray Belcourt—in his essay 'Animal Bodies, Colonial Subjects: (Re)Locating Animality in Decolonial Thought' (2015)—offers the most complex and nuanced analysis of settler colonialism and its impacts on human and more-than-human organisms. Initially, he observes that Tuck and Yang's essay 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor' does not address the various ways in which settler colonialism exploits more-than-human animals. Then,

he argues that 'the animal body' represents '*the* fleshy material(ity) against and through which settler colonialism is materialized' (p. 3). According to Belcourt:

> 'It is thus my contention that animal domestication, speciesism, and other modern human-animal interactions are only possible because of and through the historic and ongoing erasure of Indigenous bodies and the emptying of Indigenous lands for settler-colonial expansion. For that reason, we cannot address animal oppression or talk about animal liberation without naming settler colonialism and white supremacy as political mechanisms that require the simultaneous exploitation or destruction of animal and Indigenous bodies' (p. 3).

Here, Belcourt refers to the settler colonial practice—employed by Americans throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—of exterminating Indigenous peoples and wild animals from the land so that they could replace them with domesticated animals. His point is an important and insightful one: settler colonialism treats some populations of human *and* more-than-human organisms in the same manner, as necessarily expendable. It is precisely this problem that 'Benito Cereno' highlights in its treatment of spectral seals and enslaved Africans.

'Benito Cereno' and the Anticolonial EcoGothic

Though they did not necessarily categorise it as Gothic, nineteenth-century readers of Herman Melville's *The Piazza Tales* (1856) tended to describe its stories—'The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles', 'Bartleby, the Scrivener', and indeed 'Benito Cereno'—as strangely unsettling. Evidence from various antebellum periodicals indicates that reviewers regarded the latter as a particularly bizarre and unnerving tale. *The Criterion* called 'Benito Cereno' 'a thrilling, weird-like narrative, which, read at midnight, gives an uncomfortable feeling to a powerful imagination' (Higgins & Parker, 1995: p. 472). The *Sun* called the story 'strangely conceived', and the *Knickerbocker* described it as 'painfully interesting' (Ibid: pp. 478-482). Other periodicals noted the tale's 'creeping horror', its 'due gravity', and its 'singular truthfulness' (Ibid: pp. 473-475). As these reviews indicate, what made 'Benito Cereno' so striking to early readers was its Gothic overtones,

its elaboration of shadowy mysteries about dark deeds committed by desperate men in claustrophobic spaces.

Scholars, too, have long regarded 'Benito Cereno' as one of Melville's more Gothic texts, because it contains so many tropes essential to the genre. In his analysis of the historical elements of the tale, Harold Scudder (1928) comments that Melville transforms Delano's travel narrative into a 'Gothic masterpiece' (p. 529). Turning his attention to the complex array of symbols embedded in the text, Max Putzel (1962) argues that Melville's story represents much more than a 'Gothic horror tale in a nautical setting' (p. 191). More recent interpretations of 'Benito Cereno' and its Gothic elements tend to focus less on form and aesthetics and more on content and theme, attempting to unpack the story's commentary on race, slavery, colonialism, and transnationalism.[1]

While Gothic interpretations of 'Benito Cereno' are legion, ecological readings are markedly less so. In his essay 'The Cod and the Whale: Melville in the Time of Extinction' (2017), John Levi Barnard describes some aspects of the sealing industry and Delano's involvement with it. Though he does not engage in extended analysis of 'Benito Cereno', he highlights the fact that the New England sailors arm themselves against the Africans with sealing knives, which he suggests represent 'not exactly the weapons of empire but the tools of its economy' (p. 861). Tom Nurmi provides a more extended analysis of the environmental aspects of 'Benito Cereno' in his book *Magnificent Decay: Melville and Ecology* (2020). Linking social and ecological objectification, he contends that the story is 'about racial revolt, certainly, but it is portrayed in terms of an ecological disaster that is indescribable *without* the racial dimension' (p. 180, italics in original). For him, the story furnishes evidence for the conclusion that 'the economies that depend on cycles of extraction and slavery inevitably generate cycles of revolution and revenge that only more firmly entrench the systems as they seek to protect themselves against further threats and risks' (pp. 179-180). Though these interpretations of the ecological aspects of 'Benito Cereno' are insightful, neither of them addresses their presence in an otherwise Gothic tale of enslavement,

[1] See Keith Cartwright's *Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables, and Gothic Tales* (2002), Fred Botting's *Gothic* (2014), Julia Mix Barrington's 'Phantom Bark: The Chronotope of the Ghost Ship in the Atlantic World' (2017), Colleen Tripp's 'Beyond the Black Atlantic: Pacific Rebellions and the Gothic in Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno"' (2017), and Jonathan Crimmins' 'Gothicism' (2018).

revolt, and captivity. I contend that examining the story through the lens of the ecoGothic provides additional insight into its environmentalist themes and helps to explain why the text is so saturated with references to the sealing industry.

As I mentioned earlier, no actual seals appear in 'Benito Cereno'. Since he is sailing back to New England after selling all of his pelts in Canton, China (now Guangzhou), Captain Delano never takes his men hunting. Instead, they involve themselves with the mystery surrounding Benito Cereno, the *San Dominick*, and its cargo of enslaved human beings. This detail might seem to render the story more anthropocentric—concerned with human matters—than not. However, I want to suggest that 'Benito Cereno' combines its condemnations of the slave trade with criticisms of the sealing industry, highlighing the cruel, exploitative extractivism inherent in both. To launch these criticisms, Melville employs what I call the anticolonial ecoGothic mode. As I argue, the tale is thoroughly haunted by seals—seal bodies and seal skins—and the violence inherent in the sealing industry.

According to historian Briton Cooper Busch (1985), the New England sealing trade peaked between the years 1783 and 1812. Owners dispatched ships from towns in Connecticut—New London, New Haven, and Stonington, primarily—and sent them to the Southern Hemisphere to search for unexploited seal populations off the remote, rocky coastlines of South America. Though it was lucrative, it was never as prosperous or as enduring as its more famous sister trade, the whale fishery. For the most part, sealers hunted their quarry—fur seals for their skins and elephant seals for their oil—on land, when they hauled out of the water in large numbers during their breeding seasons. As Busch explains, these animals were over-exploited because sealers tried 'to exterminate every last adult and pup for its skin on the assumption—accurate enough—that otherwise another sealer would perform the act' (p. 11). Marine biologist and conservationist Callum Roberts (2007) refers to the situation as an example of the 'tragedy of the commons' in which people exploit resources for their own selfish ends without considering sustainability (p. 106). Scarcity became an issue as early as 1802 and rendered the branch of the industry operating in the South Pacific and Southern Oceans unprofitable by 1812. All told, Busch estimates that they killed roughly 5,200,000 seals of various species (p. 36). Many populations could not recover from the widespread slaughter.

Not insignificantly, Busch describes the sealing industry as a 'grim and dangerous business', which had difficulty attracting and keeping skilled labourers (p. 14). Neither fur seals nor elephant seals were naturally dextrous on land, so they were relatively easy to slaughter in large numbers. As historian Greg Grandin explains, some sealers sympathised with their prey, but most regarded killing them as 'easy sport, a game that bred cruelty and contempt' toward the animals (p. 134). While they tended to use lances for elephant seals, they employed other methods for fur seals. According to Delano,

> 'The method practiced to take them was, to get between them and the water, and make a lane of men, two abreast, forming three or four couples, and then drive the seal through this lane; each man furnished with a club, between five and six feet long; and as they passed, he knocked down such of them as he chose, which are commonly the half-grown, or what are called young seals. This is easily done, as a very small blow on the nose effects it. When stunned, knives are taken to cut and rip them down on the breast, from under jaw to the tail, giving a stab in the breast that will kill them' (p. 306).

Note the dispassionate tone of the passage. Accustomed to the work and desensitised to the suffering, Delano simply describes the process. He goes on to observe that after killing the seals, the men were responsible for skinning the carcasses, drying the pelts, and hauling the hides to the ship for storage. Some men were so adept at their jobs that they could process sixty seals in an hour. Much of this brutal, toilsome labour occurred under difficult conditions on rugged, isolated islands off the coast of Chile. Competition was steep—Delano observes fourteen ships working the same island—so sealers often deposited small groups of men on islands, where they lived in rough camps waiting for seals to arrive. According to Grandin, these 'away teams' were 'given little instruction and few provisions' (p. 143). Eking out a bare existence until their quarry arrived, they survived by scavenging local shorebirds, shellfish, and seaweed.

Though Busch provides a comprehensive history of the early American seal fishery, he does not link its operations to settler colonialism. Instead, he opts for statistical analysis of the

trade and objective descriptions of its labour force and their hunting methods. Grandin comments on this issue, however, noting that

> 'It [the sealing industry] called to mind not industrial democracy but the isolation and violence of conquest, settler colonialism, and warfare, men brutally exploiting one another and nature, not for something elemental and needed by all like light and fire but for the raw material of conspicuous consumption. Sealers seized territory, fought one another to keep it, and pulled out what wealth they could as fast as they could, before abandoning their claims empty and wasted' (p. 142).

Inured to extractivism—and treating more-than-human animal life as a resource—sealers were also capable of treating human beings in the same fashion. In other words, it was no coincidence that Delano and his crew responded to the African revolutionaries aboard Cereno's ship as disposable commodities. It was also no coincidence that they responded with such violence. According to their logic, commodities were not supposed to object to being treated as such. These are facts that Melville highlights—albeit subtly—throughout 'Benito Cereno', a text haunted by the spectre of extractive capitalism and the seals slaughtered in the name of it.

As several scholars have noted, early American literature is haunted by the spectres of Indigenous and enslaved peoples. In *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (2000), Renée Berglund argues, 'Native American ghosts function both as representations of national guilt and as triumphant agents of Americanization' (p. 4). Meanwhile, Teresa Goddu (1997) claims that 'the gothic haunts America's national narratives with the horrors of history—specifically, the specter of slavery' (p. 30). For some reason, more-than-human ghosts are not as prevalent in the scholarship. However, I would add that early American literature is also haunted by the ghosts of the more-than-human organisms slaughtered in the name of colonialist expansion and resource extraction: in the case of 'Benito Cereno', the seals.

My understanding of more-than-human ghosts and hauntings has been influenced by Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008). In that book, she argues that haunting 'registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in

the past or the present' (p. xvi). It 'is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life' (p. xvi). For Gordon, '[h]aunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way […] we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present' (p. xvi). While they might seem supernatural, ghosts represent cultural and historical realities, namely the repressed wrongs of the past and present.

In their essay, 'A Glossary of Haunting' (2013), Eve Tuck and C. Ree expand upon Gordon's ideas, adding a settler colonial dimension to them. For them, '[s]ettler colonialism is the management of those who have been made killable, once and future ghosts—those that had been destroyed, but also those that are generated in every generation' (p. 642). They continue in this vein, writing, '[s]ettler horror, then, comes about as part of this management, of the anxiety, the looming but never arriving guilt, the impossibility of forgiveness, the inescapability of retribution' (p. 642). Insofar as my analysis of 'Benito Cereno' is concerned, I want to add a more-than-human dimension to these remarks. After all, haunting can involve environmental violence as well as social violence. It can also involve more-than-human organisms who have been 'made killable' under settler colonialism. Together, these comments help to provide a better understanding of the pinniped hauntings that permeate 'Benito Cereno'.

From the very beginning, Melville identifies Delano's vessel—the *Bachelor's Delight*—not by name but by occupation. In the very first sentence of the tale, he says, '[i]n the year 1799, Captain Amasa Delano, of Duxbury, in Massachusetts, commanding a large sealer and general trader, lay at anchor, with a valuable cargo, in the harbor of St. Maria—a small, desert, uninhabited island toward the southern proximity of the long coast of Chili' (p. 46). Not insignficantly, similar sealing references permeate the remainder of the opening paragraphs. When Cereno's vessel—the *San Dominick*—first appears, it enters the harbour without hoisting a flag, a mysterious 'stranger' to the 'sealer' (p. 47). Shortly, thereafter, Melville explains that Delano dispatched a 'fishing-party of the seamen' to 'some detached rocks out of sight from the sealer' (p. 47).

While these references might seem innocuous, they serve to establish the identity of Delano's ship and invoke the presence of the seals. What really transforms these pinnipeds into

spectres, though, is the ghostly, Gothic imagery interwoven into these paragraphs. Looking out into the harbour, as the foreign ship approaches, Delano surveys a strange seascape:

> 'The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come' (p. 46).

Here, I want to highlight the spooky, atmospheric imagery of the leaden grey sea, sky, and fog. Since they seamlessly blend into the mist, the flocks of resident seabirds possess definite spectral qualities. Taken together, these Gothic details build throughout the paragraph and culminate in the ominous concluding remarks predicting 'shadows to come'. Just one paragraph later, they are amplified by the narrator's observation about the 'lawlessness and loneliness of the spot' (p. 47). Clearly, this island is a haunted place, one that is frequented by seals, most of whom have already been slaughtered by brutally violent men hunting their hides for profit.

Though not with the frequency of those in the opening paragraphs, references to sealers and sealing permeate the remainder of the story. After boarding the *San Dominick*, Delano recognises that the persons aboard are suffering from dehydration and starvation, and he orders his sailors to 'return to the sealer' for provisions (p. 51). As he does so, he marks the lack of discipline aboard Cereno's ship, and he reflects upon the atmosphere aboard his own vessel, 'the quiet orderliness of the sealer's comfortable family of a crew' (p. 54). Some time later, the men from the *Bachelor's Delight* arrive at the *San Dominick* with their cargo of food and water, delayed by an 'unexpected detention at the sealer's side' (p. 70). When the changing winds afford an opportunity to do so, Delano sends his 'boat back to the sealer, with orders for all the hands that could be spared immediately to set about rafting casks to the watering-place and filling them' (p. 80). Throughout the remainder of the first half of the narrative, the references to the 'sealer' proliferate, as the captain sends his whaleboat back and forth between his ship and Cereno's. All

told, Delano's ship is referred to by name only four times in the text, but it is described as 'a sealer' or 'the sealer' at least fourteen times.

I noted earlier that one of the changes that Melville makes in his adaption of Delano's narrative is the shift from the first- to the third-person point of view—limited omniscient, to be more specific—which provides insight into the captain's thoughts. This strategy serves to characterise Delano as obtuse, patronising, and ignorant. Tellingly, throughout the text, he refers to the African freedom fighters using animal similes and metaphors. These can be separated into multiple categories. Toward the very beginning of the story, Delano regards Babo as a 'shepherd's dog' (p. 51). Meanwhile, he calls Atufal 'mulish mutineer' and 'bull of the Nile' (pp. 62, 78). He refers to other Africans as 'black sheep' (p. 60). In these passages, he indicates that he thinks of the formerly enslaved revolutionaries as harmless, domesticated animals, useful to humans for their capacity to herd sheep and pull ploughs.

As he spends more time aboard ship, Delano witnesses the interactions among Black parents and their children, and he employs more wild animal imagery. Charmed by one woman in particular, he compares her to 'a doe in the shade of a woodland rock' (p. 73). Infatuated with his animalised perception of her, Delano extends the metaphor, adding, '[s]prawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, crosswise with its dam's; its hands, like two paws, clambering upon her; its mouth and nose ineffectually rooting to get at the mark' (p. 73). In his more general remarks, he abruptly shifts species, characterising the African women aboard ship as '[u]nsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves' (p. 73). Later, he sees an overturned longboat, which he describes in more derogatory terms as 'a subterraneous sort of den for family groups of the blacks, mostly women and small children; who, squatting on old mats below, or perched above in the dark dome, on the elevated seats, were descried, some distance within, like a social circle of bats, sheltering in some friendly cave' (p. 81).

In addition to comparing individuals and families to more-than-human animals, Delano also makes some generalisations about racialised categories of human beings. Throughout the story, he entertains suspicions about the Spanish sailors, because of their reputation for piracy and

his vulnerable position. Ultimately, he dismisses his fears, thinking, '[b]esides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes?' (p. 75). Here, he uses the language of natural history to describe racialised groups of human beings. This comment is not particularly surprising. After all, as Maneesha Deckha (2018) observes, 'the concepts of race, culture, gender, and species in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were deeply intertwined and generative of each other' (p. 283). Shortly thereafter, though, the narrator attempts to better describe the captain's attitude toward the Blacks aboard Cereno's ship. Thus, he explains that 'Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs' (p. 84). Here, he compares an entire group of people to another domesticated animal, in this case a popular type of dog bred to rescue sailors who had fallen overboard from their ships.

In his analysis of this accumulated animal imagery, Nurmi characterises it as 'performative ecology' or 'the definitive form of species-difference: the ability to rehearse the point of view of another species, where the relation to another transcends race, gender, and class and moves to an avant-garde inhabitation of trans-species distinctions' (p. 179). Although this claim has merit, I want to suggest this animal imagery showcases the impact of working in the sealing industry upon Delano's view of humanity. Delano is already predisposed to seeing more-than-human animals as commodities. Seals are not living beings who possess remarkable emotional and cognitive abilities, not to mention agency and sentience. Rather, they exist to be slaughtered, transformed, and extracted as saleable goods, worth a good deal of money on the world market. For Delano, Africans are the same as seals. This point provides evidence for Jason Moore's (2016) claim that:

> '[C]apitalism was built on excluding most *humans* from Humanity—indigenous people, enslaved Africans, nearly all women, and even many white-skinned men (Slavs, Jews, the Irish). From the perspective of imperial administrators, merchants, planters, and *conquistadores*, these humans were not Human at all. They were regarded as part of Nature, along with trees and soils and rivers—and treated accordingly' (p. 79).

For Delano, all of these so-called commodities exist to be exploited for their labour power and saleable potential, which served to transform the natural resources of the Atlantic and Pacific World into wealth for European and American governments.

Significantly, the references to sealing do not just include descriptions of the *Bachelor's Delight*. In one of his conversations with Cereno, Delano reveals that his vessel exchanged its sealskins in Canton and is now en route to Duxbury with a cargo of tea, silk, and silver. Pointedly, he informs Cereno that his men are armed 'with a small stock of muskets, sealing-spears, and cutlasses' (p. 66). In so doing, he transforms the tools of the sealing trade into weapons that can be used against human beings, thereby foreshadowing the violent encounter between the American seamen and the freedom fighters aboard the *San Dominick*.

At this point, it is important to note that when Delano sends his men to recapture the *San Dominick* from Atufal and the other African revolutionaries, he arms them with the tools of the sealing trade: 'Sealing-spears and cutlasses crossed hatchets and hand-spikes' (p. 102). The violence of their assault is remarkable, given that they were not on the *San Dominick* so they did not suffer in the same way as the Spanish sailors. Still, just the threat of such a power reversal prompts extreme violence:

> 'For a time, the attack wavered; the negroes wedging themselves to beat it back; the half-repelled sailors, as yet unable to gain a footing, fighting as troopers in the saddle, one leg sideways flung over the bulwarks, and one without, plying their cutlasses like carters' whips. But in vain. They were almost overborne, when, rallying themselves into a squad as one man, with a huzza, they sprang inboard, where, entangled, they involuntarily separated again. For a few breaths' space, there was a vague, muffled, inner sound, as of submerged sword-fish rushing hither and thither through shoals of black-fish. Soon, in a reunited band, and joined by the Spanish seamen, the whites came to the surface, irresistibly driving the negroes toward the stern. But a barricade of casks and sacks, from side to side, had been thrown up by the main-mast. Here the negroes faced about, and though scorning peace or truce, yet fain would have had respite. But, without pause, overleaping the

> barrier, the unflagging sailors again closed. Exhausted, the blacks now fought in despair. Their red tongues lolled, wolf-like, from their black mouths. But the pale sailors' teeth were set; not a word was spoken; and, in five minutes more, the ship was won' (p. 102).

Told from the perspective of the American sailors, this passage is rife with racist violence and imagery. Note the transformation of the Africans into sword-fish brutally and indiscriminately attacking pilot whales. The wolf imagery is also striking, for it serves to turn the revolutionaries into one of the most loathed and despised species of more-than-human animal in Europe and the Americas.

Perhaps because they regard the Africans as more-than-human animals, the sailors treat them as such. Significantly, they continue to enact violence—in the form of torture—on the Black men and women whom they have subdued and captured:

> 'Nearly a score of the negroes were killed. Exclusive of those by the balls, many were mangled; their wounds—mostly inflicted by the long-edged sealing-spears, resembling those shaven ones of the English at Preston Pans, made by the poled scythes of the Highlanders. On the other side, none were killed, though several were wounded; some severely, including the mate. The surviving negroes were temporarily secured, and the ship, towed back into the harbor at midnight, once more lay anchored' (p. 102).

In this quotation, the sentence in which the men use their sealing spears to inflict torture upon their charges is particularly important to mark. They treat these human beings in the exact same manner as the seals which they slaughter in order to fill their ship with skins for the Chinese market. Note that this horrendous event is foreshadowed in an earlier incident that occurs aboard the *San Dominick.* While talking to Cereno about Atufal, the Spanish captain flinches, prompting Delano to characterise him as 'one flayed alive' and wonder 'where may one touch him without causing a shrink' (p. 93). Though he clearly uses the word 'flayed' metaphorically, Delano employs the violent language of the sealing trade and applies it to a human being.

All told, 'Benito Cereno' provides important and compelling evidence for Billy-Ray Belcourt's claim that settler colonialism generates

> 'a racial hierarchy that rips indigeneity and blackness from the terrain of the human and then consigns us into the position of the killable. That is, Black and Indigenous peoples are dehumanized and repeatedly inscribed with an animal status—which is always a speciesist rendering of animality as injurious. There is a dual function to this: (1) Black and Indigenous peoples are refused the sovereignty that humanness motors and thus made to weather the terror of a life lived in the status of non-being; and (2) animality is made into a loose signifier, a fungible concept, that invites violence of all sorts' (p. 22).

It is precisely this ongoing and enduring violence that Delano and Cereno wilfully ignore at the very end of the story in their discussion of morality and humanity. When Delano wonders why Cereno remains so melancholy and asks, 'what has cast such a shadow upon you?', Cereno replies 'The negro' (p. 116). He forgets to add, and the seal.

BIOGRAPHY

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‘It was the House that Disfigured the Land’: Subverting the Eurocentric EcoGothic in Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Mexican Gothic* (2020)

Stephanie Schoellman

ABSTRACT

In *Mexican Gothic* (2020), as the title of her book suggests, Silvia Moreno-Garcia intentionally utilises the Gothic mode to critique imperial and colonial presences in 1950s Mexico. Her Latina heroine Noemí navigates the halls of High Place, an isolated Victorian mansion in the mountains near El Triunfo, where the mysterious British Doyle family has resided for generations and where her cousin is experiencing a distressing psychosis. Noemí discovers that High Place, complete with a cemetery made from transplanted European earth, has been consumed by the Gloom, a symbiotic environment grown between the fungi and the Doyle family through which the patriarch’s life is extended. Setting is crucial, not only to the story’s themes, but to Moreno-Garcia’s decolonial methodologies. Land and its resources are targets of imperial and colonial activity in both reality and in this fiction; I argue that *Mexican Gothic* is, consequently, an important study of ecoGothic aesthetic in action. Moreno-Garcia critically shifts the source of the horror: the misuse of the mycology, which in the novel is stolen and exploited Indigenous knowledge, coupled with eugenics dogma, thus demonstrating how colonised ideologies malign nature. Through Noemí’s gaze, the text poignantly differentiates between the natural world and High Place’s unnatural infringement upon it—‘It was the house that disfigured the land’ (p. 60). By actuating mestiza consciousness and affective ecocritical counterstories, *Mexican Gothic* purposefully disturbs the characters and readers alike, unsettling what should have never been settled.

> 'Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider,
> [the land] is recoverable at first only through the imagination.
> Now if there is anything that radically distinguishes
> the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of
> the geographical in it. Imperialism after all is an act
> of geographical violence […]. For the native,
> the […] concrete geographical identity must thereafter
> be searched for and somehow restored'.
>
> —Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism,* 1994: p. 225

Positionality Prologue and Land Acknowledgement Statement: As a White woman born and raised near San Antonio, Texas—where fossils of 'mammoths, mastodons, […] and an odd, rhino-looking species belong to a family called Toxodontidae' (Gibbons, 2017) lie buried, which was once Mexico, which was once where Payaya of the Tāp Pīlam Coahuiltecan Nation resided, which was once part of the mythic Aztlan—my place as a scholar in this space and moment is to synthesise and amplify scholars and artists of colour, recognising my limits as a settler and outsider, but also my responsibilities to act as a citizen of the planet, Gothic enthusiast, and accomplice to social justice causes.

In a *Vox* interview (2020) about her novel *Mexican Gothic* (2020), Silvia Moreno-Garcia declared, 'White supremacy is like a horrible […] cult, […] a dangerous kind of place […]. And if you get into it, you really start losing touch with reality' (Grady). She not only aptly compares White supremacy to a cult,[1] a space where ideologies manifest in tactile form and where its denizens are often unaware that they are even in a high control group, but she further specifies the type of cult White supremacy is: it is a 'suicidal cult', she asserts, that does not just harm people of colour, but all who are enmeshed in its constricting coils, as symbolised so fittingly in the novel with the

[1] The term *cult* is loaded and controversial; I do not use it here clinically, but rather connotatively as an accepted pejorative concept that denotes a hierarchical, insular social system where many are controlled by few through ac*cult*uration and community policing.

reoccurring image of the ouroboros. Cults, indeed, internally perpetuate themselves in self-cannibalistic fashion through mind-numbing echo chambers, authoritarian regimes discouraging or violently disallowing dissent, and, whether religious or secular, devout fervour, since cults offer a stalwart sense of identity, belonging, and stability. Moreover, cults have a deeply insidious nature, slowly and sinuously intertwining themselves with the everday.

Many testimonies from cult fugitives state that they did not know they were in a cult until someone informed them.[2] Whether born into or having joined the cult, they normalised its rules and rituals. Thus, the cult created an ecology, in this sense, being the relationship between space and subjectivity. This parasitic and cannibalistic space, one that hosts its hosts, becomes familiar, and brains resist the unfamiliar. While the familiar may be toxic, the neural pathways conform, akin for instance with the extremophile plants that adapt to harsh environments, and become accustomed to certain chemical stimulus, thirsting for their poison (LePera, 2021). If cults were a biology, they would be invasive, mutating their environments and hosts in order for them to thrive, all while making their life source believe that the relationship is mutually symbiotic.

Lest we flatter ourselves that we could never be 'brainwashed',[3] let us remind ourselves that one cannot spell *culture* without *cult*. Furthering this point is the extent to which cultural cognition[4]—the social theory explicating the ways in which culture forms brains and informs all interpretations of reality—determines private identities and public behaviours (Rachlinski, 2021: p. 278). As such, the psychosomatic degree of culture's influence on perceptions of Self, Other, and the geographies the two inhabit cannot be accentuated enough. American geogrpahies[5] are indeed segregated, renamed, and thereby possessed by Eurocentric imaginations, cerebrums cultivated by capitalism and settler colonialism and committed to the idea that they were/are superior—righteously, fraternally, and genetically. Inevitably, these ideologies are stories, self-

[2] Such as the recent HBO documentary, *The Vow* (2020), about the secular racketeering business cult NXIVM.

[3] While the brainwashing characteristic of cults is under debate, the point I am making here is that there is a normalisation process that cults—and culture at large—utilise in order to lullaby their disciples into unquestioning automation.

[4] Yale law professor Dan Kahan's term.

[5] The American landscape includes both American continents that served as host to parasitic colonial powers and populations who continue to suffer the effects of invasive imperial ideologies.

soothing fantasies for the main (White) character, and horror stories for the Othered. Moreover, Edward Said (1994) recognised the role that stories play in creating and maintaining culture:

> 'Narrative is crucial […] my basic point being that stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves are narrations' (p. xii-xiii).

Said's observation begs the question: How does one resist a White supremacist dominant discourse that is systemic and internalised, coercively persuading[6] and grooming[7] a caste that labels and sorts both humanity and nature accordingly—into categories for compost or desirables for consumption? In a *Fangoria* interview (2021), Moreno-Garcia postulates one possible answer: through the Gothic mode, since, as she states, 'Gothic is a […] space where things can change'.

As the title *Mexican Gothic* suggests, Moreno-Garcia intentionally utilises the Gothic to poignantly critique its Eurocentric topos. I argue that one of the most effective methodologies she uses to do this decolonial revisioning is through the setting, specifically the land, the house, and the mushrooms, making her work an important study of the ecoGothic. These natural elements are made unnatural due to colonised ideologies that have maligned them, endowing the narrative with an explained-supernatural plot and critically shifting focus on the source of the horror: *the misuse* of the mycology, for it is stolen and exploited native knowledge fed with eugenics dogma and the Othered bodies of the local miners. Through Gothic-infused descriptions, the text differentiates between the natural world and the imperial and colonial presences' unnatural infringements upon it. The novel is explicit: 'It was the house that disfigured the land' (p. 60). Thus, textual analysis,

[6] This is a term used by some studying New Religious Movements (formerly known as *cults*). Note that 'mind control' is a contentious topic in the American Psychological Association.
[7] This assertion operates under the tenets of Critical Race Theory, namely that racism is socially constructed, systemic, and normalised (Browne, 2019).

mestiza theory, and some informative mycology interludes unveil how the appropriation and reinterpretation of the ecologies and their corresponding ontologies in *Mexican Gothic* exorcise the invader's indwelling of the land, unsettling what should never have been settled.

Preludes to Present: Towards an Affective Counterstory to Eurocentric Gothic and Environmental Studies

When teaching *Mexican Gothic* to my undergraduates, I use an informal but apt term: the *creep out* factor. This term's colloquialism[8] resonates with my young scholars, and with me as a child of the '80s, but its etymology also captures several key characteristics of how the decolonial Gothic achieves its ends. *Creep* is an Old English verb, *crēopan,* used to describe the peculiar movement of limbless or short-limbed creatures—creatures that evolutionarily and narratively provoke dread, such as serpents and bugs. In the 14th century, the word's meaning expands to include the sensation of one's skin 'swelling or shrinking' due to trepidation or revulsion. In the 18th century, creep became nominalised as 'the creepings' in medical journals, used to describe formication, the feeling of insects scurrying on one's skin: again, not overly positive stimulus. The 19th century compounded *creepy-crawly*, describing 'an unpleasant worm, insect, or spider', targeting invertebrates' wriggling or skittering and the effect that movement has on humans, largely due to them being definitely Other on the alterity spectrum. The late 1800s also applied *creep* to people of suspicious character, and 'creep joints' renowned for their unsavory reputation. Subsequently, 'the creeps' in the 20th century became synonymous with 'feelings of unease, horror, disgust, or fear', and the 1980s gifted the lexicon with the 'creep out' phrase which often leads to a 'freak out' (Creep).[9]

Suffice it to say, the word from its predicate to its current usage carries expressly derogatory implications, one to which my undergraduates are acculturated. Hence, I ask them, as

[8] Additionally, I feel vindicated since Stephen King uses similar unpretentious language in *Danse Macabre* (1980) when he famously described the Three Types of Terror: The Gross-Out, The Horror, and Terror.

[9] Other contemporary renditions include CREEP being used as an acronym by journalists to criticise the government during Watergate describing the Committee to Re-elect the President (the committee preferred CRP) (Creep). 'Function creep' is perhaps the most recent technical application of the word, defining the phenomenon of how 'a system or technology [expands] beyond its original purposes', which is used specifically for its longstanding negative association (Koops, 2021).

they read the novel, to pay attention to what they feel, meta-reflecting on how feeling 'creeped out' embodies the nexus of aesthetics and flesh; how emotional reactions are not universal or completely innate but can still be informative about our own filters and conditioning; and how this novel's unique positionality—set in 1950s Mexico, published in 2020, and written by a 'Mexican by birth, Canadian by inclination', according to her author website (*SilviaMoreno-Garcia.com*)—situates it to commentate presently on the past, in order to, as Patricia Stuelke (2022) notes, 'make sense of ongoing yet evolving settler colonial capitalism and imperial formations in the Americas, as well as to imagine popular resistance' (p. 641). Indeed, *Mexican Gothic*'s colonial-haunted settings utilise hair-raising, spine-tingling, blood-curdling, pallor-inducing neuroaesthetics[10]—a primary narrative strategy in the Gothic tradition. Significantly, though, the source of this creep out is not traditional.

Traditionally, the Gothic—known as the 'language of panic' (Malchow, 1996: p. 4), the literature of excess (Botting, 2013), and part of the school of 'terroristic fiction' (Crawford, 2018: p. 196)—has been devised to inflict strong, complicated emotions. Some originators of the genre did so for sales; others saw in the Gothic a moralising and transformative opportunity,[11] whether through terror or horror. Garland D. Beasley's (2019) analysis of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolfo* (1794) suggests that '*Udolpho*, with its lush landscape descriptions, is almost an aesthetic treatise in its own right' (p. 180), wherein Radcliffe personifies Edmund Burke's sublime and William Gilpin's picturesque aesthetic philosophies, the sublime in human-made spaces and the picturesque in natural ones, in order to contrast and perhaps even correct the ways in which the readers view nature. As Beasley notes, the argument inherent in the aesthetics was one of 'competing worldviews between the human and the nonhuman world' (p. 178). Two key lessons to note are how nature is framed in the imaginary and how Radcliffe accomplishes this feat: the depictions of setting imply through significant, concrete detail and sensory imagery[12] and allow

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[10]'Neuroaesthetics refers to a subfield of cognitive neuroscience concerned with understanding the neural and behavioural basis of aesthetic experiences' (Vessel, 2017: p. 661). Here I use the term as a writing craft technique but in relation to this subfield.

[11] Joanna Baillie, for example, a popular Scottish poet and Gothic dramatist during the 19th century, used the Gothic to warn her audience to keep their passions in check, and Charles Brocken Brown, an 18th-century American novelist, hoped to horrify his readers against being possessed by righteous rectitude.

[12] Significant, concrete detail and sensory imagery are foundational elements to immerse readers into the narrative world taught in many creative writing texts, but notably the most-taught one currently in MFA Creative Writing Programs across the U.S.: Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (1982/2019).

the reader to infer through visceral immersion an education. Thus, the material and the moral are conflated and felt deeply. While Radcliffe's essay 'On the Supernatural in Poetry' (1826) and *Udolpho* delineate a high-brow and low-brow Gothic, they also acknowledge how, through awe and the awful, the Gothic summons the reader outside themselves by first stirring or disturbing their core. This out-of-body-experience is only possible because of the carnal stimulus—at once intimate and distant—which forces both external and internal reflection. The methodology of seduction or shock or a combination of both is left to the author's style and intent. *Mexican Gothic*'s style and intent is obviously to critique colonial paradigms, transfiguring what is alluring and revolting about the setting through her Latina protagonist's gaze and creeping towards an expanded mestiza consciousness through counterstory.

As demonstrated, in Gothic literature the setting is not just atmospheric; it is actuating, an active agent that impresses upon the inhabitants and readers alike a sense of the affinities between a location and its histories, which are often haunted literally or metaphorically. Deciphering *Mexican Gothic* through a decolonial ecoGothic lens, therefore, accentuates how Moreno-Garcia appropriates, subverts, and redeploys the Gothic setting, decentring the coloniser perspective and shifting the creep-out factor's source from the land and Indigenous populations to the invader of the land and his perverted abuse of its resources and people. This framework functions as an affective ecocritical counterstory. Aja Martinez's (2020) counterstory initiative is a critical race methodology that 'challenges […] "majoritarian" stories or "master narratives" of white privilege' (p. 24). Martinez explicates that counterstory can take any form; it is the voice and view of the story that makes it counter-discourse. In *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018), Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino explain how affect theory posits using emotion to transfer altered attitudes towards the environment from the individual (microscale) to the institutions (macroscale) (p. 3). Affective ecocriticism seeks to fully understand the confluences that manifest a place and how 'place profoundly shapes our emotional lives' (p. 2). Poignantly, in doing so, Bladow and Ladino acknowledge this holistic recognition means at times being an 'environmentalist killjoy', asserting that '"bad feelings" might be useful […] to cultivate in our present environmental moment' (p. 15). The ecoGothic often provides these 'bad feelings', as Andrew Smith and William Hughes in *EcoGothic* (2015) note: 'Nature becomes constituted in the Gothic as a space of crisis' (p. 3). Moreover, Smith and Hughes join Beasley and Radcliffe's

testaments previously mentioned on the transformational quality of the Gothic: that 'the Gothic […] compromises and challenges the way in which the world has been understood' (p. 4). Thus, when natural environments made unnatural by British colonial pursuits are seen through the point of view of a young Mexican woman navigating them, the Eurocentric Gothic tale with which many are familiar is uncannily and purposefully countered.

Mexican Gothic—written by, about, and from a differential mestiza consciousness—provides a counterstory to the traditional Gothic's imperial treatment of ecosystems. The new mestiza, as described by Chicana scholar and writer Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), is an identity (in)formed by the Borderland, '*herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds' (p. 25). Part coloniser and part colonised, this identity derives directly from the land's complicated history; as such, it is not only material or concerning a particular border, but rather inhabits 'where two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy' (p. 21). Mestiza consciousness disrupts binary identities, requiring hybridity to exist and move, 'straddling two cultures […] creating new mythos' (Anzaldúa, 1987: p. 102). While mestiza consciousness has been criticised for claiming 'originally and secondarily indigenous', particularly with the tensions between Indigenous populations and mestizx populations in Mexico, it is the location of our novel's protagonist, Noemí, as a Mexican woman who must navigate 'in a pluralistic mode […] sustain[ing] contradictions' (Anzaldúa, 1987: p. 101) through a landscape that has been repeatedly occupied. Chicana and Chicano Studies Professor Chela Sandoval (2000) proposes differential consciousness, a 'cruising mobility […] weaving between and among oppositional ideologies' (p. 6, p. 57). The goal of this mobility is to create 'affinities inside of difference' that then 'attract, combine, and relate new constituencies into coalitions of resistance' (p. 57, p. 63). The combination of these Latina consciousnesses manifest Research Social Scientist Professor Emma Pérez's *Decolonial Imaginary* (1999) initiative: to 'write Chicanas into histories' (p. xiii) through acts of 'conscious myth-making' (p. 33), a key manoeuvre being, 'assimilation […][as] tactic, an interstitial move for survival' (p. 81). Assimilation and survival are how the decolonial Gothic operate by appropriating imperial discourse and redeploying it from the 'the oppositional and transformative […] diasporic subjectivity['s]' point of view (p. 81). The world centred on and seen

through differential mestiza consciousness ultimately disrupts hegemonic narratives, particularly those of the White coloniser concerning the land.

Natural and Unnatural Ecosystems: The Land, the House, the Gloom, and Biological Horror

Mexican Gothic begins in the 1950s with the protagonist Noemí Taboada—an educated, plucky, socialite—receiving a disturbing letter from her cousin, Catalina Doyle, in hurried handwriting: '*…he is trying to poison me. The house is sick with rot […] I am so afraid of these restless dead, these ghosts, fleshless things […] It's there. In the walls*' (pp. 8-9). Noemí's father bargains that if she handles her cousin's hysterics to avoid scandal, he will let her enroll in National University's anthropology graduate program. These details establish an important narrative framework, namely our Latina protagonist's close third-person perspective and her motivation, which infuses her gaze. Henceforth, the entire novel is derived from her embodied experience of the natural and unnatural ecosystems she encounters, and furthermore, her anthropology knowledge foregrounds and enriches her observations of the tangible and intangible settings. The inciting incident of the letter that begins her journey from the city to a place that, as her father notes, does not even have a telephone also implants eco-language, *rot*, into the imagination as well as suggests the house, at least in Catalina's mind, is not merely a stagnant, human-built environment, but a dynamic, perhaps even sentient, habitation.

As Noemí ventures from Mexico City to El Triunfo, she bears witness to transitions and contrasts in the land outside her train window. A forest, which previously she had only read about in fairytales, contains 'carpeted with colorful wildflowers and cover thickly with pines and oaks', and she finds it 'all very pretty' (p. 15) in its pastoral terrain, but as she approaches El Triunfo and the silver mines, 'deep ravines cut the land, and rugged ridges loomed' (p. 16). The shift from untainted nature to nature tasked with supply and demand is reflected in how it 'kept its riches in the dark, sprouting trees with no fruit' (p. 16), foreshadowing themes of fertility and depletion. This land-based symbolism for reproduction is key since the arch antagonist's driving force is breeding bodies into which his consciousness can be transferred, thwarting and distorting natural cycles of life. Moreover, these implications emphasise the feminine necessity in this particular

predicament but also in the narrative as a whole, adding irony to Noemí's father's initiative: for her to find out what ails Catalina because 'this is a matter that may be best handled by a woman' (p. 7).

The mining town at the foot of the mountain continues the infertility motif but explicitly signals the cause for its 'musty air' and 'withered away' appearance (p. 17). Noemí sees that 'the houses were colorful, yes, but the color was peeling from most of the walls' (p. 17). Exposition reveals why:

> 'Many formerly thriving mining sites that had extracted silver and gold during the Colonia interrupted their operations once the War of Independence broke out. Later on, the English and French were welcomed during the Tranquil Porfiriato, their pocket growing fat with mineral riches. But the Revolution had ended this second boom […] places where the earth would never again spill wealth from its *wombs* [emphasis mine]' (p. 17).

Through Noemí's eyes and an ecoGothic lens, the common Gothic theme of dilapidation and former glory is pointedly rendered in the exhausted town and mines as a direct result of the ravages of the nation's history and the sapping of other empires.

Once picturesque and now melancholic, the Doyle's ancestral residence, known as High Place, reigns above the town on treacherous, winding roads, isolating the mansion in classic Gothic fashion and providing a hierarchical positionality in the geography. Noemí notices that High Place 'looked absolutely Victorian in construction' (p. 20). The Victorian era was the British empire reaching its peak and, as a status symbol, consequently, its architecture the quintessential haunted house associated with faded splendor, a metonymic site for seances conjuring the past (Blakemore, 2018). Even the landscape paintings on display in High Place are not local views, but 'England, most likely, preserved in oils and silver frames' (p. 24). The initial description makes it clear that the house should be impressive and ominous, stalwart England reconstructed amidst a foreign region, but the missing slats and groaning porch lack that gravitas: 'The house loomed over them like a great, quiet gargoyle. It might have been foreboding, evoking images of ghosts and haunted

places, if it had not seemed so tired' (pp. 20-21). It is littered with 'monstrous chandeliers' and tarnished silver (pp. 27-28), and Noemí perceives it in ecological terms as 'the abandoned shell of a snail' (p. 21). The generator and boiler are also faulty, requiring the denizens of this domicile to rely on 'candles and oil lamps' and 'mild baths' (p. 23), attesting to its regression and weariness, but significantly, weathered as a reflection of people within and the systems that built their privileged subjectivities and leeching habits.

The mysterious Anglo family in residence are headed by the racist and xenophobic patriarch, Howard Doyle, who is obsessed with eugenics and harbours strict house rules, enforced by his niece, Florence: no smoking, no Spanish, and no talking at dinner. Fire, the Spanish language, and voices other than his own all threaten Howard's agency, and thus, they are forbidden, although Florence spins the reasons when explaining the decorum to Noemí: 'It is important to maintain a sense of order in one's house, in one's life. It helps you determine your place in the world, where you belong'. (p. 169). In doing so, Florence exemplifies how White women cultivate these ecologies. After a nettling dinner table conversation with Howard citing offensive historical texts,[13] Noemí concludes 'a woman could sicken quickly in a place like this' (p. 34), noting how the attitudes influenced by these manuscripts transfer over to environments, conflating the place and the company and making both unbearable. Indeed, the village healer Marta warns Noemí later, '[t]he problem is that house, that cursed house' (p. 69). Through all these descriptions, the text differentiates between the natural world and High Place's invasive presence upon it: 'It was the house that disfigured the land' (p. 60). Further distinction is made as to the root of the decay with Marta providing found-text knowledge into the family's 'curse', as she calls it. While Marta mixes tinctures for susto, soul-fright (p. 65), for that is what she deems a cure for Catalina living in that house, she relays the family's sordid history, including forced marriages and murder, her point being 'everything they touch rots' (p. 69), *rot* again utilised to describe the family's tragic trajectory in eco-terms.

[13] Including José Vasconcelos' *La raza cósmica* (1925); Charles Davenport's *Race Crossing in Jamaica* (1929); Morris Steggerda's 'Physical Development of Negro-White Hybrids in Jamaica' (1928); Manuel Gamio's 'Forjando Patria Pro-*Nacionalismo*' (1916); Dr. Francis Galton's beauty map (1908); Cesare Lombroso's criminal profiling through physiognomy (1876)—Howard's favourites; and Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft*, *Oracles, and the Magic Among the Azande* (1976); Mary Shelley; *María Candelaria* (1943); Alexandra David-Neel's concept of tulpa (ghosts willed into existence) (1929); and J. B. Rhine's parapsychology (1957)—Noemí's copies and mentions.

High Place is indeed an externalisation of Howard's interiority, his consciousness conflated with the house through the Gloom. Marta described High Place as having '*mal de aire* […]. They're heavy places. Places where the air itself is heavy because an evil weighs it down […] the bad air, it'll get into your body and it'll nestle there and weigh you down. That's what's wrong with the Doyles of High Place' (p. 131). The '*mal de aire*' turns out to be, at least partly, the spores from the Gloom, a mycelium network that serves as repository for memories of the house's inhabitants, who are all connected to it. This is revealed to be the only reason why Howard invites strangers, especially non-White ones, inside his High Place: to be brides and provide offspring, infusing his incestuous line with their indigenous ability to meld with the native mushrooms, which, when misused and sustained by the Othered bodies of the miners that provide sustenance for the clusters, afford him unnatural longevity and the power to control the Gloom. The Gloom operates in a symbiotic relationship with Howard, enabling him to influence his workers, invade people's minds and bodies who reside in the house, and keep people from escaping. As Noemí states, '[i]t's difficult, in this place, to discern what's real from what's false' (p. 242), much like how the cult of White supremacy works. The Gloom, under Howard's control, gives thought-form[14] to colonial ideologies.

Importantly, the Gloom was established through a co-opted indigenous religious ritual which involved Howard sacrificing his first sister-wife, Agnes, in order to use her mind as the fungal motherboard. Francis (Florence's son, Virgil's cousin, and one of the few sympathetic Doyle characters) reluctantly rationalises the Gloom to Noemí after she has been infected with the spores in a graphic scene resembling a vampire siring, turning what she thought to be a haunting into an explained-supernatural phenomenon: 'The fungus, it runs under the house, all the way to the cemetery and back. It's in the walls. Like a giant spider's web. In that web we can preserve memories, thoughts, caught like the flies that wander into a real web' (p. 211). Howard and the heinous, shroom-charged imperial agendas that he personifies haunts them through the Gloom. While science mostly replaces the supernatural, some mysterious elements of the mystical remain, allowing for humility and wonder and the inability to categorise all experiences simply as one thing or another, especially when they hail from a different cosmology.

[14] In the spiritual and psychological sense: externalised and materialised internalisations.

Since Howard's corporeal being is rendered synecdochal of the domesticated Gloom, his body becomes a site of biological horror. When first meeting him, Noemí internally remarks that 'old would have been an inaccurate word to describe him. He was ancient, his face gorged with wrinkles, a few sparse hairs stubbornly attached to his skull. He was very pale too, like an underground creature. A slug, perhaps' (pp. 28-29). She notes how 'the rest of him was bleached of color, but the eyes were of a starling blue, unimpeded by cataracts and undimmed by age [….] vivisecting the young woman with his gaze' (p 29); coupled with his 'old-fashioned cravat' and 'large amber ring' (p. 30), he nearly exudes an aristocratic vampire veneer, yet Noemí equates him ingloriously as 'slug', deromanticising his aged appearance and relocating him into the mud. She also detects the incongruity encapsulated in his smile: 'The teeth were not yellow […] but porcelain-white and whole. But the gums […] were a noxious shade of purple' (p. 30). Later in the novel when Howard is disrobed for the ritual, the extent of his unwellness is fully exposed:

> 'His skin was terribly pale and his veins contrasted grotesquely against his whiteness […]. One of his legs was hideously bloated, crusted over with a dozen of large, dark boils. […] Not tumors, no, for they pulsated quickly, and their fullness contrasted with his emaciated body, the skin grown taut against the bones except upon that leg where the boils grew, as thick as barnacles upon a ship's hull' (p. 203).

Ironically, aesthetic-preoccupied Howard is hideous through Noemí's eyes, his Whiteness a sign of sickness, and his bloated leg reminiscent of gout, the so-called 'rich man's disease'. The boils as 'thick as barnacles upon a ship's hull' allude through the fleet imagery of colonial invasion and industry that brought the Doyles to Mexico. Aptly, the boils generate the black puss that serves as a (nonconsensual) initiation communion drink, linking one to the Gloom once it is ingested.

Agnes' body is also a site of biological horror, but conversely, as the victim rather than the beneficiary of these oppressive systems. In the climactic conclusion, Noemí and Catalina with Francis' aid flee through the family crypt, finding the original cave mushrooms and the physical abode of the Golden Lady who haunts Noemí's dreams, seeking to warn Noemí. It is Agnes who commands them to '*Look*', to bear witness to her eternal agony as a 'woman frozen in time' (p.

252), buried alive, mummified, and made into the hive mind for the fungus to 'serve as […] the wax […] and Howard […] the seal' (p. 283):

> 'It was the open, screaming maw of a woman […] a few teeth dangling from her mouth, her skin yellow. The clothing in which she had been buried had long dissolved into dust, and instead she was clothed in a different finery: mushrooms hid her nakedness. They grew from her torso and her belly, they grew down her arms and her legs, they clustered around her head creating a crown, a halo, of glowing gold. The mushrooms held her upright, anchored her to the wall, like a monstrous Virgin in a cathedral of mycelium' (p. 282).

She is the Gloom, with her profane, tortured state related with sacred iconography in Noemí's view, aligning Agnes with saints suffering 'for a cruel god' (p. 270). The god referenced is Howard ascended into unholy divinity through geopolitical forces that facilitated the means and audacity to harness and warp flora into freakish engines of perpetual regeneration. Herein lies the creep-out factor, rendered through exacting ecoGothic portraiture, critiquing the consequences of colonial paradigms. Much like the ouroboros insignia that proliferates throughout the house, Howard and Agnes' bodies-turned-fruiting-chambers, too, graphically depict the 'demented cycle' required in order to sustain High Place and all it represents, the purpose being, *affectually,* to horrify us all.

EcoGothic Microcosms: Mushrooms, Graves, Mulch, and Greenhouses

I contend that no other organism more perfectly embodies the Gothic than mushrooms. More 'closely related to animals than they are to plants' (Acres, n.d.), they defy neat categories; their life cycle contains a near-perfect conceit for the ways in which the Gothic works (germination, colonisation, fruiting, sporulation); they are nearly sentient; some are cute and some will kill you; 'mushrooms always grow over dead things in a way' (p. 98), so Francis observes; and they connect uniquely to cultures. As Francis points out, '[t]he Zapotec Indians of your country practiced dentistry by giving people a mushroom which would intoxicate them and serves as an anesthetic. And the Aztecs […] consumed them to experience visions', called 'Teonanácatl […] the flesh of the gods' (p. 98). Noemí is familiar with some of their properties due to her native connections,

relaying, '[m]y grandmother was Mazatec, and the Mazatec ingest similar mushrooms during certain ceremonies […], it's communion. They say the mushroom speaks to you' (p. 99). In the novel's case, they flourish in the graveyard, where many of the silver miners decay in unmarked graves, and are notoriously difficult to eradicate, even impervious to fire (p. 297). In the aftermath of High Place's incineration, Francis confides in Noemí, describing a dream he had in which the house had 'stitched itself together […] grander than before […]. And when I walked, mushrooms sprouted with my footsteps' (p. 299). Francis asks her, '[w]hat if it's never gone? What if it's in me?' (p. 299) Noemí tries to comfort him and convince herself that they would find 'places that had been open fields and held no secret histories' (p. 300), yet 'she wondered whether one day, if she looked carefully, she might notice a golden sheen to [his blue eyes]. Or maybe she'd catch her own reflection staring back at her with eyes of molten gold' (p. 300). The intimation is that the spores from the air of High Place and fungi-infused black bile from Howard's body they were forced to consume may still possess them '*in the blood*' (p. 299). As foreboding as their concerns sound, an important intercession that Moreno-Garcia makes is that the mushrooms in and of themselves are not menacing; they are a neutral agent in the machinations of humanity, an ingredient at the mercy of the forager. Thus, the mushroom is a microcosm for natural resources greedily exploited and misused.

Cemeteries are hallowed and manicured human metabolisation sites where we return to the earth ritualistically and hopefully to be remembered. But even after death, the dust does not make us equal; class and status are still evinced. In High Place's cemetery, Agnes receives a stone statue memorial, while Alice, Howard's second sister-wife, did not; and 'the Mexicans didn't get headstones […] not even a cross' (p. 127). The cemetery links the living and the dead, but also links the house to the mines and to England. The cemetery ties the mines and house together, not just through the mycelium network and tunnel system, but also due to the fact that 'this house had been built atop bones', as Noemí contemplated (p. 244), the bones of the silver miners who grew sick because of the cemetery's fungus, then they were interred there as 'meat' (p. 236) for the mushrooms to consume and the bones of the women and children whose bodies were used as incubators, hosts, and sustenance, 'flesh of the gods' (p. 217). Moreover, the mushrooms that caused the miners' ailments and made the Gloom possible could have arguably been altered by growing in non-native soil. As revealed to Noemí, the cemetery was made from transplanted earth,

because 'that's what Uncle Howard wanted, a little piece of England […] here' (p. 18) because 'the old man [wanted] […] to ensure the conditions here would be like the ones in the motherland' (p. 237). Noemí asks if it is because of an 'extreme case of nostalgia' (p. 18), but the reader most likely associates this detail with vampiric lore, reminiscent of Dracula's transposing soil from his home in his coffins in order for him to regenerate. Thus, the cemetery, through an ecoGothic filter, becomes a complex location where the natural final stages of life cycles are overlaid with wreaths and manufactured myth-making markers.

Much of the mulch in the cemetery that nourishes the mushrooms are the bodies of the silver miners who, once spent from poor working conditions, were disposed of unceremoniously. 'Mulch' is how Howard refers to them, rationalising, '[y]ou must make the soil fertile […]. It was an assortment of underfed peasants, riddled with lice' (p. 236). His allocation of these local workers to that of turf in which to nurture his mushrooms clearly demonstrates the level of derision his White supremacist views have imparted. In his mind's *Great Chain of Being*, these ideologies have not just commodified the people; they have composted them. The silver mines are what enriched the Doyles, allowing them, through their abused labourers, to achieve elite status and pursue odd hobbies like mycology and master race theory. The silver in the High Place's cabinets serve as layered symbols for how the mines, the house, and cemetery feed off of each other. As Florence boasts,

> 'Most of this is made from silver from our mines […]. Do you have any idea how much silver our mine produced? God, it was dizzying! My uncle brought all the machinery, all the knowledge to dredge it from the dark. Doyle is an important name. I don't think you realize how lucky your cousin is to be part of our family now. To be a Doyle is to be *someone*' (pp. 113-114).

Conspicuously, Noemí notices that as Florence revels in her family name's prominence thanks to the mines, her 'face, reflected on the silver surface, was elongated and deformed' (p. 115). Her features are refracted by the product she clings to as a source of power and identity, something that was taken from the earth by exploited labour; but even in death, the labourers' bodies could not rest when they were returned the earth, for there they were, yet again, sorely used as fertiliser.

Thus, the diminishing and dehumanising term *mulch* encapsulates the effect of a colonised consciousness, viewing the world and the people in it as organic material to manipulate. The organic quality of the word *mulch*, as well, *affects* the reader with its corporality, translating abstractions about superior and inferior races into its physical ramifications.

Greenhouses are similar blended natural/unnatural settings where humans attempt to create terrariums sealing in and controlling nature. Prominent in High Place's small greenhouse is a stained glass ouroboros, which Francis explains is 'our symbol, but we don't have a shield. My father had a seal made with it though […] the snake eats its tail. The infinite, above us, and below' (p. 87). Noemí notes how this glass is created from compounds: 'Chromic oxide […] gives it that green coloration. But there must also be some uranium oxide used here […] it almost seems to glow' (p. 88). Her observation, while displaying her aptitude, also demonstrates how these elaborate constructions hail from minerals, that all these identities are deeply tied to the land. Howard understood this as well, in his racist way, wanting an English garden with rose beds, even bringing 'boxes filled with earth from Europe to make sure the flower would take' (p. 126). Ironically and tragically, it was when his estate workers were tending to these rose gardens that they first fell ill, implying how colonial designs operate: through the unnatural manipulation of the landscape, benefitting the invaders and devastating the Indigenous people. More to the point, the garden above hides the miners' graves and Gloom below, and the roses, though lovely, are, nevertheless, an invasive species transplanted to camouflage the violence of colonisation and conceal the smell of rot.

Conclusion

Mexican Gothic is essentially a possession story. The land is possessed by colonisers, the characters are possessed by colonial ideologies or victimised by the poltergeist-like consequences of colonisation, and the overarching narrative names the indwelling entity in order to call it out. However, the novel's 'exorcism' is, purposefully, incomplete with Francis and Noemí in the final chapter having escaped but haunted with nightmares of High Place 'stich[ing] itself together' (p. 299) and the Gloom returning. As Francis asks, '[w]hat if it's never gone? What if it's in me?' (ibid). The ending with its uneasy non-resolution is the last decolonial rhetorical manoeuvre,

appealing to the characters and readers alike the need for lingering reflection and vigilance, for cults rely on their subjects remaining unaware and complacent of the (unnaturally) grafted nature of their structures and belief systems in order to thrive. As Moreno-Garcia told Dolores Quintana (2021) for *Fangoria*,

> 'White supremacy is this cancerous force that infects a lot of people. After being sold that story, after being gaslit into that thought pattern, then they may grow up to be abusive and unkind. […] We exist within a society, and we accept the going narrative of our society. But sometimes, that story is wrong'.

How does one disentangle from these cultish, dominant narratives? Cultural cognition cannot be escaped, but as holistic psychologist Dr. LePera (2021) posits, brains can forge new pathways with exposure to new information and experiences. They can heal, they can change, by altering consciousness; by seeing the world through eyes other than our own; by seeking the counterstories that challenge our assumptions, perhaps even make us feel affectively disturbed, even creeped out.

Stories that pretend that everything is fine or the established order is 'as nature intended' do not shake us awake; they soothe like the *massospora cicadina* fungus that, as Francis explained, '[s]prouts along the abdomen of the cicada. It turns it into a mass of yellow powder. […] The cicadas, which have been so grossly infected, were still 'singing', as their body was consumed from within. Singing, calling for a mate, half dead. […] I'm not going to end my life singing a tune, pretending everything is fine' (p. 232). So long as stories sing, rather than scream, the ruling class retains their cultish control of the narrative. As Catherine Spooner (2006) observes, the Gothic provides this scream that shatters illusions of normalcy with 'a language and lexicon through which anxieties both personal and collective can be narrativized' (p. 9). We need to be anxious, especially for the detrimental effects White supremacy, capitalism, and militant imperial designs are having on the planet, and as Said (1994) remonstrated, '[the land] is recoverable at first only through the imagination' (p. 225). Ecophobia be damned; the negative is necessary because the consequences are dystopic, if not apocalyptic. The critical urgency for people of colour is manifold, for the ones in most peril are the oppressed, the vulnerable, and the disenfranchised. But we all share this responsibility and this fate. Much is at stake. Nature's message seems to be a

warning, like the Golden Lady that haunts Noemí's dreams: '*Wake up. You're still in the house. And the house is in you*' (p. 150).

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Looking at the Garden to Understand the Tear: Haunted Landscape in Settler-Colonial Australia

Costanza Bergo

ABSTRACT

Through the foundational lie of *terra nullius*, the settler colony of Australia is built upon an unstable, anxious foundation of historical denial. Australia is susceptible to hauntings: a social phenomenon and index of oppression that occurs wherein there are 'people who have been made ghostly by the silencing of their voices' and 'the effects of their silencing, of their writing out from history, can be felt today' (Frosh, 2013: p. 4). Haunting is a temporal disturbance, wherein the erased past disturbs the present. Aboriginal people are not confined to the past: Aboriginal life, culture and resistance continues and endures. Yet, occupation, and settler denial too, continue and endure; as Patrick Wolfe (1999) reminds us, within settler colonialism, invasion is a structure, not an event. A settler colony, then, is permanently haunted (Tuck & Ree, 2015)—fragmented between the drive to forget and the necessity to remember. This paper examines the haunting of Australia through a close reading of artistic responses by two Indigenous artists, Julie Gough and Tracey Moffatt. Gough and Moffatt utilise an ecoGothic aesthetic to call the history of the continent into question, producing works that are in direct conversation with the settler tradition of landscape representation. Land is the principal preoccupation of settler colonialism: it is both why and where Indigenous massacres occurred. Landscape representation is also an essential technology of occupation: images of empty landscapes continuously circulate the myth of *terra nullius.* By filling the land with ghosts, Gough and Moffatt engage in truth-telling and invite us to acknowledge the structural cracks within hegemonic narratives.

Introduction: the first lie

As Jim Bates' phrase, 'Always Was, Always Will Be Aboriginal Land' (cited in McBride, 2021), reminds us, the settler colony we call Australia rests on shaky grounds. The phrase points to Australia's unique circumstances amongst other Anglo settler colonies. In North America, Canada and New Zealand, formal treaties were eventually reached between Indigenous populations and invading settlers. While the legitimacy and circumstances surrounding these treaties are often contested, the deployment of treaties suggests, at least, an acknowledgement of Indigenous presence and claim to land. This, however, was not the case in Australia. In the lead up to invasion, Australia was declared *terra nullius*: unoccupied land, legally claimable under common law (Bhandar, 2018). During his initial exploratory journey, James Cook did not find the country uninhabited—his journals document sightings and encounters with Indigenous people (Banner, 2005). He did, nevertheless, claim that the continent was 'sparsely populated' (Banner, 2005: p. 100), a report that left the door open for a common law loophole. British beliefs around property rights were informed by two philosophers, the first of which was Swiss philosopher Emmerich de Vattel (1758), who argued that a people had no right to claim too broad an area. This claim appeared only to be applied, or considered applicable, to populations outside of Europe (Banner, 2005). Investigating the reasons behind Australia's unique invasion, Stuart Banner (2005) writes, 'parts of Britain were also thinly populated, and yet no one thought it lawful for strangers simply to move in' (p. 100). The second philosopher was John Locke (1960), whose theory of labour inextricably linked land property rights with farming. To work the land was to own the land. As Bruce Pascoe (2018) has proven, Aboriginal people across the more than five hundred First Nations that existed in Australia prior to invasion did, of course, work with and on the land.

Yet Cook—either because of a vested interest in omission, or because of a narrow and Eurocentric definition of farming—reported otherwise. Australia was portrayed as a sparsely populated territory in the hands of a 'primitive' population that was not making the best use of it, rendering invasion a moral right of settlers. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2005) writes, 'the right to take possession was embedded in British and international common law and rationalised through a discourse of civilisation that supported war, physical occupation and the will and desire to possess' (p. 21). Deployed retroactively through groundwork laid in the initial reporting, *terra*

nullius created a false narrative that contextualised the continent as uninhabited territory, erasing and invalidating Aboriginal land rights. *Terra nullius* is the basis of the present Australian claim to sovereignty, a claim that is therefore fundamentally unstable. It is also the basis of a collective and ongoing historical denial. Through *terra nullius*, a long history of colonial violence and genocide is erased. As Meaghan Morris (2006) notes, 'if in North American popular culture the Western genre conceded that violence occurred between settlers and Aboriginal people, in this country "there happened—nothing"' (p. 85). The erasure of ongoing Aboriginal resistance to colonisation is essential to the myth of *terra nullius*, which claims that the land was not conquered in a war, but rather empty, and thus was occupied peacefully. The legal fiction of *terra nullius,* therefore, not only aided in legalising the establishment of settlers; it was and remains an essential technology of occupation. By silencing and erasing the past and present existence (and resistance) of Aboriginal people, it continues to work ambidextrously to legalise and obfuscate colonial violence.

Building on Avery Gordon's (2008) psychoanalytical approach to history, Stephen Frosh (2013) posits a theory of haunting that conceptualises it as 'a social phenomenon, an index of oppression' (p. 4). Historical haunting occurs 'because there are people who are made ghostly by the silencing of their voices; and even if these people belong to the past, the effects of their silencing, of their writing out from history, can be felt today' (Frosh, 2013: p. 4). Haunting, then, is a temporal disturbance, the past disturbing the present to demand resolution. What belongs in the past and what belongs in the present, however, is not so easily separated. After psychoanalysis, Frosh sees past and present as anachronistically interdependent: 'the past is always a work in progress […], the reinvention of the past in the light not only of the present, but also of the future—of what we might hope or fear to become' (p. 128). Frosh calls for a social, material solution for hauntings. Unlike personal ghosts, social or collective ghosts 'cannot be removed simply by being spoken about: they can only be set free by some kind of action to bring them the justice they deserve. Hauntings demand a liberatory practice' (Frosh, 2013: p. 4). This is especially true in what Frosh terms postcolonial contexts: 'the past that refuses forgetting […] opposes the "colonising" act of appropriating history that makes it the "history of the victors"' (p. 54).

Frosh's theory of temporal disturbance—the past disturbing the present—acquires further complexity within a settler colonial context. As an ongoing settler colonial occupation, Australia is not *post*colonial: colonial violence and occupation are ongoing. Aboriginal people also do not belong in the past: to equate them with it, or to use the latter as shorthand for the former, is itself colonial. As Maddee Clark (2016) reminds us, the characterisation of Aboriginal people as part of the past, and the denial of their continued presence in both the present and future, is a fantasy produced by the logic of elimination of replacement. Clark explains, 'one of the central fantasies of colonisation in Australia has been that Aboriginal people have no future. Much of telling Indigenous history to non-Indigenous people is unseating the idea that we are dead or that we belong only to the past'. In conversation with Clark, Astrid Lorange (2018) adds that this colonial fantasy is potent and intentional: 'this is not an error or misunderstanding, but a willful narrative underwritten by desire, fear and denial'. Decolonial practice in a settler-colonial context, therefore, ultimately needs to resist the characterisation of 'past' disturbing the present. This paper seeks to take the concerns of temporality seriously, and proposes instead, after Eve Tuck and C. Ree (2015), that the settler colonial nation is 'permanently haunted' (p. 642). As Patrick Wolfe's (1999) seminal articulation reminds us, within settler colonialism invasion is a structure, rather than an event. This structure is oriented by the logic of elimination and replacement, eliminating Indigenous people, culture and ontology, and replacing them with settlers, their culture and their ontology. As Wolfe argues, 'settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of native societies. The split tensing reflects a determinate feature of settler colonization. The colonizers come to stay—invasion is a structure not an event' (p. 2). This structure is not confined to legal, economic and otherwise rational fields. In everyday life, the structure of invasion and occupation is circulated primarily through unconscious, affective registers (see Rifkin, 2013, & Moreton-Robinson, 2011). As the ongoing, lethal efficacy of *terra nullius* demonstrates, occupation is also supported by strategies of epistemological domination.

Nonetheless, Frosh's articulation of haunting can be productively adapted to the ways in which colonial violence has historically been, and continues to be, erased from Australian public consciousness. The reality of Aboriginal people continues to be invalidated, denied and erased, and any attempts at truth-telling face both systemic and overt violence. To quote Tuck and Ree again, 'Settler colonialism is the management of those who have been made killable, once and

future ghosts—those that had been destroyed, but also those that are generated in every generation' (p. 642). Referring to the ongoing inability of the colony to take steps to repair the trauma of the Stolen Generations, Sherry Balcombe (2021)—a Olkola/Djabaguy woman from North Queensland and member of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, which was established in 2021 as the first formal Indigenous-led truth-telling inquiry into historical and ongoing injustices against First Nations people—poignantly notes, 'it is against the law in Germany to deny that the holocaust happened. It's certainly not against the law here to say that the stolen generations did not happen. Andrew Bolt does it every week'. Even more recently, the catastrophic result of The Voice referendum, in October 2023, shows the colony's ongoing determination to silence Aboriginal people. In this sense, Aboriginal people continue to be 'made ghostly' (Frosh, 2013: p. 4) within the Australian dominant narrative.

The Indigenous ecoGothic: Julie Gough's haunted history

Between 2016 and 2017, Trawlwoolway artist Julie Gough created a series of thematically and aesthetically unified video works: *Hunting Ground (Pastoral)* (2016), *Hunting Ground (Haunted) Van Diemen's Land* (2017) and *Hunting Ground (Pastoral) Van Diemen's Land* (2017). All three works are the product of extensive archival research undertaken by Gough to uncover the hidden history of massacres of Aboriginal people that took place in Van Diemen's Land during the early years of invasion.[1] For *Hunting Ground (Haunted) Van Diemen's Land,* Gough travelled around Tasmania, filming trees, rivers and valleys. The first shot of each area allows us to focus on the natural elements: the songs of birds, the movement of water, the sound of the wind blowing between trees. In the following shots, Gough guides our eyes towards ghostly apparitions: copies of primary sources—government documents, private correspondence—documenting violence against Aboriginal people by early settlers. The thin sheets of paper hang from trees, rocks and lamppost, out of place in the natural surroundings. Both headstones and protest signs, they change their surrounding environment, revealing it as a site of atrocity. The journal of George Augustus Robinson Richmond, dated March 29th 1832, reads,

[1] The modern-day settler name for the region is Tasmania.

> ‘Some stock-keepers once told him that they once chased a native woman, who climbed up a cherry tree when they commenced firing at her. There was three of the stock-keepers. Everytime the shot took effect she pulled the leaves off the tree and thrust them into the wounds, til at last she fell lifeless to the ground. It was, he said, a practice with the stock-keepers to get two or three of the women together and shoot them’ (Gough, 2017).

The documents soon paint a picture of Aboriginal resistance (incursions, fighting parties, sabotage) that categorically challenges *terra nullius*: a war, albeit uneven, was fought between Aboriginal peoples and invaders. In her artist statement, Gough (2016) writes that the intention of her haunting series is two-fold: ‘a demonstration of our island as a crime scene; and a record of my reconnection with these places, establishing there, ensite, that we continue, were not entirely annihilated, and that we remember’ (p. 15). Reflecting on the series of works, Joseph Pugliese (2017) terms Gough’s work ‘forensic archaeology’, as she ‘transmutes these documentary texts into artworks that compel acts of remembering in the face of the national forgetting that insistently inscribes the dominant narratives of the settler nation’—in other words, Gough ‘speaks back to settler acts of forgetting’ (p. 1). Similarly, Tess Allas and Ruben Allas (2022) describe Gough’s series as ‘a visual language facilitated by modern technology backed up by impeccable research, which informs the historical texts that she places on occupied settler estates that she also identifies through research as sites of genocidal violence and conflicts’ (p. 206).

Hunting Ground (Haunted) Van Diemen’s Land and *Hunting Ground (Pastoral) Van Diemen’s Land* function as a diptych, and are designed to be exhibited together. *Hunting Ground (Pastoral) Van Diemen’s Land*, however, more closely resembles the first work of the series, *Hunting Ground (Pastoral).* In both artworks, through time-lapse photography, a selection of nineteenth-century Australian landscape paintings is first displayed, then vandalised, and finally dusted with soil until completely buried. The following analysis will focus on *Hunting Ground (Pastoral) Van Diemen’sLand*, one half of the diptych. The process is repeated ten times, each time with a different painting; each instalment broadly repeats the same actions but declines them differently. The paintings all depict pastoral scenes set in Tasmania during the early decades of European invasion. When each painting first appears, it is brightly and neutrally lit, mimicking the

immaculate trademarks of gallery or museum lighting. There is a first pause, as the viewer takes in the traditional artefact and its pastoral scenery. Soon, the image glitches, signalling the beginning of an interference. The light changes in tone and intensity, turning the painting cooler or warmer, darker or brighter. Specific marks and words begin to appear: lines and patches of colour circle tree hollows and turn rivers red. Fragmented yet explicit information appears in the form of scattered words: 'killed', 'a child', 'about 15', 'Blacks', 'dissected'. The viewer is now confronted with seemingly antithetical pairings: a pastoral scene and violence. Slowly, dusted soil, including herbs and small rocks, begins to fall on the painting's surface. Like the marks and words, the soil is different each time, varying in shade and composition. By the end of the accumulation the surface is compacted, so that you may never know there is something underneath it.

The video is entirely shot through time lapse. The rhythmical stops and starts produce a staccato that both alludes to a discontinued narrative and emphasises the recurring repetitions which bind it together. The first and final instalments are longer than the central ones (two minutes versus one minute long). This cadenced structure of regular longer and shorter acts, intervalled by equally regular pauses and repetitions, gives the video the melodic pattern of a rhyme. Although entirely soundless, the work generates multiple echoes.

In her early critical analysis of the Gothic, Ann Radcliffe (1826) articulates the difference between Gothic and horror. While the Gothic is the feeling of dread that precedes an event, horror concerns itself with the revulsion that follows it: the Gothic imagines, while horror *sees*. From this perspective, *Hunting Ground (Pastoral) Van Diemen's Land* can be seen as the least didactic, and, therefore, perhaps the most Gothic work out of the series of three. Gough inscribes a watercolour view of the Macquarie River with only the following words: '1829', 'a tribe', 'indiscriminately', 'slain', 'Macquarie River', 'gully'. Gough's minimal information leaves much to the imagination, allowing the audience's imagination to fill the gaps. The video speaks in the ephemeral, cryptic language of a haunting: the extensive research undertaken by Gough to recover and locate hidden histories, and the knowledge she collected in the process, are not volunteered in full but rather drawn upon selectively. Gough quotes archival sources, but only puts forward words of her choosing, maintaining agency over her own history at all times. This is not historical research by colonial standards, and that is precisely the point. As Lorange argues, '[i]n the archive of forged

notes, it is easier […] to dream up the end of a history than it is to imagine the continuation of history and its potential to be realised otherwise. […] [I]f the history of white supremacy is in part a history of forged documents […] then what is needed is a counter-history in which the archive is shown as corrupt and corruptible'.

Reflecting on the ways in which Aboriginal women artists 'haunt history', Patricia Mellencamp (1994) contends that dissident history deals in entirely different temporalities. If colonial history is a way of counting time and measuring change, dissident history is about questioning time and creating change. She cites Morris (1998), who argues that feminist history is sceptical, constructive and 'untimely' (Mellencamp, 1994: p. 128). Thus, argues Mellencamp, 'history is not something to be recorded or even accepted, but something to be used, something to be changed' (p. 128). Gough shows no interest in engaging with colonial methodologies of history. Her extensive archival research demonstrates her skills and abilities in engaging with these methodologies, making her rejection of them in her delivery all the more intentional. *Hunting Ground* exists in emancipation from colonial epistemology: it presents both a counter history and a counter method of doing history; and in doing so, it challenges colonial world building. Writing on the series of works, Allas and Allas offer a generative suggestion: 'by contemporising these historical events […] often staid and academic histories are energized and then become a living and ongoing process' (p. 207). Similarly, Mellencamp explains, 'for women of color, the history of representation, a geography of women's lives, is being made. By inscribing what has been there but not visible to everyone, by telling the tale from the point of view of [Aboriginal] women, the landscape changes' (p. 136). Combined, these perspectives guide us towards a position of hope as historians. If the discipline of history is able to evolve through decolonial interventions—if it can become a living process, reliably capable of change—then new pathways for transformative change in the present may open.

Through its ecoGothic aesthetics, Gough's re-telling of hidden histories of colonial violence deliberately leaves gaps, offering fragmented data that invites mistrust in what is known and uncertainty towards how much more knowledge we may be missing. The primary suspect Gough moves to destabilise in her forensic report is that which is naturalised: a forged history of pastoral, peaceful settlement, but also our own perception, visual and otherwise. As the first

intervention—the change of lighting—begins, we are reminded that the initial gallery-style lighting was itself a mediated intervention with a precise subtext, just like the landscape painting it was shining on. By the end of the process, the accumulation of soil that covers the painting, as well as its vandalism, appears like a natural surface, one that may very well be hiding nothing. As Pugliese notes,

> 'the viewer is thereby compelled to rethink the significance of the very ground under their feet. […] Its accretive layers conceal the hundreds of massacre sites that scar the Australian landscape, even as they serve to supply the very foundation of the nation…What violence underpins the foundation of the nation? What collective acts of forgetting have been mobilized to erase this foundational violence? Across the surface of a site of atrocity, the amnesic soil of national forgetting continues to accumulate' (p. 7).

Gough explicitly directs our attention to survey multiple lines of continuity: between her repeated gestures, but also between past and present, art and history, imaged and physical environments, landscape and land. By crafting links between things that are similar, but perhaps misleadingly so, Gough invites us to second-guess each element in the equation, and what binds them together or separates them from each other.

While the intent of the work is manifest, the structure of signification it relies upon is perhaps less so. To understand Gough's actions throughout the film it is necessary to also appreciate the object that her actions centre around: to unpack, in other words, what it really is that Gough is vandalising and burying. If the purpose of the series is to destabilise the settler-colonial narrative, and by proxy settler-colonialism itself, why use landscape paintings? Land, of course, is not neutral but rather profoundly relevant as one of the primary points of colonial contention. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) remind us, within settler colonialism, the most important concern is the exploitation of land, which they use as shorthand to include 'land/water/air/subterranean earth' (p. 5). Unlike in *Hunting Ground (Haunted),* however, in *Hunting Ground (Pastoral)* and *Hunting Ground (Pastoral) Van Diemen's Land,* Gough is not using images of landscapes produced by herself. She is specifically using landscape art produced by settlers. To understand this stylistic

choice, we must consider not just the aesthetics, but the very function of settler colonial landscape art.

The first clue we are given as to the relevance of landscape representation is already in the text. Amidst Gough's soundless video, a jarring, off-key detail becomes increasingly loud. The original paintings all include settler names for the landscape; a tribe was indiscriminately slain in Macquarie River; natives were dissected on or near the residence of T. Gregson, Esq.; it was in Oatlands that seventeen natives could not get away. An uneasy feeling begins to emerge. While the textual element drives our attention to the lost history of massacres, the background invites us to consider the multiplical quality of colonial violence. As Antonio Traverso (2022) argues,

> 'colonial massacres […] are intrinsic components of the settlement technology and must therefore be understood as constitutive of a complex colonial technology of settlement that functions through progressive cycles of territorial, social and cultural occupation, dispossession, cleansing and erasure, where massacres are systematically continuous with other techniques, methods and tools, such as maps, weapons and transportation and observation instruments' (p. 230).

The notion of settler-colonial violence as an all-encompassing system, operating both conceptually and materially, is central to this paper. Aboriginal people were both killed and dispossessed: their land was materially occupied, renamed, and then represented within a settler colonial cultural imagination that directly denies history.

Landscape as verb

To explore the relationship between settler colonialism, meaning-formation and landscape, this paper draws from Moreton-Robinson's seminal notion of the White possessive. Moreton-Robinson (2015) argues that while both direct violence and regulation play a part in Indigenous dispossession, '[they are] not the only way the possessive logics of patriarchal White sovereignty are operationalized, deployed, and affirmed' (pp. xi-xii). Rather, dispossession and occupation are also produced by the circulation of 'sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of

commonsense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions' (Moreton-Robinson, 2015: p. xii). Landscape is a crucial dimension of this process: 'in taking possession of indigenous lands', writes Moreton-Robinson (2011), 'White male bodies took control and ownership of the environments they encountered', among other ways, 'by mapping land and naming places, which was an integral part of the colonizing process' (p. 59). In other words, the process of colonial naming and colonial occupation progresses symbiotically: one cannot exist without the other. Moreover, Suvendrini Perera (2009), building on Achille Mbembe, notes that colonial territorialisation includes 'processes of colonial boundary-making, the fabrication of spatial, epistemological, and ontological borders that undergird and organize colonized societies' (p. 141). She continues the list by quoting Mbembe (2003) directly:

> 'the production of boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the classification of people according to different categories; resource extraction; and, finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries' (pp. 25–26, quoted in Perera, 2009: p. 141).

In the case of a settler-colonial state that occupies unceded sovereign Aboriginal land, this reservoir of cultural imaginaries begins with the very notion of Australia: that is, with the reconceptualising of occupied Aboriginal land as a sovereign White nation. The very notion of Australian landscape is rooted in the epistemology of colonialism: the ability to conceptualise Aboriginal land as the material basis of a White nation, naming that nation Australia, and from then on conscripting all morphological features of that land as an expression of Australianness. Kay Anderson and Fay Gale (1992) refer to the clash between two competing versions of reality—two competing cultural imaginaries—within the same nation as a struggle for imaginative supremacy:

> 'while all of us participate in symbolising the world, people do not enjoy equal access to the conditions for creating those shared meanings […]. [S]truggles for imaginative supremacy are perhaps as endemic as those that course, both overtly and latently, between economic classes' (p. 8).

World-building is an essential part of the settler colonial project. As Lorenzo Veracini (2010) writes, 'colonialism and settler colonialism are both essentially concerned with the making and unmaking of places. The anticipatory geographies of settler colonialism, however, are unique to it' (p. 179). While both colonialism and settler colonialism are concerned with the making and unmaking of place, settler colonialism is unique in its desire to replace the existing landscape, both spatially and ideologically: while the colonial gaze is preoccupied with appeasing an 'otherness' that must be subjugated but not necessarily vanquished, the settler-colonial gaze is tasked with both fabricating a void and filling it (Veracini, 2010: pp. 179-80). I use the term 'fabricating' here, intentionally, to convey that the settler-colonial project is twofold: it creates ghosts materially, through Indigenous massacres, but it also *fabricates* ghostly voids through forgery, denial and erasures. It makes ghosts of those who are still living: by silencing them, erasing them from historical records and public consciousness, and repeatedly characterising them as part of the past. Within the Australian context, this desire to fabricate a void is ongoing, as can be seen with the reproduction of landscape images and landscape narratives that constantly and subtly reaffirm *terra nullius*. From advertising to cinema, Australian visual culture is overpopulated by images of empty, ghostly landscapes.

In his seminal text *Landscape and Power,* W. J. T. Mitchell (2009) suggested that landscape representation is not only a signifier of power relations, but their active agent. Thus, Mitchell sets out to change the definition of landscape from noun to verb, 'both sight and site' (p. 2). Landscape always presents itself as in and of the world, or indeed, as *being the world*. A painted landscape is best understood, then, 'as a representation of something that is already a representation in its own right' (Mitchell, 2009: p.14). Mitchell makes the crucial point that landscape 'does't merely signify or symbolise power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power' (p. 1). He posits that the fantasy apparatus of landscape, circulating as a medium of exchange, can be deployed to naturalise and unify the world for a variety of purposes, including as part of the broader world-making project of settler colonialism (Mitchell, 2009: pp. 10-13). Colonial world-building extends, and in fact depends on, representation: as Veracini reminds us, it drives the settler-colonial project (p. 179). There is a relationship of interdependency between the physical occupation of territory and the production of images that naturalise said occupation. What begins conceptually through visual acts of

representation, manifests spatially. The circulation of the myth of *terra nullius* through landscape art directly implicates as a technology of occupation. 'Landscape', writes Mitchell, 'makes history in both the real and represented environments. Landscape *circulates* as a medium of exchange, a site of visual appropriation, a focus for the formation of identity' (p. 2; emphasis in original). The semiotic potential of landscape, to Mitchell, is 'tailor-made for the discourse of imperialism, which conceives itself precisely (and simultaneously) as an expansion of landscape […], an expansion of "culture" and "civilization" into a "natural" space in a progress that is itself narrated as ""natural"' (p. 14). This is especially relevant in the context of colonialism, where the production of landscape art flourished synchronously with the rise of imperialism. Drawing from both Mitchell and Veracini, we can begin to conceptualise landscape representation as the epicentre of two competing claims to reality: settler denial and Indigenous remembering.

Through this theoretical framework, Gough's haunting of the landscape takes on new meaning. Without context, the pairing of the pastoral landscapes with the uncovered violent history appears purely oppositional. The revelation of the local massacres reads as a reminder of the violence that the sanitised, pastoral images conceal. The absence of violence—or indeed, of Aboriginal people—from the landscapes appears as a byproduct of settler denial and occupation. Through closer reading, however, we begin to understand the paintings as not only the mere circulators of occupation, but part of the technologies that perpetuate and produce it.

In this light, Gough's vandalising of the paintings is civil disobedience, the burning of a colonial effigy: Gough puts decoloniality into practice. As Pugliese writes, the viewer is challenged to question what constitutes a criminal act: 'a massacre? The erasure of a massacre? Or the physical defacing of an iconic settler painting in order to draw attention to a site of massacre occluded by the same painting?' (p. 9). Gough's attack on the canvas is an attack on occupation itself: on the acts of colonial naming and possession, on the imperial eyes (Pratt, 1992, cited in Veracini, 2010: p. 190) that both produce and consume it, on the history it erases and the epistemological hierarchy it contributes to weaponise.

At the end of each inscription, Gough buries the vandalised paintings with soil. In her artist statement, Gough (2016), as cited by Pugliese, explains that each individual soil sample was

collected from the area in question: the modern-day sites of recent colonial massacres in Tasmania, not far from where each of the landscape painting is set. There are multiple possible interpretations for this final gesture. An acknowledgment of the colonial practice of burying the truth certainly seems part of it. Gough ' dug up' the history of massacres through extensive, arduous research. Perhaps it is a desire to put the victims of the massacres to rest at last, remembered and therefore released; or perhaps it is an invitation, as Pugliese suggests, to consider how much blood is mixed within the cemented foundation of the colony. Most likely, if we return to Gough's artist statement, it is both: the intention of the works being to simultaneously expose the past and affirm the perseverance of the Aboriginal present. Returning to Tuck and Ree, while the settler colonial nation is 'permanently haunted', the continuation of the haunting is alien to settlers and generative for ghosts: 'this refusal to stop is its own form of resolving. For ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs to be resolved' (p. 642).

Tracey Moffatt: looking at the garden to understand the tear

A work that might help us think through the multiplicity of these themes, and synthesise them by way of a conclusion, is *Picturesque Cherbourg* (2013) by Tracey Moffatt. *Picturesque Cherbourg* consists of a series of photographs depicting the modern-day remnants of a former government mission. In deliberate contrast to the sombre subject, the photographs were taken and edited to mimic the forcedly cheerful style of tourist advertisements or real estate brochures: they are postcard-like images, full of blooming flora, sunshine and blue skies. Yet, something is not quite right; it takes a few seconds for the eye to register that each photograph was roughly ripped apart and reassembled with fragments from multiple reproductions of itself, carefully yet imperfectly. From afar, the images look whole, but up close they become skewed and uncanny. In *Picturesque Cherbourg N. 1*, the footpath is fragmented, terminating abruptly and resuming again, ever so slightly in the wrong place. On the right, the tear severs a utility pole and its wires, realigning them so that the connection is interrupted but seemingly still working. On the left, three uneven, layered shreds reproduce the edge of the garden as many times, in a loopy vortex of bottlebrush and white picket fence.

In line with Moffatt's oeuvre, *Picturesque Cherbourg* is firmly grounded in place—as John Conomos and Raffaele Caputo (1993) note, '[Moffatt] first and foremost concerns herself with history and its place in space' (p. 28). She also engages with silenced personal and public histories. The mission was the appointed confinement for some of Moffatt's family members in the 1920s, placing the work at the intersection of personal and national history. To settler Australia, this is an image that falls within a direct, immediate, intelligible, pop iconography: that of the tourist brochure. Much like Gough's use of landscape paintings, Moffatt's brochure-style, Australiana aesthetics place her in direct conversation with the settler tradition of landscape representation; and, by proxy, with the national project of settler-colonial world-building.

The original picture is a precise cultural reference, a national sign within settler culture: the white picket fence; the quarter-acre block; the lush native plants flourishing in and around it, seemingly undisturbed or perhaps even improved by human intervention upon the land; the visual enactment of the private property iteration of the colonial utopia. Moffatt also mobilises the fantasy of Cherbourg, or rather the broader fantasy of suburban Australia. She draws from an aesthetic tradition, but a specifically libidinal one: were it not for the tear, the place looks like a desirable destination, a desirable place to live.

While speaking on an ongoing history of historical denial, Gough's work is situated in the past: it concerns itself with the uncovering of hidden histories. It is an explicit intervention within the discipline of history. In Moffatt's work, it is not so much the past that disturbs the present, so much as one experience of reality that intervenes to unsettles another. To Mellencamp (1994), a shared trait of Moffatt's works is a particular type of collision: 'the experiential crashes into the historical' (p. 136). If Gough's series became progressively more cryptic, Moffatt's work does not include any words at all. Moffatt's decolonial practice is not didactic. It makes no attempt to educate, explain or resolve; it does not seek resolution. It simply unsettles the viewer, who is left to decide what to make of their discomfort. Much like in a traditional ghostly manifestation, the work is mute. We are invited to witness 'someone else's' traumatic experience of a place, with no volunteering of traumatic account. The victims' identities and suffering are not up for consumption. I am reminded here of Édouard Glissant's (1997) call for 'the right to opacity' within anti-colonial practice (p. 189): the right of the colonised to voice its experience without making it

legible to the coloniser, without catering to their education (Brooks, 2020: p. 57). Andrew Brooks (2020) tells us that for Glissant, 'opacity is central to any meaningful conception of knowledge and politics. It leads us to a conception of knowledge that does not require appropriation, a conception of knowledge that can only be discerned in the movement of relations of difference' (p. 57). It is a radical call to solidarity that does not demand access and understanding in exchange: 'to feel in solidarity with him [*sic*] or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to become the other (to become other) nor to "make" him in my image' (Glissant, 1997, cited in Brooks, 2020: p. 57). Yet the lack of explanation also functions to universalise the experience that is being portrayed. Without being told, we instinctively know by looking at the shattered image that an indeterminate number of terrible things have happened here to an undetermined number of people: it is precisely that vagueness that creates anxiety. The image operates on an affective register that concerns itself not just with the unrepresented, but with the unrepresentable. The landscape is haunted.

The work itself creates a suggestion of repetition. Many identical images were created and printed, and many were torn; or, in other words, many attempts to insist on the cheerfulness of the place were made, and they were all halted. As a result, silenced experiences emerge to disturb the hegemonic narrative through the tear. As such, the tear is a disruption, an interruption. In *Picturesque Cherbourg no. 1* we are offered two competing claims to reality: that of the idyllic suburban setting and that of the tear. The power of the work is in its clash, with the unrepresentable disturbing the overly represented. We are offered two competing claims to reality, and part of the challenge is that only one of them is intelligible; only one offers itself up for analysis. The tear disturbs the underlying hegemonic narrative. Yet, understanding this hegemonic narrative as inherently anxious and violent reframes the tear from being an alien interruption to being a built-in disturbance. The tear begins to look more like a crack, structural rather than intrusive. As Moreton-Robinson (2005) writes, 'Indigenous sovereignty continues, through the presence of Indigenous people and their land, haunting the house that Jack built, shaking its foundations and rattling the picket fence' (p. 27). In this light, the tear represents a generative form of haunting, one rooted in Indigenous people's ongoing survival and demand for recognition.

Conclusion: the work of art

Reflecting on whether settler colonial haunting can ever reach something akin to resolution, Tuck and Ree write,

> 'I want to slip a note into some people's pockets, "Decolonization is not metaphor", because at some point, we're going to have to talk about returning stolen land […]. Fanon told us that decolonizing the mind is the first step, not the only step. Decolonization necessarily involves an interruption of the settler colonial nation-state, and of settler relations to land' (p. 647).

I concur. The ultimate work of decoloniality is not discursive, but material: land repatriation, not landscape representation. However, that is not to say that nothing of meaning can be achieved in the lead up to land repatriation. Through their ecoGothic aesthetic, the works of Tracey Moffatt and Julie Gough offer us the opportunity to gather a number of complex ideas and registers. They highlight the constitutive role of violence, and the denial of violence, within ongoing settler-colonial occupation. They facilitate an understanding of the ways in which landscape representation is not merely a product of colonial world-building, but one of the technologies that produce it.

While inviting us to think of landscape art as verb, Mitchell suggested we consider landscape representation as 'the "dreamwork" of imperialism, unfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on itself to disclose both utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance' (p. 10). The Indigenous ecoGothic fractures the cover of settler denial and exposes the cracks within the settler-colonial dreamwork: it heightens our ability to look at the garden and understand the tear. The work of the decolonial ecoGothic, borrowing Tom Melick's (2021) words, is then perhaps to ask 'what resilient artistry, what minor plays, allows one to face the demands of the day?' (p. 15). Facing colonial history is simply what we must do, both in order to live in (with) the colonial present, and to inch towards a different future.

BIOGRAPHY

Costanza Bergo is an early career Cultural Studies scholar and Art Historian who specialises in colonialism and displacement. Originally from Italy, they have lived across the UK and Australia for the past fourteen years. Costanza's PhD thesis, *Atlas of Denial: Australian Landscape and the Settler-Colonial Structure of Feeling,* won the 2023 UNSW Dean's Award for Outstanding PhD Theses. Costanza has taught across multiple UK institutions, most recently the University of Nottingham. Their current research focuses on displacement and hidden histories. Their research has been published by *History Workshop* and *Ibidem Press.*

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Tropical Gothic as Method:
Ethnographic Dislocation and Mari-it Ecologies in the Western Visayas, Philippines

Christina Verano Sornito

ABSTRACT

People in the Hilagaynon/Kinara-ya speaking communities of the Western Visayas region in the Philippines describe a range of human and more-than-human encounters as *mari-it*—a term that is variously regarded to mean 'enchanted' or 'taboo'. The concept of *mari-it* is often used to mark certain places and features of the invisible world as outside of the control of human beings and as potentially harmful to those who seek to transgress against the other-than-human agents that inhabit them. Drawing on Filipino writer Nick Joaquin's coining of the 'tropical gothic', and reconceiving it as ethnographic method where nonlinear time and the irrational unproblematically exist, I argue that against the regimes of hyper-visibility and order deployed by U.S. colonialism in the Philippines, re-tooling ethnography as 'tropical gothic' resists the Western epistemological impulse for 'enlightened' visibility, order, and hierarchy. In this piece, I enmesh stories of the Western haunted house trope with contemporary Hilagaynon experiences of *mari-it*. Instead of attempting to rationalise and fit *mari-it* within the framework of social sciences, I propose exploring how *mari-it* attunes us to animistic worlds. These worlds challenge colonial frameworks that delineate human and non-human coexistence, especially in the context of rapid climate change. Re-enchanting our understanding of the world may be crucial for humans to cultivate sustainable futures, rather than resigning ourselves to the inevitability of apocalyptic outcomes.

'*Tabi-tabi anay mga amigo, basi masapalay kamo. Indi ako makikita sa inyo*!'
('Excuse me and let me pass, my friends, I cannot see you and I might harm you!')

—Visayan prayer or utterance deployed when encountering *mari-it*

In recent scholarly writing about the Philippines, trajectories in theories of hauntology have renewed interest in the works of mid-century Filipino writer Nick Joaquin, pioneer of the concept 'tropical gothic' (Rafael and Apostol, 2017). Since the time of foundational Filipino novelist Jose Rizal, tropes of the 'tropical gothic' have included family secrets; ill-gotten inheritances sometimes hidden under enchanted trees; revenants of a restored Manila witnessed by the American GIs that destroyed it; Roman gods mingling with pre-colonial entities, and more. The rejuvenated attention to Joaquin's work and other non-Western literary writers of the 'tropical gothic' also resonates with questions of form and voice raised by academics in the social sciences.

As I engage with these scholarly discussions, I find myself reflecting on my own experience as a scholar-teacher. I teach a class called 'Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion', which, while very popular, students are frank enough to tell me they are excited to take precisely because they regard the materials as oppositional to more 'serious' and 'practical' topics. I consider myself a very ambivalent social scientist, because I take seriously my engagement with ghosts and spirited worlds, or beings that we cannot verify using positivist approaches and assumptions upon which, centuries ago, the scientific method was crafted. As Michael Taussig (2024) put it, 'Methodology in the social sciences is code for Enlightenment magic' (p. 9). In the region of the Philippines where I spend my time and from which my ancestors descend, magical beings are variously referred to as *engkanto* or *taglugar*. Decolonising 'Enlightenment magic', for me, might start with Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of 'staying with the trouble' (p. 1). Let's assume, for a moment, the ontological fact of communication from non-human or invisible sources. What experiences, what interpretive arcs, or actions might emerge from just being even a little more receptive to ghosts or *taglugar* transmissions in ethnographies of the Philippines? Drafting a 'tropical gothic' for anthropology is not to tell made-up stories, though Michael Taussig (1999 & 2020) made the point all too well that the 'real is really made up' (p. 11). The making of an ethnographic Filipino

‘tropical gothic’ further takes inspiration from postcolonial to decolonial scholarship on the question of temporal critique. I am particularly fascinated by the work of Bliss Cua Lim (2009) who draws from Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson and retools them for a postcolonial reading of Filipino and East Asian horror cinema as an exemplar of disrupting the dominance of a linear, secular, disenchanted historical time. Herein, *taglugar* and ghosts emerge in life as in film, not just as spectres of the past, but rather as phantasmic figures that insist on their own present-ness. Opening this line of inquiry within my own ethnographic encounters, my long-term relationships with faith healers and shamans known as *babaylans* of Panay Island in the Central Philippines, constantly made me question everything I took for granted. It seems painfully obvious to say that these figures are real people living among us, and not relics of a so-called pre-modern past. Many of the people I work with are spirit mediums, those who channel communication from worlds and beings most of us cannot perceive. Borrowing from Nick Joaquin and other artists of the non-Western world, I think of my ethnographic research and writing as taking up the mantle of a ‘tropical gothic’. This is a kind of ethnographic transmission which can be characterised in the following ways:

Troubling colonial time skews the dominance of linear historicism, a colonial legacy that literally occulted the multiplicity of timeframes that *taglugar*, revenants, and shamanic visions make apparent. Recalling that media is the plural of medium and evoking the pre-technological forms (once called magic) by which *babaylans* communicated with spirits and more-than-human types, I contribute to a long line of post/decolonial scholarship disrupting the enduring attitude that indigenous or non-Western liveliness embodies pastness while Western subjectivities self-fashioned as modern lay claim to omniscience in time (Fabian, 2014). To pursue this is to follow how anthropologists and ethnographers thinking about writing the disproportionate effects of climate change on formerly colonised regions aim towards what Blaser and Cadena (2018) call ‘practices across heterogeneous(ly) entangled worlds’ (p. 4).

Decolonising the ‘haunted house’ trope relates the aesthetic experiences of humans and more-than-humans in tropical settings disturbed by the long durée of colonial violence and capitalist extraction, inverting Eurocentric narratives where the appearance of ‘primitive’ revenants is presented as threats to Western modernity’s colonial-bourgeois fantasy. Here,

'tropical gothic' presents spectres and shadows, many of them imperial and foreign, alongside those entities indigenous to the tropical archipelago.

No Heart of Darkness

In an analysis based on late 19th to early 20th century accounts written up in diaries and travelogues kept by mostly white, middle-class women from the United States visiting the Philippines, the historian Vicente Rafael (2000) noted in reference to the newly acquired colony that 'the tropics here is no heart of darkness but a collection of scenic spots [where] culture and nature harmoniously coexist' (p. 60). According to Rafael (2000), several of the writings took on the tone of a spectator, where any tensions or social inequalities were erased and instead made the tropical landscape a collection of visual impressions or idyllic views as if through a distant lens. Such romanticised aestheticisation attempts ultimately reveal the construction of gendered and racialised social relations between coloniser and colonisers, which in the end for Rafael reiterated a colonial fantasy where the U.S. could imagine itself engaging in a more benevolent form of imperialism.

Rafael's analysis dovetails with other critical scholarship on the techniques of visibility endemic to the U.S. colonial regime. Neferti X. Tadiar's analysis of 'flyovers', a post-U.S. occupation infrastructural network of bridges made to link flows of commerce, also created a sense of distance and comfort from an urban Other regarded as teeming and disordered. As an aesthetic experience that underscores how an American, bourgeois house traffics into Filipino view, Tadiar likens the sentiments bourgeois metropolitan subjects had towards flyovers and a new vision of Manila as 'predicated on the modern Western house' (p. 166).

Tropical Gothic

The concept of 'home'—and specifically the physical structure of the 'house'—appears repeatedly across literature, poetry, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and music as a fundamental site where personal memory both resides and takes shape. This architectural space serves as both a literal dwelling and a powerful metaphor for how individuals store, organise, and access their memories

and sense of self. The house exterior marks a coordinate as 'home' in visible and public space, yet it is also a demarcation of private territory and both a literal and figurative interior space containing memories that are intimate, secret, and—in the many forms of omissions and negative spaces of family history that are recursive in their silence and absence—haunted. In architectural discourses of the Philippines, the *bahay na bato* is considered a traditional house, and one that integrates modernist design with pre-Hispanic Filipino, Spanish, Malay, Chinese and even French influences. Many *bahay na bato* are called 'heritage houses', and have passed down several generations usually within a single family and in some cases are legally declared heritage houses under the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009.

Bliss Cua Lim's work on film media containing supernatural themes and particularly horror films brought to the fore issues about primitive otherness as a construct of colonial time, resonating with other authors writing from the 'Global South' or formerly colonised world who employ the gothic to articulate the uneven experiences of the Anthropocene (Lundberg, Ancuta and Stasiewicz-Bienkowska, 2019). If the smoke that hangs over North American cities in 2023 and 2025 have been decried an uncanny spectre of humanly driven climate change, the same violence has long wrought terror and horror in the form of state sponsored violence, super-typhoons, landslides, drought, wildfires, floods, and poisoned waters across poor and displaced populations. Scholars of climate justice and disaster in the Philippines remind us that the spectacle of disaster as 'natural' obfuscates the *longue-durée* of 'slow violence' (Go, 2018: p. 418), where the Philippines ranks not only as the most vulnerable nation to disasters according to the latest World Risk Report, but also among the world's most dangerous countries for environmental defenders (Frege *et al.,* 2023).

Anna Tsing, in collaboration with other anthropologists, put together *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017), a collection of essays about monsters and ghosts dwelling amidst landscapes of the Anthropocene. While not directly referencing the Gothic, across their fieldwork the authors find that ghosts and time are not in fact 'out-of-joint', but instead that the structure of *haunting* more accurately describes the contradictions of living and dwelling in the present:

> ‘Anthropogenic landscapes are also haunted by imagined futures. We are willing to turn things into rubble, destroy atmospheres, sell out companion species in exchange for dreamworlds of progress’ (p. G2).

The ‘Gothic' is a literary genre or psychoanalytic concept which could all to easily be imported or superimposed onto the tropics from its purported home in the dark and cold climes of North America and Europe. But for a haunted discipline like anthropology, against a Eurocentric reading, the Gothic offers a unique turn. Its philosophical vitality lies in its capacity for decolonising not just Freud's Viennese uncanny, but also ethnographic methodologies themselves. This decolonisation supports further research in the contradictory temporalities of the postcolony. It also addresses the mutually constitutive multiplicities of relations central to ontological anthropology's role in confronting the grotesque inequities of rapid climate change.

It is claimed that Nick Joaquin, a complicated figure that wrote across genres and languages (colonial English and vernacular Tagalog) created the term ‘tropical gothic’ in English. Why employ a ‘tropical gothic’ by a cosmopolitan Tagalog speaker to help me unpack a mostly rural, Hilagaynon experience? Here I must place myself in discursive space as a Filipinx American anthropologist (or very ambivalent social scientist) who, upon reading Nick Joaquin’s work which was originally published in English, felt myself quite literally at home with sentences that seamlessly switched languages seemingly at random. This was true of my own upbringing between two immigrant parents from different non-Tagalog ethnolinguistic backgrounds, who mixed up their native languages, English, plus the national language Pilipino/Tagalog, with no discernible pattern or logic. I also saw something of myself in many of Joaquin’s characters that embodied the unique pastiche of what one might broadly refer to as a not uncommon intergenerational Filipino experience. There was the character Sid Estiva in *The Order of Melkizedek* (1966), who, like me, lived in New York and was asked by family to come back to his home village, only to get embroiled in the intricacies of a local cult that could outwardly have appeared Christian but, in keeping with the surge of neoshamanism across the world and the effects of Vatican II in 1960s Manila, sought to recreate indigenous spiritual practices. I could not believe how Joaquin, this mid-century Filipino fiction writer, anticipated my own ‘real’ story that began in 2009 of coming to my father’s hometown outside of Iloilo at the behest of community members who believed that my Aunt, who

lived in a modern house that everyone considered haunted and called the 'Cake House', was being taken advantage of by a cult leader who came out of nowhere. I do not claim the 'tropical gothic' as a concept to co-opt for social science analysis. In a turn of the decolonial screw, it is arguably more accurate to say that a Hilagaynon experience of haunted houses found me in Santa Barbara, Iloilo, reminding me that the business of trying to explain anything was never going to be that simple.

Childhood Encounters with the *Mari-it* Kind

Memories from childhood form a repository of vague and disjointed recollections, as if calendars did not exist. After all, how many of us can recount their childhood with precise, chronological recall? When I was growing up, my immigrant parents saved up money working their respective jobs as a nurse and an engineer in the midwestern U.S., so we could spend summers with family in the Philippine Islands. On my father's side, I had two aunts that lived in an elaborate and antiquated house in the town of Santa Barbara, Iloilo, at the time a largely agricultural community. Across the 1950s, my great-Uncle, an eccentric master carpenter, styled the entirety of the house from the inside out with intricate wood handiwork and then painted it a riot of pastel colours that earned it the moniker the 'Cake House'. In contrast to the surrounding nipa-huts and humble, cinder block homes, the Cake House bore a certain aura in the community. My aunts were from a line of teachers trained in American English and the liberal arts, a legacy of U.S. colonialism. When I came to stay with them, they were keen to teach me about their world. As they took me on long walks along the town's dusty thoroughfares, hemmed in by an abundance of flora, they imparted unwritten rules for interacting with the complexity of the surrounding natural world. 'Christina', they would say, 'watch out when you pass by anthills'. And, 'Christina, watch out when you pass such big, knotted trees'. I was familiar with the risk of automobiles and strangers, but the properties of anthills and trees were lost on me. 'Why?' I would ask. 'There might be someone living there, you just can't see them', would be the reply. And of course, my imagination was piqued. 'Invisible people? Who are they?' 'They are not exactly people', I remember one of my aunts explaining. 'We call them different things—*engkantos, duende,* or *tamawo.* Who knows which one? But we are careful because we don't want to disturb them'. I would query what happens if they are disturbed and learnt, 'well, they can make you sick. Especially your stomach. Or

something bad can happen. So you do as we do. We say *tabi, tabi, po*'. It means, 'excuse me, let me pass'. If anyone got sick from such enchanted encounters, they had to see Maria, I was told. My aunts sometimes took me to Maria's house: a massive structure that looked less like a typical house and more like a church. The door opened into a large room with ceilings high as a cathedral. Along one wall was a life-size figure of a Black Madonna, encased in a glass box, exactly like the one I had seen on the second floor of the Cake House. Streams of people come in and out of a closed room where Maria held court, and where I recall strange voices or mumbled singing. My aunts told me Maria helped people with their problems, sometimes those whose children fell ill, nursing students seeking help to pass their board exams, and other visitors with problems of a spiritual kind. Maria was like my other aunties—she smiled a lot, held my hand, and plied food on me. But I was too timid to go near the back room when guests arrived to seek her out.

I became hyper-attuned to space in ways that I could not fully anticipate: a bodily orientation to the world that I had not been accustomed to growing up in the urban settler-colonial American plains where the domination of nature and seamlessness of capitalist dreamworlds were tailored for carefree, consumer subjects. But for a good number of people in Santa Barbara, a chance footfall in one direction or another presaged an unexpected encounter with something that could potentially unsettle a rational self. As a child, I could still entertain the idea that I was not just a human traversing from a rationally mapped point A to point B. Instead, I was a vulnerable mortal amidst a shimmering and lively sphere of existence right outside the range of (at least my) human perception.

Worlds, Big and Small

The first mention of the term *mari-it* in ethnographic literature is found in *The Concept of Mari-it in Panaynon Maritime Worldviews* (1994), an ethnography of maritime cultures on Panay researched and written by anthropologist Alicia Magos. Magos describes the concept primarily in the context of fisherfolk communities of the coastal regions of Panay, who spoke of it to describe areas and times in the water that may entail unusual risk. She describes the magical techniques employed to protect against accidents, wherein dangerous currents were attributed to sea spirits (such as *kataw* and *ukoy*) requiring appeasement. These rituals often involved bloodletting

ceremonies known as *padaga*/*padugo* performed before a boat's launch. Magos mentions examples of *mari-it* on land, the *lupan-on,* as native inhabitants of certain trees like the *bubog* or acacia, and certain rocks, caves and springs. However, as the title of her ethnography indicates, it is mostly focused on coastal regions of the island, though her concluding remarks argue that *mari-it* should be marshalled more broadly as an indigenous worldview steeped in ecological awareness:

> 'Since caution, if not fear, is engendered by places believed to be *mari-it*, people try to avoid these places, if not shun them altogether. If one destroys, misuses, or greedily appropriates for himself the resources from these *mari-it* places, it is believed that danger will befall him. I suggest, therefore, that we make use of folk beliefs to generate ecological consciousness' (Magos, 1994: p. 350).

Building on Magos' research and conceptual formulation of *mari-it* as a counterpoint to environmental commodification and degradation, I examine how this concept operates within terrestrial communities, where the term is invoked by both experienced believers and self-proclaimed skeptics alike. Whereas Magos' research focused intensively on believers, whose ritual lives and cosmological convictions were more or less established, I am interested in both communities of believers as well as self-proclaimed sceptics, whose belief systems and convictions are often considered irreconcilable but, in the era of apocalyptic dread and sea-level rise posing an existential threat of totalising proportions, are polarised communities which also seek, desperately, a more capacious understanding of liveliness even if it includes unfixing ontic coordinates and a Copernican revolution in the relationality of living things.[1]

Santa Barbara, Iloilo, Philippines

The town of Santa Barbara in which most of my ethnographic research is centred is located on Panay Island, a part of the geographical region of the Philippines known as the Visayas. Walking around town, one hears some Tagalog, but mostly either English, Kinaray-a, or Hiligaynon, the latter being the dominant language of Panay. *Mari-it* is a Hiligaynon word which, within

[1] This is not to say that states of belief and non-belief handle *mari-it* in the exact same or consistently different ways, but that it is plausible there are similar themes arising out of such worldings.

Hiligaynon linguistic communities, is often translated as 'dangerous' with the caveat that the word is somewhat taboo, and that such a flat and pedestrian translation is impervious to the word's affective aura. More precisely, the English translation does not convey the anticipatory element or performative invocation that enunciation initiates, nor the sensory dimensions of dread, curiosity, humour, uncertainty, contempt, and even rage that are synonymous with *mari-it* as an affective domain. Such diffuse but semiotically constellated affects might be described akin to what Kathleen Stewart (2007) characterises as 'ordinary affects', these being the 'public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation […] as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation' (p. 13). Stewart's ethnographic sensibility begins with the concept of 'atmospheric attunements', wherein, for example, a chance meeting with the fragments of *taglugar* or *lupan-on* residences splintered in the widespread debris of typhoon damage enables *mari-it* to become a 'speculative topography […], an attention to matterings, complex emergent worlds, happenings in everyday life'. Stewart draws upon the work of Martin Heidegger, whose notion of worlding was in her words 'an intimate, compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestates, worlds' (p. 7).

I think Stewart and I both agree this concept entails as much potential for ethnographic practice as it requires reconceptualisation. Here, in the Santa Barbara of the Anthropocene, for example, I reimagine the concept of worlding as not within Heidegger's depiction of a Western subject's encounter with pastoral mysticism in a completely different ecological moment in time, but within the setting of tsunami and typhoon catastrophe, the compromise of human and non-human communities whose familiar infrastructures of worlding have been dismembered, scattered, buried, and lost, where worlding is a non-linear and unfamiliar coming to terms with material, symbolic, and relational disorientation. As an ethnographer, I approach *mari-it* as it approaches me—in a mutually constitutive ethnographic method for taking in the legacies of colonial destruction as well as anthropogenically impacted futures. The anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2020) and the philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2012) boldly suggest that we might 'reclaim animism' by resisting the impulse that it is a throwback (in Enlightenment progress), but instead view it as what Stengers terms 'the pragmatic art of immanent attention' (p. 14). At this point I stop avoiding the obvious, which is to say that *mari-it* by definition is animism. Attunement to

mari-it and its disrupted landscapes and atmospheres focuses on the conceptually generative potential of frayed temporalities and raggedly constructed worlding.

Destination and Dislocation

When the Spanish colonial project was initially organised in Panay, beginning in the 16th century, what is now called Santa Barbara was surrounded by dense stands of trees, thick foliage, and rolling hills. As recorded by Augustinian missionaries, the area was then known as Catmon, for the abundance of the *catmon* or 'elephant apple' trees there (Cabigayan, 2005). As the municipality of Santa Barbara was established, the first roads were carved out by the Spanish as they territorialised archipelagic space to serve the administrative logics of the colonial state. Such routes, and their impact on everyday experience for both colonisers and colonised, were reinforced centuries later as military transport veins for the occupying forces of the Imperial Japanese army during World War II. When I visited relatives in 2007, the same routes were being expanded into several concrete lanes as an international airport opened in Santa Barbara, along with the widening of the Santa Barbara Highway that would make the fourteen-kilometre passage to the provincial capital of Iloilo City less than an hour, even for the refurbished US military transport vehicles that serve as public transportation across the archipelago. It was around that time that a neighbour by the Cake House—who had invited me to nightly rounds of mahjong filled with gossip and innuendo about the local community—remarked that development had transformed Santa Barbara so much in her own lifetime that perhaps the only catmon tree left was the one at the local police station. And even that one was still around only because, and perhaps this was not entirely true, she recalled being told the station had been purposefully constructed around it.

It was a few years later, in 2011, that I was back in Santa Barbara with a different sense of purpose—this time as a graduate student interested in doing some basic ethnographic research on the historical trajectory of shamanic traditions in Panay from pre-colonial era to present, known as *babaylanism*. Though the same term is today used to describe shamanic traditions across the Philippines, the root *baylan* is largely associated with shamans from Kinaray-a communities native to Panay (Magos, 1994). By that time, the same neighbour who had invited me into her mahjong circle by the Cake House was also director of the Santa Barbara Museum—an underfunded project

with limited office space but with grand ambitions of fulfilling its mission of heritage conservation and promoting cultural tourism in the area. The role positioned Aileen in a broad social network that, among philanthropists, politicians, business owners, professors and graduate students, also included Nemie, the first *babaylan* to whom I was introduced.

I arrived at Nemie's house on a Friday, when the front room is often filled with people waiting to seek her advice in individual sessions beyond a door on the far end of the room. When it was my turn, I entered and found a formidable woman with a lively presence. She offered me the chair across from her at a wooden table, at the side of which was a deck of cards. Bottles with dried herbs and stones populated a few shelves and the walls were hung with images of the Virgin Mary and her other *santos,* or patron saints. For some time, we talked about my family, the stories which circulated about the eccentric and baroque Cake House in which they lived, and then about myself—a person whose life consisted of many travels, and among them so many returns to this small township in the central Philippines. As I described to Nemie what I had read and heard about *babaylan*, I eventually fell into recounting the stories of learning about *taglugar* from my aunts as a child, and how these resurfaced in recent years as conversations with friends in Santa Barbara had often led to the topic of *mari-it*. Having come of age in the midwestern United States where car-culture has paved over both the landscape and the imagination, there could be fewer things more disenchanted than a highway—for me. This is why I was surprised when Nemie's advice, as a *babaylan* speaking to an ethnographer interested in sites of enchantment, was to begin by riding the public transport buses that ran the Santa Barbara Highway. Not knowing what to say next, I simply thanked her, and Nemie waved her hand dismissively and told me to come back as often as I like.

Figure 1: 'Jeepney Driver'. Photograph by Author. 2012.

The following day, as I boarded a jeepney by the town's soccer field, I took a seat on one of the two benches that run parallel across the sides of the length of the vehicle. Also sitting across and beside me were passengers heading to and from the airport, farmers taking chickens and young pigs to market, day labourers, office workers, and students heading to the regional university. And so it went, day after day, until some of the drivers, at first spooked by my repetitive appearance with seemingly no destination, invited me to ride up front with them. Sitting with the drivers and observing their body language as more than just the learned skill of bus driving but also expressive of a relationship with the road that was unspoken, I began to note something unusual but consistent as we approached the border of the Santa Barbara township. Drivers grew less communicative, and the seasoned ease with which they navigated the bus sharpened into a seemingly tense focus. I began to pay attention, with each ride observing more. Looking back to the passenger area, I saw parents clutch their children. Others murmured prayers. Some reached for or beaded rosaries; others clutched golden amulets strung around their necks. One afternoon, a driver with whom I had grown friendly grasped the crucifix hanging from the rearview mirror. 'Is everything ok?' I asked him. This was a veteran jeepney driver, who deftly handled the exchange of money with one

hand while weaving a rambling machine through traffic with the other hand. He looked at me. ‘This stretch [of highway] is *mari-it*’, he said. I asked if it was dangerous and he replied, ‘Yes. There are many accidents that happen here’. He went on to explain, ‘if you transfer jeeps up here [at the gas station] you can go to the next barrio and see the sign that says, *Mari-it – Accident Prone.* But there isn’t one in Santa Barbara. Not yet’.

I looked out the window where a heavy rain had just abated, leaving the air damp and abuzz with mosquitoes. Our conversation fell silent, and I watched the passing expanse of rice fields, roadside refreshment stands, auto repair shops, and the occasional water buffalo munching on grass. Then there was a loud bang. The jeep jolted upwards and lifted passengers off their seats. A woman screamed and all I can remember are flailing hands as time slowed nearly to a halt. In the space of that pause, many thoughts flashed through my mind. I wondered if even the most skeptical were asking themselves if we had encountered *mari-it*. What might happen? Would we crash? Die? When time snapped back into joint, would this be the first instant of a violent encounter that, for the living, becomes the next story of *mari-it*? Do I believe in fairies?

And then, just as quickly, we were back in our seats, the bus’ tires back on the road, and the jeepney sailing forward. Hands made the sign of the cross, with murmurs of ‘Thank you, Lord Jesus’. Some took out kerchiefs to wipe sweat from their faces. After a few minutes, everyone looked relaxed. Children assumed their own seats. Chatter about ordinary life resumed. What had just happened?

It would be easy to explain that a pothole in the road caused the jeepney to jolt so violently. And yet the intensity of that instant did not dissipate from my insides. As I sought to find a way of going about ethnographic fieldwork in these early days of long-term, sustained research, it was not the chronological unfolding of each day riding the bus from which insight accrued in a linear manner, but rather from a split-second of dislocation in which that time and process came to a standstill. I like to imagine the attunements of ethnographic research as less akin to the graduated accumulation of a ‘learning curve’, or a road with a destination, and more akin to the slamming disorientation of a metal machine lurching into a crumbling pothole. Ethnographic research as an attentive purgatory—an artful state of pause—until the differential between senses lulled yet

saturated (peering through the bus window) is charged to the point of rupture, overflowing the conceptual forms of habit (a jolt), wherein the force of affect ruptures the boundary between subject and object (suspension in the air). As Stewart writes, 'things hanging in the air are worth describing' (p. 447).

The City of Tamawo

As I mulled over what happened that day on the bus, I shared the experience with my friend Placida. Placida was considered a *mal-am*, or community Elder, having lived through the Japanese occupation of Santa Barbara during World War II. She told me that as a child she witnessed the Japanese re-working the road for military operations and that the very place where our bus had encountered the jarring event, where the construction of the road and the life-force of a *mambog* tree became intertwined, had been surrounded by stories ever since. She recalled that when the war ended and the Imperial Japanese forces had departed the island, the U.S. colonial administration set up a primary school that was built by the road in striking distance of the *mambog* tree. One day, Placida said, when students went outside for recess, they returned to the teachers describing hundreds of kittens sitting in the branches of the *mambog* tree. Running outside, the teachers saw nothing.

But one need not go back so far, Placida went on. In 2012, as the town prepared for then-President Benigno Aquino, Jr. to attend Santa Barbara's first nationally televised commemoration of Philippine Independence Day, strange occurrences were reported by workers widening the road in anticipation of so many visitors. A labourer assigned the task of clearing the roadside by extracting a *camoncil* tree into which the jeep with university students had crashed said he could not sleep for days. When attempting finally to remove the tree, his excavator had broken down. Across this time, he reported being constantly ill. It was not until he consulted a *babaylan*, Placida said, that he was able to remove the tree.

But what would serve my interests most, she said, would be locating a recording of a visit to Santa Barbara in 2015 by the popular host Korina Sanchez, of the ABS-CBN show 'Rated K' (2005). Sanchez, known to host Halloween specials about haunted places in the Philippines, had

come to interview residents of a neighbourhood called Bolong Oeste, parallel to the stretch of Santa Barbara Highway notorious for its numerous accidents and strange occurrences. The accident-prone zone began at a busy circle exchange that locals referred to as *Bangga Dama*. Placida related that when Sanchez arrived in the area after a wave of accidents—one in which five college students had been killed—Placida was one of the persons Sanchez interviewed. Placida told me that she and the residents of Bolong Oeste explained to Sanchez that the frequency of accidents in *Bangga Dama* was not about the geometry or condition of the road itself, but because it was close to an enchanted *mambog* tree, which made the entire area surrounding it *mari-it.* I had thought I knew the general location but for some reason had never noticed the tree despite having passed by it many times.

What Placida and others had not mentioned to Sanchez about the 2015 jeepney accident in which the university students had died, neighbours said that an entire city of *tamawo*, or fairies, who had long called the *mambog* tree home, were angry. A tradition had been broken when the latest tenants of adjacent properties had not given an offering to the tree. Placida and others recounted that when the previous owners lived on the land, a black pig was sacrificed every seven years, its blood saturating into the roots of the tree, recalling the *daga* or ritual of bloodletting. Then, meat was prepared and cooked, served on a plate, and nested inside the tree where fairies held a feast. In turn, the fairies blessed the land for a bountiful harvest of rice.

Figure 2: The Mambog Tree, 2013. Photograph by Author.

Pockets of Time

In dislocation, the ethnographer attends to what Stewart (2011) calls a 'pocket' or the practice of 'attending to a space opening out of the charged rhythms of the ordinary', inviting one 'to see what might be in it' (p. 446). For me, the jolt presented not just a spatial displacement, but an errant pocket of time that, however briefly, dis-accustomed the usual terms of time. Bliss Cua Lim (2009) might call this 'immiscible time', where depictions of the supernatural in film present 'traces of untranslatable temporal otherness […] multiple times that never quite dissolve into the code of modern consciousness, discrete temporalities incapable of attaining homogeneity with or full incorporation into a uniform chronological present' (p. 12). Drawing on the philosopher Henri Bergson's notion of duration and its fluid understanding of time, Lim underscores how colonial power structures have perpetuated a universal narrative of time as linear and measurable, thus reinforcing oppressive hierarchies where time is a gauge of progress or capitalist productivity. Her analysis opens the possibility of exploring diverse temporalities, where ghosts and pre-colonial spirits are not exiled as anachronism.

What happened on the jeepney did not occur in the medium of cinema yet could not be separated from *mari-it* spectrality and the return of co-presence as sensation located deep within my childhood memories. For several years I had been a close reader of Sigmund Freud's (1919) classic essay on the psychological phenomena brought together under the concept of 'the uncanny', and my initial reaction to such an event as the jeepney jolt—in which flashes of childhood memory were interwoven with unusual suppositions transgressing the temporality and physics of the world as I knew it—was to interpret this through the lens 'the return of the repressed'. While the 'return of the repressed' as concept is found in a clinical essay, what had drawn me to his thesis on the uncanny was its deep consideration of affect within overlapping discussions of literature, anthropology, and the deceptive mundanity of secular modernity.

Yet what happened to me that day on the jeepney was an experience from which a different sensibility for ethnographic research would develop, precisely because Freud, for me, remained in Vienna. *Mari-it* was not 'the Visayan uncanny', as a specimen of experience in which traces and affects of a Hilagaynon world disrupt the equilibrium of an ego theretofore sustained by the

culturally bounded coordinates of Western modernity—as Freud's clinical method, the writings derived from it, and the writings interpreting it, seek no further than to observe and resolve this disturbance of the individual Western subject. The 'uncanny' is, from Freud's studies and formulations, a profound discomfort and unease, sometimes bordering on fear and panic, interpreted and domesticated by the scientific practice of psychoanalysis. What I was experiencing within the domain of *mari-it* was different in at least one, fundamental, manner. The experience of 'time-out-of-joint' was not a psychological lesion to which a Western doctor administered a cure, but a temporal contradiction in colonial time by which social life of the postcolony was a critical praxis of, contra Freud, a productive if not revelatory rupture. Perhaps an anticolonial praxis could be to dwell with dislocations where temporal elitism and exclusion, as described by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007), Johannes Fabian (2014) and others, becomes itself anachronistic.

Lim reads cinema of the supernatural as a site that strains against the naturalised idea that time is only 'homogeneous, empty time'.[2] What if encounters with *mari-it* as they arise unanticipated, sometimes brief, yet overflowing with intensities, were not dismissed, reduced by explanation, but regarded as methodologically instructive on their own terms? Over the last decade, emerging paradigms such as the pluriverse, multispecies, and other conversations reevaluating the distinction between ontological and epistemological have nurtured experimentation in ethnographic practices such that, for me, not only allows for the possibility that a *mambog* tree is as much an interlocutor as a person known as a *babaylan*, but that the ethnographic practices through which interlocutors are encountered in the first place, must always assume multiplicities of social relations—as yet unaccounted for—dwelling between a *mambog* tree and a *babaylan*. Here I understand Haraway's case for 'staying with the trouble' as a nudge in the right direction, wherein unruly insights of disorderly data sets become a horizon that inspires ethnographic endurance rather than the vertigo of misrecognition.

[2] Here, of course, I am referencing German cultural critic Walter Benjamin's famous phrase from his 1940 collection of aphorisms, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

Methods of Enchantment

As I came to understand, the enchantment of the *mambog* tree was rather common lore around Santa Barbara. Following my jeepney experience and the conversations with Placida and others, I returned to see the spirit healer Nemie—excited to have deciphered 'jeepney as method' and, in the process, found my attention redirected into blindspots and peripheries of awareness. Encounters with *mari-it* were not a rarified encounter with eco-cosmological relations of the pre-colonial world as anachronism, but frequently sites where the frameworks for social life assembled by discourses of colonialism and modernity, and the existing lifeways outside of it, co-constituted a semiosis of ontological contestation that ranged from unusual sensations within the individual, to surreal and catastrophic spectacles that had been witnessed collectively. The section of the highway known to be *mari-it* was nearly two kilometres long, though the *mambog* tree seemed a condensation point of some kind. Nemie asked if I had seen it—which I had not.

The following day my friend Tita Glo offered for her and her nephew, Erwin, to accompany me to the jeepney stop nearest the tree, to show me the field where a subtle path indicated the way. Friends urged against this—the consequences of approaching the tree being unpredictable, and not to be taken lightly. I told them I only intended to photograph it, and from a distance. Even Erwin, who had been interviewed by Korina Sanchez in 2015, had escorted the camera crew around town but not near the tree.

We de-boarded by a familiar rice field, the edge of which had overgrown with banana trees that obscured any possible view of the *mambog* tree. 'This way', Erwin said, stepping into the muddied field still saturated from rain the night before. We sloshed through the field as the sun beat down, the mud sucking at our shoes. Erwin found a break in the banana trees and once we emerged to the other side there was, perhaps fifty yards across a clear field, a single tree that stood a couple dozen feet tall and a diameter at the base of the trunk that implied it was one of the oldest living trees in the area. I stepped forward a few steps, framing a few landscape photographs, though Erwin, perhaps wisely, stayed behind. As I used the telephoto lens of the camera to zoom in and examine the tree's unusual trunk, a thick jumble of arboreal vines that had merged with the host

tree, I grew more comfortable with the proximity and turned around to ask Erwin if he could wait for me while I got closer. He nodded and stepped back.

The field between myself and the tree was more saturated and I struggled to walk through mud that nearly reached my knees. As I approached the tree, I pronounced my *tabi* and boldly decided to take refuge in its shade. I looked back across the field and waved to Erwin, who stood motionless observing me. For approximately twenty minutes, I photographed the tree and ran my fingers over its bark, sat down at its roots and watched the shadows of clouds move across the field. The most prominent feature was an opening in the trunk, which was, I think, the aperture described by those who recounted sacrificial and ritual offerings made to the *tamawo* for whom this tree was a densely populated space of dwelling.

When Erwin and I arrived back on the road, Tita Glo was waiting for me. They invited me to visit a friend nearby, who had prepared some lunch for us before heading back to the Santa Barbara Museum where I had set up a makeshift office. As we arrived at the house and were ushered inside to a table of rice, meat, and chilled papaya juice to rehydrate from the sun, I felt the desire to eat drain from my body as if the plug of a bathtub had been pulled from my big toe. Dizziness and disorientation followed, and Tita Glo ushered me quickly from the house and into a jeepney for the Cake House where I would spend the next several days in bed as fever, chills, and a montage of vivid dreams moved through my body—as if I were not exactly sick in any familiar sense, but within a vortex that was as much inside my body as beyond it.

Tita Glo and Aileen came to visit. My cousin, a doctor in the capital city, thought I must have a stomach bug and prescribed antibiotics, but Tita Glo was not convinced. 'Too sudden', she said to Aileen, who agreed. Lying ill for several days I felt I could observe the illness effacing the pre-conceived boundaries I had been unable to transcend, between myself and the tree, even as I had desired as much. Any hubris I harboured about being the active inquirer in relation to an inert tree dissolved, as I contended with a strong intuition that what was happening to me was a result of a certain inability to comprehend *mari-it* on terms other than my own. As an interruption of fieldwork, and not unlike the jeepney's jolt, this bodily distress itself estranged me from what I had up to that point been accustomed to in thinking about a human experience of affliction. In *How*

Forests Think (2013), the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn has remarked that this decentring of the human is an opening to a 'new kinds of we' which he describes as an 'ecology of selves' (p. 6). Kohn writes that '(a) we learn to attend ethnographically to that which lies beyond the human, certain strange phenomena come to the fore [...] if through this form of analysis we can find ways to further amplify these phenomena, we can cultivate and mobilise them as tools' (p. 22).

When *Mari-it* Came to Land: A Tale of the Tropical Gothic

In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan made international headlines as it ravaged the Visayas region of the Philippines. Though Santa Barbara was directly impacted, it also escaped the most devastating events. This is not to say that the first sign of rapid climate change began in 2013. Santa Barbara and surrounding areas were still reeling from a 2008 storm of unusual power, Typhoon Frank. In a village called Villa Juanita, adjacent to Santa Barbara, a local resident created a YouTube video titled, 'Frank, You Haunted Us' (2008). In the aftermath of Typhoon Frank, a story had been circulating about a boy who went from house to house asking for water. After being refused by several households, the boy was reported to have said to an unspecified family at the centre of this tale, 'just wait for the right time, I will give you a lot of water'. The next day Typhoon Frank made landfall, and the family's barrio was underwater. Not unlike the failure to make an offering to the *mambog* tree, the devastation of Villa Juanita was attributed to angry *taglugar* who had been refused an offering. The video inscribes a narrative where environmental catastrophe and ecological injustice converge through mythical awareness—precisely the kind of understanding that Alicia Magos advocated for. However, as Anthropocenic calamities intensify, such vivid accounts risk being eclipsed by newer disasters. Their interpretive potential gradually vanishes into the slipstream of daily life's unrelenting disruption.

Before I left Santa Barbara to return to the U.S. one summer I visited Placida, who often spent her days sitting by a window in her house, looking out at the Santa Barbara Highway. I was talking about Primavera's tree farm, and the grove of *bubog* trees on top of which a shopping mall might be enchanted by more than the fetish of the commodity, when Placida asked if I had heard of the people who looked towards the *mambog* tree and had seen visions of wooden ships, and heard the sound of foghorns. I had not. 'Go see the family that has a coffee stand, just beyond

where the road stops being *mari-it*', she said. I found the coffee stand, which was in the shade of several *bubog* trees. 'Not only the wooden ships', the couple told me. 'We could smell the salty air of the ocean'. From that coffee stand to the beach itself was several hundred kilometres. I had learned from members of the Iloilo Native Tree Society that *bubog* trees were relatively rare inland because they were native to the sea. When I spoke to Placida that evening, and told her what the couple had said, she was unsurprised. 'Makes sense', she said, as I remembered that, from Magos' work with fisher communities, *mari-it* was initially a way of describing the sea. Visions of wooden ships were not only revenant irruptions of colonial time, but of geologic time, as rising sea levels and intensifying storms denaturalise nature and *mari-it* floods onto land.

Conclusion

Drawing on the 'tropical gothic' as an expression of postcolonial modernity in the Philippines, I have intimated that the Hilagaynon cultural form of *mari-it* provides a critical response to Western epistemological frameworks that foreground linear time, rational visibility, and human-centred hierarchies of being. The concept does not simply mark spaces as 'enchanted' or 'taboo', but unbounds categories of knowledge towards a richer argot for world-making.

My own encounters with *mari-it*—from childhood memories of my aunts' careful negotiations with invisible presences, to the jarring suspension of linear time during the jeepney incident, to my fevered dialogue with the *mambog* tree—demonstrate how a 'tropical gothic' demands we move beyond both romantic indigeneity and scientific scepticism. We might instead find in *mari-it* sensibilities a decolonial ecoGothic orientation for engaging with our present moment's contradictions—one that cultivates both practical vigilance and profound wonder as our world grows increasingly unpredictable and enchanted in ways Western modernities may evermore fail to apprehend.

BIOGRAPHY

Christina Verano Sornito Carter is an associate professor and co-director of the App State Ethnography Lab in the Department of Anthropology at Appalachian State University. Christina is currently at work on a book manuscript, *In the House of Santa Regla: Spectres of the Tropical Postcolony*, which examines the convergence of global capitalism, colonial histories, indigenous spirit worlds, and rapid climate change in the central Philippines. In addition, Christina writes, makes films, and directs surrealist theatre that touches on the themes of dreams, sorcery, the human and more-than-human experience of climate change in the tropics, intergenerational trauma, figures of 'modernity' in Southeast Asia, and decolonising trajectories in media anthropology. For Sornito, sociocultural anthropology is an expansive zone of experimentation where cultural norms built on inequality can be transfigured into speculative forms based on social justice and unbounded joy. She has done long-term fieldwork in the Czech Republic and the Philippine Islands.

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Decolonising EcoGothic and Pestilential Colonialism in *The Last Man*

Jiwon Min

ABSTRACT

The Last Man (1826) by Mary Shelley is the story of Lionel Verney, the last man alive on Earth after a rapacious plague accompanies sudden, ill-fated climate change at the end of the twenty-first century. Looking forward from 1826, Shelley not only foretells the risks of an idyllic, Romanticised version of nature, but also reveals the dangers of environmental catastrophe and the limitations of anthropocentrism when nature reclaims the planet. This paper uses the term ecoGothic to connect different fields and trace common themes in representations of a global pandemic and subsequent environmental transformations. Through an ecoGothic reading of *The Last Man*, I interrogate the interactions between humans and nonhumans when human control over nature disintegrates. In a call to decolonise the ecoGothic, I specifically scrutinise moments in *The Last Man* where the nonhuman entity—the unnamed Otherness—initiates recognition and fear in the coloniser, much like the fear of reversal in *Frankenstein* (1818). In *The Last Man*, Shelley radically reimagines the travel narrative as a decolonial and ecological critique, transforming the genre into a provocative exploration of imperial vulnerability and environmental catastrophe.

By situating the plague as a dynamic metaphorical system that exposes the intrinsic violence of colonial expansion, this essay explores the ways in which Shelley deconstructs traditional boundaries between geographical movement, imperial ambition, and ecological destruction. The novel's unique contribution, I contend, lies in its proposition that environmental catastrophe—embodied through the uncontrollable spread of plague—becomes the generative force that disrupts imperial narratives and reveals the fundamental interconnectedness of human, ecological, and colonial systems of destruction. Unlike conventional travel narratives that reinforce imperial fantasies, I demonstrate how Shelley

uses the plague as a subversive mechanism that prefigures the potential decolonisation of England's imperial imagination. The travel narrative as such becomes more than a geographic movement, but a critical framework that exposes the systemic vulnerabilities of human civilisation, where disease functions as a metaphorical critique of imperial violence. By interweaving spatial dynamics with Gothic ecological anxieties, this essay shows how environmental and imperial catastrophes as depicted in Shelley's novel are not separate experiences, but mutually constitutive processes of systemic breakdown and potential extinction. This approach transforms *The Last Man* from a mere apocalyptic narrative into a prescient theoretical intervention that interrogates the violent intersections of environmental transformation, imperial conquest, and human precarity.

Introduction

For a world now teetering in collective anxiety over its attempts to comprehend rampant globalisation, worsening climate changes, and a racialised pandemic, perhaps no one has captured the experience of living during such crises better than Mary Shelley. Her novel *The Last Man* (1826) was generally referred to in its time as an apocalyptical novel, a dystopian science fiction, a plague narrative or a 'last man' tale but has since acquired new relevance as a work of purported 'prophecy', as its plot of disease amidst climate disorder unfurls uncannily for today's readers.[1]

[1] Olivia Murphy (2020), in her essay 'Guide to the Classics: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* Is a Prophecy of Life in a Global Pandemic', contextualises Shelley's novel within the historical backdrop of the early 19th century. Murphy highlights how the devastating losses of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815) and the global cooling caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815 made human extinction seem like 'a horrifying imminent possibility'. What sets Shelley's work apart from the numerous 'last man' narratives that preceded it, Murphy argues, is its unique portrayal of a new, unstoppable plague that leads to the collapse of the human population. Significantly, Murphy highlights how *The Last Man* portrays a world in which human control and dominance over nature have been shattered by a devastating pandemic. This loss of control leads to a sense of alienation and dread as the remaining human survivors navigate a radically transformed, post-apocalyptic landscape. At the same time, the novel suggests a newfound, unsettling intimacy with the nonhuman world as the boundaries between human civilisation and wild nature break down. Similarly, Jed Mayer's (2018) analysis of *Frankenstein* (1818) in 'The Weird Ecologies of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*' points out to the novel's depiction of a 'weird ecology' in which the lines between the human and nonhuman, the natural and the unnatural, become blurred. According to Mayer, the strange, liminal figure of the creature, with its 'watery, clouded eyes' (p. 229), embodies this unsettling ambiguity, reflective of our own ambivalent attitudes towards the nonhuman world in the face of ecological disaster. Furthermore, Heidi Scott (2014) made a case for the significance of the 1816 Year without Summer for both *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* in *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century*. Kate Rigby (2015) also argued that Shelley's novel depicts a 'scenario of socioculturally intensified vulnerability to a lethal pandemic' in *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (p. 52).

However, the novel has also been branded as 'Shelley's most demented and least rewarding book', described by Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb (2020) as being 'fucking metal' and 'very extremely extra' (p. 453). It is a complex tapestry of family drama, depressed characters, tumultuous shift from monarchy to republicanism in England, upheaval of traditional class structures, breaking down of borders, and tensions between East and West—all against the backdrop of a global pandemic (Ibid: pp. 451-453). In this article, I focus on the latter part of *The Last Man*, where the narrative takes on distinctly Gothic characteristics as the plot centres around the 'story of a rising goddess, the Plague' (Ibid: p. 452). Specifically, I examine how the plague functions as a powerful ecoGothic device that embodies Shelley's complex and ambivalent engagement with racial ideologies and Britain's imperial identity. As scientists warn that we are entering an age both of weird climatological changes and world-ending pandemic, Shelley's imaginative world offers a representation of the collective trauma and grief associated with global man-made catastrophes, and the pestilential characteristics of Western colonialism.

The Last Man begins with a frame story describing how the unnamed author discovers a fragmented narrative in the Sybil's Cave in the early nineteenth century, while much of the central story recounts the life and turmoil of a man named Lionel Verney in the twenty-first century. Verney is the last man who survives a global plague—one that spreads more quickly and effectively amidst unprecedented climate change like unseasonably warm weather, storms, and floods. As the human population drops dramatically, Verney witnesses how the planet thrives. His observations include what human remains and ruins look like and imaginings of what future intelligent beings may think of the dying or extinct human race. Working with the ecoGothic as a generative critical framework, I argue that *The Last Man* reveals the plague as a nonhuman agent that radically destabilises traditional boundaries between human agency and environmental forces, exposing the violence of colonialism through a narrative that renders disease as both a material and metaphorical manifestation of imperial decay. Shelley's text strategically mobilises the plague as an ecoGothic agent that simultaneously diagnoses the racial and socio-economic prejudices of the early nineteenth century, revealing how nonhuman entities can forcefully challenge and unmask the underlying ideological structures that construct racial Otherness. By presenting the plague as a transformative critical mechanism, the novel demonstrates how environmental

catastrophe can function as a revelatory force that disrupts and exposes the hidden mechanisms of social stratification and colonial violence.

In 2020, the early stages of the coronavirus sparked international debates that exposed underlying racial tensions, despite the virus affecting individuals irrespective of their economic, social, or racial background. The virus was called ‘mysterious’ and ‘wily’, and was Orientalised by health officials and government representatives alike (Normile, 2020). Gothic-laden reports of ‘Wuhan bat caves’ and a virologist nicknamed ‘bat woman’, together with dehumanising descriptions of Chinese wet markets where ‘exotic’ and ‘wild animals’ were sold for food, fuelled countless expressions of hatred towards all Asians—East Asian, South Asian, as well as Asian Americans (Briggs, 2020). What Western media called ‘travel bans’ were first imposed throughout East Asian countries, continuing through the summer of 2020, closing down all traffic going in and out of the Eastern continent. In Shelley’s imagination, this fear of the East is reimagined through the plague’s origin in the Ottoman Empire or Constantinople, reviving longstanding colonial anxieties about foreign threats. It has been noted that Shelley’s vision of the Ottoman threat is ‘an incessantly perpetuated melancholic attachment to a Romantic world-picture’ and the apocalypse ‘is the persistent vehicle for this world picture’ (Raza Kolb, 2020: p. 448). While Raza Kolb argues that Shelley opted to end the world in her story rather than to see the Muslim empire thrive, she delineates the ‘virus as final sovereign’ and reminds us that the coronavirus was named because of its appearance ‘in the shape of a crown’ (p. 448). I follow Raza Kolb’s concept of sovereignty ‘going viral—a spectre of a new wave of decolonisation as de-neo-imperialism’, but my argument stays within the realms of an ecocritical reading, and ‘the pathogenicity of the Other’ (p. 450). I suggest the plague is an ecoGothic agent, a biopolitical entity set to manifest and unnerve the colonisers with its obscurity, ultimately to decolonise the pestilential property of all forms of colonialism. It is not just an ‘Orientalist Apocalypse’ as Raza Kolb states (p. 451), but an apocalypse of coloniality itself—the worst human actor. While these theoretical frameworks illuminate the plague’s symbolic function, examining specific moments in the text reveals how Shelley deploys the ecoGothic to critique imperial power. The plague operates not just metaphorically but as an active agent of decolonial transformation, taking apart the foundations of colonial control it seems to mirror.

Shelley's EcoGothic Plague

To examine the ecoGothic is to examine the human complicity—specifically the European, White, developed world's or Global North's role—in the environmental problems present in *The Last Man*. While the plague emerges as the apparent external threat or monstrous Other, the ecoGothic moments ultimately expose a more profound insight: that humans are not separate from, but intrinsically embedded within, the ecological systems that appear to menace them. As Emily Adler and Jenny Bavidge (2020) argue, we are temporary dwellers, 'we are inside the other' (p. 228), and this 'other' is fundamentally ourselves and not nature—a critical realisation that dismantles the false dichotomy between human agency and environmental forces. Whereas Romantic contemporary nature writing often discloses feelings of nostalgia and speaks the language of loss and memory, the latter part of *The Last Man* stands in nihilistic opposition, undermining such romanticised biophilia.[2] Drawing on David Del Principe's (2014) insight, the plague becomes a force that 'serves to give voice to ingrained biases and a mounting ecophobia—fears stemming from humans' precarious relationship with all that is nonhuman' (pp. 1-2). The ecoGothic framework, as theorised by Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland (2019), operates as a lens that points to the fundamental instability of human systems, especially in relation to 'our fears of a lack of human/nonhuman divide' (p. 5). And given that the Gothic essentially investigates the 'fear that underpins both how we imagine and understand the material world', the ecoGothic effectively demonstrates renewed forms and narratives of Gothic Nature 'to provide a more immersive understanding of human relationships to the nonhuman than science alone can offer' (Ibid: p. 12).

In 'Theorising the EcoGothic', Simon C. Estok (2019) explains how, in essence, the ecoGothic framework reconceptualises threatening images of nature in Gothic literature through the lens of ecophobia—the often irrational fear, anxiety and dread towards the natural environment—that characterises the troubled relationship between the human and the nonhuman. Estok argues that the ecoGothic depicts the nonhuman as a powerful, menacing, and agentic force that challenges human control and disrupts the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman in grotesque ways, thereby revealing the dark roots of anthropocentric thinking and environmental

[2] Erich Fromm introduced the term biophilia in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), which described it as 'the passionate love of life and of all that is alive' (p. 366), an idea that humans tend to seek connections with nature.

destruction driven by phobia. As such, Estok asserts that the ecoGothic becomes increasingly relevant in discourses of ecological crisis, as it exposes the underlying anxieties and power dynamics that shape human-nonhuman interactions. In Shelley's novel, this manifests through three interconnected dimensions: the erosion of anthropocentric power, the futile struggles of class and racial hierarchies, and the existential anxiety produced by an uncontrollable, unidentifiable disease. By rendering these dynamics visible, the ecoGothic displays how seemingly stable social structures—imperial power, racial categorisation, economic stratification—disintegrate when confronted with nonhuman agencies like plague, revealing the profound precariousness of human existence. This means that the ecoGothic in *The Last Man* emphasises that there is no such thing as a safe position, unlike the traditional Gothic mode, which has frequently been used as a means 'for confronting (safely) that which is threatening, frightful, and culturally or socially reprehensible' (Hillard, 2009: p. 693).

In the novel, Shelley explores moments where an unnamed plague, the Other subject, elicits recognition and fear in the coloniser, echoing the fear of reversal that occurs in *Frankenstein* when the creature and Victor Frankenstein first make eye contact. Through *The Last Man,* Shelley anticipates the concept of decolonisation by envisioning the dismantling of England's imperial ambitions and imagining uncolonised (or perhaps uncolonisable) frontiers. The novel suggests that travel narratives inherently raise questions about imperialism and the potential for a reversal of colonial power dynamics. What distinguishes the novel is its depiction of a travel narrative catalysed by a biopolitical catastrophe—the uncontrollable spread of plague. The novel weaves together a complex tapestry of Gothic ecologies, socio-political and imperial decline, racially haunted landscapes, decaying urban spaces, and human exhaustion. This intricate interplay of genres positions the work as a significant contribution to the study of both decolonisation and the ecologically Gothic narrative. The novel's framing device, set in 2073, introduces the idea of a travel narrative through the discovery of fragmented prophetic texts in a cave. While this notion of the travel narrative is not always at the forefront, it permeates the novel as an underlying current. Simultaneously, the framing device brings to the surface the interconnected discourses of pestilence and imperialism. By juxtaposing the apocalyptic plague with the remnants of past civilisations and their prophetic warnings, Shelley highlights the destructive nature of colonialism, likening it to a pestilence that brings about ruin. Central to Shelley's work is the concept of the

ecoGothic, which intertwines the devastating impacts of the plague with the far-reaching consequences of colonialism. The novel posits that these two forces are inextricably connected, with the plague serving as a metaphor for the destructive nature of colonial expansion. Shelley's ecoGothic lens illuminates the anthropocentric calamity that stems from the imperial project, emphasising the interconnectedness of ecological devastation and societal collapse. In essence, *The Last Man* presents a multi-layered narrative that explores the entangled impacts of colonialism and ecological catastrophe: whenever the reader encounters the effects of the plague, they are simultaneously confronting the consequences of colonialism. Through this ecoGothic framework, Shelley proposes a radical re-envisioning of the world through the decolonisation of the inherently ecoGothic imperial project. The novel serves as a cautionary tale, warning readers of a potential future in which England's colonial power is overthrown and displaced. By depicting the collapse of society in the face of the plague, Shelley urges readers to imagine the unsustainable nature of imperialism, foreshadowing the dire consequences that await if the colonial project continues unchecked.

Barbara Johnson (2014) describes *The Last* Man as 'the limit narrative of decapitation, of the cutting off of the human head with which we look at all things', and that the stories are written in a 'postplague', 'postrevolutionary', and 'postuniversal' language (p. 10). This characterisation highlights the novel's dichotomous structure, often divided into pre- and post-plague sections, or the A plot and B plot, with the former focusing on romance and the latter on crisis. In the following analysis, I focus on the crisis narrative, where the novel stages the East-West conflict as a totalising tragedy that engulfs the romance, the A plot, the pre-plague world. As the story unfolds, political unrest, war, plague, and imperial expansion relentlessly assault the characters and landscapes, subjecting them to immense existential pressures. Amidst this turmoil, the plague emerges as a profound metaphorical entity—a hyperobject, as first coined by Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought* (2010) and later defined by Ian Buchanan in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2018) as referring to 'an object or event whose dimensions in space and time are massive in relation to a human life, e.g. a black hole, the Amazon forest, an oilfield, and especially climate' (p. 18).[3]

[3] The concept of the hyperobject was initially developed to provide framework for understanding and discussing human actions that have far-reaching, long-lasting consequences on a global scale. These actions, such as those contributing to climate change, have impacts that extend well beyond the lifetimes of the individuals or generations responsible for them.

Drawing on this theoretical framework, the plague in *The Last Man* functions as an overwhelming, temporally and spatially expansive force that disrupts human attempts at control and understanding. The plague operates as a complex, sentient force that erodes the foundations of human existence, exposing the fundamental vulnerability of humanity in the face of larger, incomprehensible processes. By personifying the plague as 'Queen of the World' (p. 346), the narrative suggests a deeper, more mythic understanding of catastrophic systems, implying that the plague is an intricate, multifaceted entity that defies human comprehension and control. This divine personification underscores the plague's profound impact on the human world, as it relentlessly erodes the social, political, and economic structures that once seemed stable and enduring:

> 'I see plague. She has invested in [the Creator's] form, is incarnate in his flesh, has entwined herself with his being, and blinds his heaven-seeking eyes. Lie down, O man, on the flower-strown earth; give up all claim to your inheritance, all you can ever possess of it is the small cell which the dead require. Plague is the companion of spring, of sunshine, and plenty. We no longer struggle with her. We have forgotten what we did when she was not. Of old navies used to stem the giant ocean waves betwixt Indus and the Pole for slight articles of luxury. Men made perilous journeys to possess themselves of earth's splendid trifles, gems and gold. Human labour was wasted—human life set at nought. Now life is all that we covet; that this automaton of flesh should, with joints and springs in order, perform its functions, that this dwelling of the soul should be capable of containing its dweller. Our minds, late spread abroad through countless spheres and endless combinations of thought, now retrenched themselves behind this wall of flesh, eager to preserve its well-being only. We were surely sufficiently degraded' (p. 316).

As defined by Rowan Williams (2017), plague as a metaphor is understood 'as the stroke of a hostile agent [that] prompts us to examine our memories, to retell our stories, so that we can discover what we ought to negotiate about and with whom' (p. 196). The metaphorisation of the plague is about losing the sense of human agency and shows 'a way of identifying what needs to be purged or expelled from the suffering community' (Ibid: p. 197). However, what Williams

points to is not necessarily a paralysing perspective, but to use the plague—a nonhuman entity—as a potent vessel to manifest other kinds of disorder in the human world. By breaking the harmony of nature, disorienting bodies, displacing habitats, and rendering the world unfamiliar, the plague in Shelley's novel is an ecological actor that disrupts the delicate boundaries between human agency and natural systems, thereby interrogating contemporary social and ecological upheavals. Yet, this plague is not merely a contagion; it is a sentient ecological agent that exposes human complicity in environmental destruction and imperial violence. Through its relentless progression, the plague reveals human pretensions to control and exploit the natural world. Humans are, therefore, demoted from agents of conquest to vulnerable organisms, reduced to automata of flesh, and the globe-trotting imperial activities for 'slight of luxury', 'splendid trifles', and 'gems and gold' are made to appear as mockery (p. 316). EcoGothic literature often portrays Nature as a conscious, responsive entity that reacts to human transgression.[4] Drawing on the ecoGothic portrayal of Nature as a conscious force, the plague in *The Last Man* can be interpreted as a kind of collective ecological intelligence—a punitive force that knows and responds to human transgressions. It transforms human experience from expansive exploration to radical confinement. As the imperative to survive overwhelms all other motivations, humans are forced to relinquish their inherited right to roam and exploit planetary resources. The novel's evocative language captures this radical contraction of human experience rather melodramatically: 'our minds, late spread abroad through countless spheres and endless combinations of thought, now retrenched themselves behind this wall of flesh' (p. 316). This metaphorical compression represents more than physical limitation—it signifies a psychological reduction. Humans are not just quarantined in physical spaces, but within the increasingly restrictive boundaries of their own 'small cell' (p. 316)—their embodied existence. The plague therefore becomes a sublime force of ecological reckoning, stripping away human assertions and reinforcing the precarious nature of our species' relationship with the living world.

Meanwhile, the unpeopled world of *The Last Man* flaunts its verdant jubilance. The world, stripped of its human inhabitants, erupts into an almost supernatural ecological renewal that

[4] For example, as explored in Tom J. Hillard's (2017) '"Perverse Nature": Anxieties of Animality and Environment in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*', the wilderness is depicted as a living, threatening presence that responds to the protagonist's intrusion.

presents a paradoxical tableau—landscapes so lush and blooming that they simultaneously evoke mystical wonder and Gothic unease, their beauty rendered hauntingly sublime by human absence:

> ‘We rowed lightly over the Laguna, and entered Canale Grande. The tide ebbed sullenly from out the broken portals and violated halls of Venice: sea-weed and sea monsters were left on the blackened marble, while the salt ooze defaced the matchless works of art that adorned their walls, and the sea-gull flew out from the shattered window. In the midst of this appalling ruin of monuments of man’s power, nature asserted her ascendancy, and shone more beauteous from the contrast. The radiant waters hardly trembled, while the rippling waves made many sided mirrors to the sun; the blue immensity, seen beyond Lido, stretched far, unspecked by boat, so tranquil, so lovely, that it seemed to invite us to quit the land strewn with ruins, and to seek refuge from sorrow and fear on its placid extent’ (pp. 438-439).

Thus, the plague operates on what I call a weird loop—a conceptual framework that obstructs linear narratives of ecological progression. This term describes a recursive, non-linear process where cause and effect become cyclically entangled. In the ecologically Gothic context, a weird loop suggests a reimagining of environmental relationships, where human destruction inadvertently creates conditions for ecological regeneration. By removing humans, the plague paradoxically enables a form of ecological restoration that challenges anthropocentric narratives of environmental control. The novel hence becomes a critical text within broader discourses of the Anthropocene, climate change, and pandemic dynamics, while simultaneously advancing a decolonial ecological perspective. The immobilised human population then becomes spectral remnants, while the plague dismantles existing social and imperial structures. Drawing parallels with the human-monster relationship in *Frankenstein*, the novel presents a complex, problematic allegory of plague as an Oriental force devastating the Western world—a narrative that critiques and reproduces colonial anxieties. Shelley constructs a nuanced paradox: she challenges imperial narratives while remaining embedded in Western cultural assumptions. As Raza Kolb observes, Shelley is fully ‘committed to the superiority of Western culture and its political philosophies and economies’ (p. 454). The plague becomes an instrument of this ideological contradiction—an Oriental force that subverts European sovereignty while being constructed as a pathogenic Other,

an unnamed monster requiring destruction. This constitutes the novel's first weird loop—a recursive narrative mechanism where the very act of challenging imperial power reinscribes colonial logic. The plague is indeed an agent of transformation, but one that is fundamentally defined by Western perspectives. To decolonise the imagery, Shelley must invoke a monstrous agent powerful enough to dismantle imperial systems, yet in doing so, she negates the possibility of a Romantic ecological Eden. Young-Ok An (2005) takes this idea further, stating that '[t]he plague introduces ambiguity and paradox on a massive scale', and that the 'interpretations it invites […] do not lead to clear-cut answers' (p. 584). She calls the plague 'the agent of radical change' and references Percy Shelley's political radicalism in 'A Philosophical View of Reform' (1819-20), *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), and *Queen Mab* (1813), where, An notes, 'Shelley likens power to a pestilence' (p. 586):

> 'Power, like a desolating pestilence,
> Pollutes what'er it touches; and obedience,
> Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,
> Makes slaves of men, and of the human frame,
> A mechanized automaton' (Shelley, 1813: pp. 176-180).

The narrative therefore becomes an exploration of transformation, where the mechanisms of change are themselves deeply compromised by the very systems they seek to overthrow. The plague is neither pure destruction nor redemption, but a complex ecological and political negotiation that displays the limitations of imperial imagination. Furthermore, as this narrative of transformation requires the near-total evacuation of human presence, the narrative undergoes a fundamental inversion: 'Instead of human agents controlling the story, the plague controls it' (An, 2005: p. 586). This is not a simplistic personification, but a complex reimagining of agency. As the plague overwhelms human attempts at interpretation, regulation, or resistance, it represents a form of ecological presence that exceeds human comprehension—a force that writes its own narrative of transformation. By rendering human systems obsolete, the plague exhibits a transformation that challenges assumptions about human exceptionalism and planetary governance.

As I employ the ecoGothic as a potentially generative framework to think about the plague, the second weird loop emerges as Verney notices the first sign of the plague as an omen: a 'black sun' that darkens the sky, one that caused darkness to fall 'sudden, rayless, entire' (p. 224). It is interesting that Verney describes this weird phenomenon as occurring in 'every country', underscoring the world's oneness in the face of environmental or atmospheric changes. However, immediately before and after this statement, Verney clarifies that this black orb would never cast its shadows on England, as if to privilege England's position as an unaffected nation. He emphasises that the black sun never looms over England, while simultaneously framing the darkness as a singular phenomenon from the East. Stories quickly spread that this darkness is 'brought to us from the East, […] from Asia, from the eastern extremity of Europe, and from Africa as far west as the Golden Coast' (p. 224). Here, Verney adheres to the plague narratives embedded with the myths of 'epidemiological Orientalism' and European exceptionalism (Fielder & van Munsteren, 2021: p. 205). Laura Otis (1999) also illustrates the affinity between political and biological thinking in the nineteenth century, as Europeans 'became horrified when the cultures, peoples, and diseases they had engulfed began diffusing, through their now permeable membranes, back toward their imperial cell bodies' (p. 5). Verney affirms the plague language that imagines disease as a foreign entity, one that has been deeply entrenched in the public imagination even to this day. Yet, Shelley recycles this myth into a weird loop. Verney later learns that the efforts of distancing England from the East turns out useless against the actual attack of the plague. As Ranita Chatterjee (2014) argues, 'in these resulting effects of the Plague's tyrannical rule, we see that her power is neither localized nor traceable. This apocalyptic Plague functions more like the Law that exists through and in the sovereign and with the capacity to rule over and control human bodies' (p. 39). If we read beyond the stories of its origin, the plague ruthlessly attacks all human bodies, forcing humans to abandon all—nationality, race, class: 'When I am a plague-spotted corpse, where will my duties be? Every man for himself!' (p. 177); 'there is no help!—great God, who talks of help! All the world has the plague' (p. 175).

The death-driven plague, described as 'enemy to the human race' (p. 175), blurs the distinctions between nations and ironically achieves a form of social restructuring that echoes the idealistic political visions of Adrian the Earl of Windsor, one of the novel's key characters who befriends and influences Verney. Adrian, a visionary political reformer, had passionately

advocated for comprehensive social change, dreaming of a society characterised by economic equality and republican governance. His aspiration was 'to effect a greater equalisation of wealth and privilege' (p. 170), and to introduce a 'perfect system of republican government into England' (p. 30). The plague, in its indiscriminate destruction, perversely accomplishes what Adrian's political efforts could not—completely erasing national boundaries and social hierarchies:

> 'Poor and rich were now equal, or rather the poor were the superior, since they entered on such tasks with alacrity and experience; while ignorance, inaptitude, and habits of repose, rendered them fatiguing to the luxurious, galling to the proud, disgustful to all whose minds, bent on intellectual improvement, held it their dearest privilege to be exempt from attending to mere animal wants' (p. 223).

By eliminating human populations without regard for nationality, class, or status, the plague becomes an unintended agent of social transformation. It obfuscates divisions between nations in a manner far more absolute than any human political movement could achieve, emphasising the fragility of human-constructed societies. In turn, the plague creates a verdant oasis, not available for humans but for everything that is non-human. Shelley proposes a postapocalyptic vision of an Eden that disagrees with normal imperial expectation, one that decolonises all humans or human influence. If the British settlements around the world were broadcasted as a recreation of eternal Edens, Shelley overwrites this myth with a new, vexing plague narrative. The plague in *The Last Man* overturns the colonial bearings: from England's outward global direction to the plague's uncompromising cycle inward, as diseased refugees seek England to deflect the plague. These contagious and nationless bodies signal the return of the repressed, as if to accomplish what the imperial project of colonial expansion failed—to create an Edenic space at home. The reverse colonialism reproduces an ecological utopia on British soil, and the imperial projects are taken back to create a weird loop condemning Romantic imperialism.

In a unified world—or, more precisely, a world where there are no boundaries (or hierarchies or categories)—the plague demonstrates England's vulnerability to outside penetration and global expansion. Unlike the dwelling of the depleted souls, the plague accomplishes ease of travel. Its seemingly miasmic transmission emphasises its stealthy, indefensible, and unpredictable

attack, enhancing the terror it holds. Furthermore, the plague resists identification: 'the grand question was still unsettled of how this epidemic was generated and increased. If infection depended on the air, the air was subject to infection' (p. 231). Siobhan Carroll (2014) terms this phenomenon as 'atmospheric cosmopolitanism' and argues that it was dictated by 'Shelley's contemplation of 1816's international ecological crisis and by her consideration of Briton's responsibilities towards colonial members of their expanded empire' (p. 9).[5] The concept of a shared atmosphere or ecology in *The Last Man* evokes anxieties about global interconnectedness, making the colonisers uneasy as they confront the notion of a penetrable, 'looped' planet where the boundaries between the coloniser and the colonised become obscured.

Notably, the initial encounter with the plague is significantly mediated by economic circumstances. The plague exposes places and positions of Britain's global economy of '[b]ankers, merchants, and manufacturers, whose trade depended on exports and the interchange of wealth, become bankrupt' (p. 234). As the plague spreads, 'even the source of colonies was dried up, for in New Holland, Van Dieman's Land, and the Cape of Good Hope, plague raged' (Ibid). Here, Shelley dredges up one of the fundamental problems of the colonial spaces in a post-apocalyptic reality; if the colonies start drying up, the economy will be in distress, and these settlements will soon lose their significance as everlasting Edens. Paradoxically, it is only after these settlements lose their imperial rule (when the Empire is demolished) that the ideal Eden becomes an ecoGothic reality. This is the irony the ecoGothic mode pushes towards: in seeking to understand uncontaminated ecological spaces, Shelley insists on the plague's unpredictable mobility that challenges human attempts at control. Hence, the plague becomes an agent ironically subjugating humanity through its own ecological logic. Just as Romantic imperialists sought to rewrite colonial

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[5] According to William K. Klingaman and Nicholas P. Klingaman in *The Year Without Summer: 1816 and The Volcano That Darkened the World and Changed History* (2013), the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815 had significant impact on nations halfway around the world. They explain that 'throughout the winter of 1815-16, the spreading aerosol cloud from Mount Tambora' reduced the amount of solar energy that reached Earth, ultimately 'cooling global temperatures by reflecting and scattering sunlight' (pp. 18-19). However, unlike the immediate cooling effect in the Indonesian archipelago, 'the planet-wide cooling was a gradual process that took up to a year to be fully realized' (Ibid: p. 19). By early 1816, the results of massive volcanic ash cloud had altered the world's weather, resulting in a year without summer, often dubbed as 'The Year Without Summer'. Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron and John Polidori famously gathered at Vila Diodati in Geneva during this time, where they engaged in a friendly competition to write ghost stories, leading to the creation of *Frankenstein.* Klingaman and Klingaman provide important evidence that during the unseasonable weather, Geneva experienced an influx of tourists, particularly from England, and note, 'English tourists continued to flood into Switzerland—ten thousand, by one estimate' (p. 133). This crowding of Geneva by English tourists can also be seen as a small-scale example of the potential scenario in Shelley's latter work *The Last Man* where people flock to regions to avoid challenges posed by unusual weather and the impacts of a pandemic.

landscapes to suit their benefits and stories of conquest and adventure, the plague belligerently renovates the world and functions as an unexpected mechanism of decolonisation. The plague's movement is not random, but a deliberate ecological counter-narrative that crushes imperial fantasies of environmental domination.

The plague, then, is not only communicated by these imperial points of connection and spaces, but it is also a 'death-dealing' decolonising agent. In a grotesque reversal of colonial migration patterns, the plague sweeps across global populations, converging and concentrating its destructive force in England—transforming the imperial centre into a site of ultimate vulnerability as emigrants from North America flood back to Europe, and '[s]everal hundreds landed in Ireland' (p. 295). From there, the North Americans and Irish embark for England, passing through Scotland. Paul Cantor (1997) delineates this immigration as an 'Empire Strikes Back' moment, wherein 'the refuse of the British empire [comes] pouring back into the home country' (p. 195). The journey, the travel narrative of the plague, therefore, tracks Britain's imperial expansion with diseased bodies physically returning the problem of colonial conquest. Momentarily, Adrian perceives that 'the evil is come home to us, and we must not shrink from our fate' (p. 244). He refers to the plague not only within a context of travelling, but also in conjunction with the fact that the evil refers to the evils of the imperial projects. The plague and its accompanying environmental disasters force Britain to admit the consequences of its colonial undertakings. The narrative span of *The Last Man* is thus compressed from a global scale to a localised ruin—Britain. As the plague evolves, hoarding more and more diseased or dead bodies, the novel spirals down to focus on the experiences of the last remaining survivors, and finally to the last man himself.

The Return of the Pestilential Colonialism

As the novel unfolds its panoramic vision of global imperial devastation, the plague triggers the Romantic-era insecurity about planetary comprehension. This reflects the consciousness articulated by William Blake (1810), that '[t]he whole extent of the Globe is explored'—a realisation that provokes existential insecurity about the limits of human knowledge and control (quoted in Wright, 2000: p. 131). Julia Wright (2000) considers how *The Last Man* is 'an extended refutation of reassuring representations of England as a well-defended sanctuary' (p. 131). She

argues that Shelley's focus is Romantic insecurity, which stems from a 'tension between the infinite imagination and the scale of global geography' that 'critiques key discursive strategies for coping with imperial space as England turned outward to establish what would become the Victorian empire' (Ibid: p. 131). Wright further emphasises 'the geographical diminutiveness of England' and 'the anxiety of being physically inconsiderable' as Verney is located on a 'nook' or a 'speck' (p. 131). By illustrating the agency of the plague, An develops the British nationalist subject by examining how the plague is resurrected as 'a racial scapegoat, thus locating a complex ideological juncture of racial(-ised) power dynamics' (p. 595). Following Wright's and An's observation, my interpretation focuses on the colonial reverse, the return of the colonising bodies, which signals the repressed colonialised bodies that stir up racialised *unheimlich*, the Gothic sensibility. Therefore, it is not so much about the insecurities of a shrinking empire, but rather the slow but violent invasion of the plague (a.k.a. the colonised bodies) that paralyses Verney—the last White man. It is the fear of contraction of the unidentifiable disease—a once far away figment of imagination—via a colonised body, and the fear of diminishing distinction between the coloniser and the colonised that terrifies him.

In one of the most dramatic moments in Volume 3, the plague hits close to Verney's home. On this day, Idris learns that Alfred is dying and leaves home to look for Verney, who has been patrolling the town with Adrian. Verney, however, misses Idris and arrives back home at Windsor Castle to encounter the plague. This confrontation hits its climax when the plague carrier—a physical embodiment of mystery and nonhuman agency—is identified as 'a negro':

> 'I felt my leg clasped, and a groan repeated by the person that held me. I lowered my lamp, and saw a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease, while he held me with a convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, and fell on the sufferer; he wound his naked festering arms round me, his face was close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea; till, reflection returning, I sprung up, threw the wretch from me, and darting up the staircase, entered the chamber usually inhabited by my family' (pp. 336-337).

The use of the term 'negro' in the text prompts an immediate recognition of the dying victim as Black. The Black presence is reminiscent of the black sun mentioned earlier, but what is most noteworthy in this passage comes next: as soon as Verney 'sprung up' and 'dart[ed] up the staircase' to 'the chamber usually inhabited by [his] family', he meets 'Clara trembling, and paler than whitest snow' (p. 337). The Black victim downstairs is counter positioned by the whitest of White angel-of-the-house figure upstairs. This moment could be, and has been, interpreted as the dark burden of the British Empire that reinforces the colonialist's anxiety (An, 2005: p. 596). However, it is also important to highlight how the anxiety is magnified via the face-to-face encounter. Shelley explicitly portrays Verney's infection as a moment of physical contact, describing it as 'convulsive' and instinctively 'mixed [with] horror', as he collapses onto the affected (p. 336). This contrasts with her earlier depiction of the plague's transmission through air and underscores how contagion could operate through intimate touch. Here, I push against the analysis that posits Verney's moment of infection as a moment of exception, and instead interpret it as an extension of the novel's gradually diminishing possibility of space, and of colonial contraction. With shrinking population, the imagined spaces and physical landscapes steadily decrease in *The Last Man*, from the entire scale of the world to an islanded shelter, from random communities of survivors to one last man. When Verney is eventually left alone, he is a post-human left with his memories and reflections as the journal, the account, and archive of the human species.

The infected Black man represents not only the plague's mobility, transmission, and pestilential indiscrimination; he also represents that borders hold little meaning at the face of a global pandemic. The encounter between Verney and the Black victim amplifies an uncomfortable contact zone, a weird third loop, between the coloniser and the colonised. The above passage is not solely about geographical anxieties or about the oneness of the globe. When the infected grabs Verney, the repressed colonised body has returned, and the uncanny awakens him. As Mary Pratt (1992) explains, contact zones are 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (p. 7). Traditionally, the Black victim would have been observed as a subordinate or as a colonisable body, but also as a 'victim-turned-lethal-enemy' (An, 2005: p. 597). However, this scene, in its ecologically Gothic sense, complicates and reverses the typical power dynamic. It is the death-

inducing Black body that occupies Verney physically and restricts him by '[holding him] down with a convulsive grasp', and '[winding] his naked festering arms round [him]' (p. 336). The intermingled bodies manifest an uncanny representation, which could be read as a grotesque parody of the pervasive colonial motif of a kneeling, racialised figure upholding the greatness of the Empire—a pestilential yet decolonising moment is achieved. And in this case, the Black victim's gift is the plague that triggers Verney to fall 'on the sufferer […] and his breath, death-laden, entered [his] vitals' (p. 337).[6] Therefore, in this intimate scene, the world dramatically contracts to a microcosmic scale, simultaneously magnifying the visceral intensity of human vulnerability. The entire atmospheric expanse seems to condense into the charged space between bodies, creating a grotesque inversion of life-giving (or taking) breath. What emerges is a horrific parody of intimacy—a reversed mouth-to-mouth exchange where viral infection (or deadly air) is dispensed. This scene echoes a similar moment of horrific intimacy in David Fincher's *Alien 3* (1992), where the alien's encounter with Ellen Ripley reveals a metaphorical terrain of colonial encounter. As Anne K. Mellor (1998) notes, such interactions expose the complex dynamics of an 'unwilling but powerful embrace of the racial other' (p. xxiv)—a dynamic where contact itself becomes a form of violent transformation, disintegrating boundaries between self and other, victim and vector.

Up to this point of the novel, the plague's mode of transmission has remained shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. However, the confrontation scene with the Black victim crystallises the novel's engagement with race, disease, and colonialism. On one hand, Shelley's depiction of the racialised figure of the 'negro' reflects problematic discourses that linked Blackness to pathology, contagion, and death. This aligns with what Priscilla Wald (2008) has termed as 'outbreak narratives', a recurring and troubling trope that associates infectious disease with fears of racial contamination, casting Black individuals as primary agents of contagion (pp. 2-3). As Donna Haraway (1991) observes, the construction of the 'coloured' body as a source of infection, pollution, and decay was already entrenched in colonial contexts (p. 223). Yet, at the same time,

[6] Here I am alluding to Josiah Wedgwood's ceramic medallion of a kneeling Black man in chains asking, 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' (1787). Wedgwood's design was made to support the abolition of the slave trade. It is assumed that thousands of these medallions were distributed by the 1790s. Thomas Jones Barker's *The Secret of England's Greatness* (circa 1862-1863) also provides an interesting historical parallel; an oil canvas, Barker's painting depicts an African kneeling in front of Queen Victoria who is gifting a Bible in the Audience Chamber at Windsor.

the Black body's literal and metaphorical centrality in this scene—as both the agent of Verney's infection and the embodiment of the plague's decolonial force—disrupts colonial hierarchies and destabilises White Western subjectivity. As Verney is consumed by the racialised Other, Shelley highlights the permeability of bodies and borders in the face of global catastrophe, exposing the precarity of Britain's imperial project and the illusion of colonial control. Furthermore, this 'new space of the traversable atmosphere' debunks the mystery and 'the assumption that the air in England and the air of its current and former colonies are separate' (Carroll, 2014: p. 5). The mingling of bodies and environments underscores the inescapable entanglement between the empire and its colonies, directly challenging the Romantic-era belief in spatial separation and imperial dominion.[7] Shelley subverts the Romantic imagination of scale, challenging the colonial coping mechanism that positions the British coloniser at the centre, with the globe rotating around their circumference of power and perception.

Building upon the complex tensions of colonial representation, Shelley further destabilises racial and spatial boundaries through another provocative episode. In Volume 3 Chapter 7, a spectral figure appears as the 'Black Spectre' riding 'his coal black steed' and wearing a 'plume of black feathers' looking 'majestic and awe-striking' (p. 299). The Black Spectre is soon identified as a French nobleman, a spectral embodiment that both signifies the waning aristocracy and evokes the haunting memory of the Black Death.[8] Unlike the previous Black victim, however, this figure is White and mobile, traversing symbolic boundaries of race, class, and historical trauma:

> 'At another time we were haunted for several days by an apparition, to which our people gave the appellation of the Black Spectre. We never saw it except at evening, […]; his face, one said, who had seen it for a moment, was ashy pale; he had lingered far behind the rest of his troop, and suddenly at a turn in the road, saw the

[7] William Cowper's (1785) *The Task* offers a 'fancy' solution to master the problem of space by reassuring that England is safe at home if they are 'still at home' (p. 143). He suggests that the world should be 'contemplated at a distance' through a newspaper (p. 582).

[8] An earlier version of this analysis readily positioned the French nobleman as a coloniser. His presence on French soil, while English forces move through France, suggests a multilayered relationship. Rather than representing colonial power, he embodies the aristocratic order being replaced by both English imperial ambitions and the plague's indiscriminate devastation. This complication enriches our understanding of how the plague dissolves not just colonial hierarchies but all forms of social and national distinction.

> Black Spectre coming towards him; he hid himself in fear, and the horse and his rider slowly past, while the moonbeams fell on the face of the latter, displaying its unearthly hue. Sometimes, at dead of night, as we watched the sick, we heard one galloping through the town; it was the Black Spectre in token of inevitable death' (p. 299).

In other words, the Black Spectre is ultimately revealed to be a White coloniser who has become the embodiment of the plague (or Death itself) roaming, lingering, and galloping across the land. In this form, the coloniser not only spreads disease but also symbolises the relentless movement of pestilential colonialism.

This interpretation also reverberates the point that the plague carries agency or is a hostile agent. Williams (2017) identifies this pestilential character as 'an extra charge' (p. 196), which follows a way of reading the plague metaphor as something emotionally charged. In the European tradition, the word 'plague' was laden 'as a matter of divine punishment, and for seeing the possibilities of healing as bound up with an appropriate symbolisation of guilt' (Fielder & van Munsteren, 2021: p. 205). Shelley seems to follow Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert's (1765) definition in their *Encyclopédie* that 'La *peste* nous vient de l'Asie' (the plague comes to us from Asia) (p. 452), yet she is also playing along with this idea that, as a charged agent, the plague is capable to expose the pestilential character of the imperial project. Utilising this idea of pestilential colonialism, we can then think more about the decolonising effects of the plague as we recognise the plague as an ecoGothic agent that is charged to feed the Empire's hunger. Shelley conceptualises this hungry drive with literal hunger for death. Unlike the conventional reading of hunger which prompts the body to seek sustenance, *The Last Man* recasts imperial hunger as entropic. This interpretation is meaningful in a novel that largely licences circular conceptions of Romantic temporal movement such as seasonal changes. As the post-apocalyptic world suggests regeneration and regrowth for Nature, the plague limits such potential for humans as an act of decolonisation and condemnation of imperial ambitions by consuming its homeland (Britain). As hunger is referenced in relation to the plague, it also becomes an unavoidable symptom before death. The sick become 'wild with hunger' (p. 263), and so there is a symptomatic bond between bodily hunger and consumption by the plague. For example, Shelley describes the diseased farmers

'wandering separate from each other careless of hunger or the sky's inclemency' (p. 263), while they imagined that they avoided 'the death-dealing disease' (p. 269). Because they know that hunger could be a symptom of the plague, if one is careless to notice it, they could imagine the fantasy of immunity—to be hungry meant one is hungry for death. This is demonstrated by the disillusioned astronomer in the novel who was so captivated by his own work, that despite being at the point of starvation, he 'neither felt hunger, nor observed distress' (p. 289). He only recognises this primal drive in the aftermath of his family's death, realising that his hunger was, in fact, a symptom of the disease he had contracted.

In an interesting correspondence, Verney comments that 'the hunger of Death was now stung more sharply by the diminution of his food' (p. 320). Death is a hungry agent that has the same appetite as those infected by the plague.[9] However, unlike the diseased bodies who are ultimately consumed by the illness, Death also becomes a metaphor that successfully hunts for its food. As the novel reaches its pandemic climax, Death's hunger—the plague—is uncontainable, all-inclusive, and voracious. In one of the novel's memorable scenes, Verney, Adrian, and Clara—the few survivors—are submerged in a violent storm, during which their ship is 'hemmed in by hungry, roaring waves, buffeted by winds' (p. 441). Even at the end of the world, when the plague (or Death) has engulfed most of human population, it remains all-consuming. Therefore, it is significant to note that Shelley transforms this hunger as belonging to Earth itself as Death inhabits the 'hungry, roaring, waves' that drown Adrian and Clara. This demonstrates human vulnerability at the face of natural disasters and the environment. Even though its landscapes can appear welcoming and fruitful, it is simultaneously hostile and unknowable. For all its ecological abundance, the post-apocalyptic ecologically Gothic Eden leaves Verney's desire for kindred connections pathetic and useless, and all human social construction is futile, as he exists alone. Moreover, the contradictory racial ideology prompts the problematic mechanism through which the last man represents British national identity. This narrative strategy erases the colonial settlements and the racialised bodies within them by excluding them politically, literally, and historically.

[9] The hungry Death could also resonate with the 'Black Death' in Western memory.

A one-man Eden

The novel's fundamental irony is, then, that the damage caused by the plague turns the world into a supremely decolonised space or a supremely colonisable space. However, despite its alluring greeneries and thriving animals, Verney cannot be happy with this version of a one-man Eden:

> 'But where was the bustle and industry characteristic of such an assemblage; the rudely constructed dwelling, which was to suffice till a more commodious mansion could be built; the marking out of fields; the attempt at cultivation; the eager curiosity to discover unknown animals and herbs; the excursions for the sake of exploring the country? Our habitations were places, our food was ready stored in granaries—there was no need of labour, no inquisitiveness, no restless desire to get on' (p. 383).

In a decolonised ecoGothic narrative, Verney expresses a nostalgia for the markers of human civilisation—'rude constructed dwelling', 'the marking out of fields', and 'the attempt at cultivation'—that are now associated with ruins, travel, and the establishment of colonial settlements in a desolate world. This empty landscape evokes an unnerving and undesirable feeling, reflecting Shelley's critique of imperialism and the erasure of enslaved bodies central to Romantic-era colonialism. Moreover, Verney's anxiety about labour in this barren world can be interpreted as a conventional longing for a romanticised agricultural past, where English farmers worked seasonally to sustain themselves locally under predictable weather patterns. Paradoxically and disturbingly, this same aesthetic model was applied to distant colonial settlements like Jamaica, where it was portrayed as familiar and accessible in pictorial representations. For instance, George Robertson's famous engraving of Jamaican sugar plantations in 'A View in the Island of Jamaica of the Roaring River Estate' (1778) presents an unresolved tension between the romanticised portrayal of plantation slavery and the disturbing realities of enslaved life and labour. By presenting colonial life within the framework of the picturesque, such images sought to effectively erase the systematic violence and forced labour that underpinned the Caribbean sugar

trade. The widespread circulation of these sanitised visions of colonial Jamaica through reproduced engravings thereby worked to normalise slavery as benign and natural for British audiences.[10]

Ultimately, in *The Last Man*, the achievement of ideal colonial space is tied to the failure of nationhood and the fall of the Empire. When Verney leaves England, he laments, 'England, no more; for without her children, what name could that barren island claim?' (p. 412). As Charlotte Sussman (2003) asserts, Verney is 'a kind of anti-Adam' especially towards the novel's ending: 'not a powerful namer but a passive witness to global unnaming' (p. 295). Yet, Verney commits himself to write a story of the plague and compose a journal of death. Through his narration, in an attempt to 'name' the tragedy, he describes human vulnerability and the rebirth of the environment which mimics the colonial reports that justify the civilising progress of colonial spaces, as if to mock the White man's burden. However, upon completing the journal, 'Verney reverts to a less than human state', thereby losing sense of what and who he is (Chatterjee, 2014: p. 43). Verney states, 'my voice unused now to utter sound, comes strangely on my ears. My person, with its human powers and features, seem to me a monstrous excrescence of nature' (p. 340). As the last man, Verney cannot vocalise his identity nor distinguish himself from his environment; he becomes an awkward and superfluous presence in the landscape, much like the incongruous and subjugated figures in Robertson's depictions of idealised colonial scenery. Thus, Sussman's description of Verney as an 'anti-Adam' is especially perceptive because he experiences humanity's organic breakdown and becomes a mere backdrop. The Romantic fantasy, or perhaps the Westernised version of a colonial Eden, is now perfectly familiar and unsettlingly accomplished by erasing Verney. And readers of the novel may learn to share Verney's realisation

[10] Robertson's depictions deliberately obscure the brutal conditions of slavery by positioning enslaved figures in seemingly unproductive poses, often in the shadowed foreground, while highlighting the plantations' industrial machinery. Yet, the awkward presence of these figures disrupts the pastoral ideal, revealing the incompatibility between picturesque aesthetics and the violent exploitation upon which colonial sugar production relied. However, as Kerry Sinanan (2021) argues, it is precisely the uneasy depiction of the enslaved within the picturesque frame that renders visible the irreconcilable contradictions between slavery and the idealised landscapes imagined by Robertson and his patrons. Thus, while appearing to present plantation slavery as a picturesque ideal, Robertson's images actually betray the impossibility of reconciling pastoral conventions with the systemic violence and forced labour of Caribbean sugar production. This discordant presence of the enslaved themselves in these scenes points to the fundamental instability of such romanticised representations of colonial exploitation. Shelley's novel and Robertson's engravings, though created in different mediums and with different intentions, both reveal the troubling erasures and contradictions inherent in the picturesque aesthetics of the Romantic era when applied to colonial contexts. The anxiety and unease that permeate these works expose the impossibility of sustaining an idealised vision of agricultural labour and rural life in the face of the brual realities of imperial expansion.

that the pestilential aspect of humans' very existence is the end result of all colonising projects. It only leaves a one-man Eden.

Using the idea of pestilential colonialism thus enables us as readers to think more about the effects of the plague as a decolonising, ecoGothic agent; and yet, *The Last Man* nevertheless concludes with a conflicting or downright *weird* statement about Britain's colonial expansion. In the last chapter, Verney shows how he is suffering more from the loss of his beloved companions, especially of Adrian, than from the realisation that he is alone in the world. If we reiterate the autobiographical allusion of the novel, Verney's mourning for Adrian was often interpreted as Shelley's lamentation for the lost ideal, the idyllic Romantic (imperial) world. When Verney travels back to Rome, he declares himself as 'Verney, the last of the race of Englishmen, had taken up his abode in Rome' (p. 456), a rather self-aggrandising statement. Verney moreover decides to restart a new life in Rome, a symbol of one of the oldest and most aggressive human civilisations and colonial powers. This ending of a long ramble around the world circles back to the root of pestilential colonialism: the loss of Romantic idyll is replaced by another, more ancient Western civilisation. Yet again, Shelley continues to ridicule Verney's sense of hope to rebuild civilisation with the clear indication that there is no sign of another human in sight. And as Verney lives the ghost story of human civilisation, is Shelley mocking human existence by cutting off the possibility to a return of Windsor, Verney's childhood playground? Or is she reassuring the audience that there is a way back to the Romantic idyll, to where 'a beech wood stretched up the hill behind, and purling brook gently falling from the acclivity ran through poplar-shaded banks' (p. 17)? The nostalgic desire for a mythologised past collides with a violently destabilised, and decolonised world, exposing the ecological and colonial infringements that undermine Romantic fantasies of human exceptionalism.

In '"Fast lapsing back into barbarism": Social Evolution, the Myth of Progress and the Gothic Past in Late Victorian Invasion and Catastrophe Fiction' (2023), Ailise Bulfin shows how late nineteenth-century invasion and catastrophe fictions often used the familiar Gothic trope of doomed inheritance and collapsing borders to amplify the late Victorian anxieties of geopolitical expansion and the impact of industrialisation. According to Bulfin, the 'threatening versions of the past' in late-Victorian popular tales are manifested as 'barbaric' and 'atavistic', thus the haunting

terror to which Britain might relapse—despite of and due to her aggressive progress—encompasses the dire scenarios of mass death and foreign invasion (p. 38). While invasion fiction deploys the Gothic to gatekeep 'the historical barbarians', catastrophe fiction displays large-scale environmental disaster that elucidates 'intensifying population growth, resource extraction, and industrialisation' and the 'detrimental impact of Western development on the human and non-human worlds' (Ibid: p. 40). In this sense, both invasion tales and catastrophe tales share similar, if not identical, 'tropes of an ancestral terror and anxieties about breakdowns in the borders that divide racial, national, and class differences' (Edwards, Graulund & Höglund, 2022: p. xxiii). Therefore, Shelley's profound interest in transgression, excess and monstrosity positions *The Last Man* as a uniquely prophesying novel, serving as a precursor to late nineteenth-century invasion and catastrophe tales that hinge upon not just the Gothic trope but also the ecoGothic literary strategy.

This ecoGothic reading of the novel offers a critique of the anthropocentric linear comprehension of human time, space, and agency. Shelley explores the concept of the ecoGothic as a peculiar transformation from the familiar to the unfamiliar, envisioning a prosperous world devoid of humans. This literary strategy is particularly significant as it subverts traditional Gothic narratives that position nature as a threatening Other to be conquered and controlled—a trope fundamental in colonial perspectives. The narrative articulates a sense of macabre estrangement from the pristine, untarnished, decolonised Gothicscape, thereby challenging Western assumptions about humanity's dominion over nature. By depicting a thriving post-human landscape, Shelley's work contributes to the decolonial project of dismantling anthropocentric hierarchies and recovering alternative ways of conceptualising human-nature relationships that existed prior to colonial impositions. Extending this decolonial understanding, the ecoGothic tension underlying Shelley's imperial critique leads readers to recognise the hostility inherent in Verney's desire to preserve his Englishness. This approach challenges Romantic colonialist writings that perpetuated problematic Eurocentric myths about colonial spaces, serving as an effective tool to destabilise these myths and question traditions of anthropocentric order and colonial authority. Therefore, the novel resists simple resolution through its portrayal of an invisible, man-eating plague and uncontrollable environments. This unsettling narrative refuses to allow readers the comfort of taking sides, instead thoroughly rejecting the assumption that all lands, spaces, and even

imagination can be domesticated. Shelley's novel ultimately transcends its historical moment to offer a radical vision that continues to challenge contemporary readers. By refusing to provide easy narrative resolution or the comfort of human mastery, the text anticipates current environmental and decolonial discourses that question the foundations of colonial authority and control. More than just a Gothic tale of humanity's extinction, *The Last Man* serves as a prescient critique of the persistent colonial desire to domesticate both natural spaces and literary imagination.

BIOGRAPHY

Jiwon Min is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Oxford College of Emory University. Her research explores the intersection of Global Anglophone literature with Romantic and Victorian literary traditions, focusing on environmental humanities, decolonial studies, and climate change narratives. Currently, she is working on a book project that investigates the global literary and ecological impact of the 1883 Krakatau eruption. Through her analysis of periodicals, ecological surveys, and literary representations, Min examines the unprecedented ecological phenomena that emerged after the eruption, a concept she refers to as 'weather weirding'. Her research highlights how this event accelerated international media ecology, heightened awareness of global ecological interconnectedness, and influenced global literatures of the time. By incorporating local narratives from the most affected regions, Min addresses the imbalance in the representation of global literatures and provides a comprehensive understanding of the eruption's impact on both global and local scales.

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'Of What Sex Is Your Friend?'
Charles Maturin's (Almost) Nonbinary, Ecosexual Paradise and Colonial Primitivism in *Melmoth the Wanderer*.

Desmond Huthwaite

ABSTRACT

Albeit the delineation of a queer, ecosexual primitivism was likely not among Charles Maturin's conscious aims in depicting the deserted isle of Immalee during the telling of the 'Tale of the Indians', a queer, ecosexual primitivism he nonetheless comes tantalisingly close to delineating. The tale appears midway through Maturin's multi-layered novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), whose disconnected episodes relate the attempts made by the titular Melmoth to coax people in various states of extreme distress to accept the bargain he himself made with the devil, selling his soul for extension to his mortality. In a stark departure from the claustrophobic—and more conventionally Gothic—scenes of monastic, carceral, and subterranean confinement that immediately precede it, the island episode presents the reader with an unlikely ecoGothic idyll where humanity exists in harmonious and uninhibited relation to its natural surroundings. This harmoniousness and noninhibition extends to Immalee's sex life on the isle, which does not seem to suffer much from her being the isle's only human inhabitant.

Indeed, sexuality on the isle of Immalee has been contentedly unheedful of sex difference, and uninhibited by any partition of the human from the nonhuman, for as long as our teenaged heroine can remember, and it will be the task of the first part of this essay to propound the relevance of this tale to contemporary theories of ecosexuality. Yet all is not as queerly or ecosexually paradisical as it first seems. For even as this tale inserts a porous interspecies sexuality into the scene of the primal, it regretfully, and in a way that resembles the regretful primitivisms of contemporary queer ontology, fails to stand in solidarity with Indigenous and/or Black(ened) Peoples and their struggles. This failure of

solidarity becomes evident when Melmoth arrives on the island and immediately begins to introduce gradations of race, voyeuristically and superciliously showing Immalee nearby Indigenous life through a telescope. Sex difference may be momentarily bracketable on Immalee's isle, but even this deserted place is couched *a priori* in racialising inter- and intraspecies hierarchies, traversed by lines of differentiation between human and animal, White and Black, embodied and enfleshed. Thus the 'Tale of the Indians' offers itself as a reminder of something which is increasingly a central principle of contemporary queer and transgender studies: that our eagerness to celebrate examples of prototypically queer genders and sexualities must not block our attentiveness to how such queerness is imbricated in White supremacy and imperialism.

'Our ancestor was an animal which breathed water, had a swim-bladder, a great swimming tail, an imperfect skull & undoubtedly was an hermaphrodite! Here is a pleasant genealogy for mankind'.

—Darwin, 'Letter to [Charles] Lyell', 1860

'"Is your friend male or female", said the stranger.—"What is that?" answered Immalee'.

—Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, 2008 [1820]: p. 284

Some four decades before Charles Darwin offered this tantalisingly gender-abolitionist aetiology for humanity in a letter to his associate Charles Lyell in 1860, the oceanic and the genderqueer (if not exactly hermaphroditic) converge in Charles Maturin's 1820 novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer*. The convergence occurs in an episode which, like Darwin's letter, offers some speculations about mankind in its primitive state. The 'Tale of the Indians' is told at two removes: it is a story from the seventeenth century which the Spaniard Moncada is forced to transcribe after escaping the dungeons of the Inquisition, which he in turn relates to John Melmoth (the eponymous Wanderer's descendent) at the outermost layer of narrative in the obtusely disjointed Russian Doll structure of

this novel. The tale provides Maturin with the opportunity to stage a thought experiment which has long sponsored the fantasies of the colonialist imaginary: that of making contact with raw, primitive humanity in an unspoiled terrain. The setting is an island paradise 'in the Indian sea', which 'from the peculiarity of its situation and internal circumstances, long remained unknown to Europeans, and unvisited by the natives of the contiguous islands' (p. 272). This is a far cry from the monastic and castellar settings that we conventionally associate with the Gothic. It is also quite distinct from the third space that Lisa Kröger (2013) identifies as the privileged topos of the ecoGothic: the forest. However, while this island is topographically distinct from the more recognisable locale of the forest, it shares some of the formal properties that Kröger identifies the Radcliffean forest in particular as having: it is a space of 'solace, renewal, and protection' for a heroine, providing her with an 'air of liberty' which seemingly promises that she will be 'unobserved' by pernicious male characters (p. 17). While this latter point about liberty certainly plays into Maturin's sustained purpose of attacking the rigid and constraining doctrines of Catholicism, the presentation of such a 'third space' allows the novel to dip into a thoroughgoingly ecoGothic mode, one which shuns a 'human *versus* wilderness' paradigm in favour of 'a more encompassing "anotherness" which reconsiders binary oppositions that remain contained and conditioned within gender differences, the individual body, community and culture' to present a situation of human-nature entwinement that a contemporary posthumanism may take great relish in (Smith and Hughes, 2013: p. 8).

The oriental island is home to Immalee, a young white woman who initially seems to be a native of the otherwise unpeopled island, and who is taken to be a goddess by the inhabitants of neighbouring isles. Until the arrival of the wicked Wanderer from the West—and with him, an occidental episteme that privileges binaristic structures of knowing—our heroine has enjoyed a full and satisfying erotic life which is predicated on neither the division of the sexes nor the partition of the human from the nonhuman. To say that the 'Tale of the Indians' presents a scenario in which a character's embodied experience of eroticism collapses the boundaries between human and world that have historically underpinned antagonistic and anthropocentric models of human-nonhuman coexistence, is already to construe this tale as a boon to queer ecology's posthuman imaginary. And, to an extent, it is. Indeed, just as Darwin's 'queer plots' that deny the separability of human from nonhuman history have spurred scholars of the posthuman such as Donna Haraway

and Stacy Alaimo, so too might Immalee's tale be a source of inspiration for scholars invested in literary imaginings of human-nonhuman relationality (Brooks, 2021b; see Brooks, 2021a for a close examination of Darwin's sublimated avowal of universal nonbinary sexuation). Posthumanism, as Anya Heise-von der Lippe (2017) reminds us, 'confronts us with the instability and ultimate unsustainability of our most basic ontological category—the human—and challenges the tenets of Enlightenment humanism in the process' (p. 3), denying the oversimplified binaries, such as sentient, transcendent humanity vs inert, immanent nature, that dualistic Cartesian thinking has bequeathed us. The opening of the tale offers descriptive passages which portray an aesthetically and sensually rich existence on the island, as well as an eroticism that thoroughly and delightfully shatters the self-containment of the human. This presents us with a prototypical ecosexuality which it will be the first task of this essay to examine more closely.

Despite this staging of a relishable foray into the posthuman, the 'Tale of the Indians' transpires to be a cautionary tale as much as it is a thought experiment. This is because Maturin ultimately depicts not pure, unadulterated humanity, but rather specifically *White* humanity. Following the distinctions set out by critical race theory, we might say that he depicts the privileged category of the human rather than the denigrated category of (bare, immanent, flattened) *flesh*. This differentiation between full, White humanity and the not-quite humanity of Black and Indigenous people has led scholars such as Alexandre Weheliye (2014) and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) to conceptualise race not as process rather than ontology. It thus makes less sense to speak of Blackness as a static condition than of Black(ening) as a contingent but powerful process of hierarchising eligibility for entry into the human. As well as facilitating an ecologically progressive thought experiment about posthuman sexuality, the nominal primitivism of Immalee's island gives Maturin a stage for egregiously anti-Black projections, for delineating hierarchies of embodiment. His presentation of what seems to be humanity ground zero on the island is crossed with preconceptions about Whiteness's innate superiority over the coarse, underevolved flesh of the nearby Indigenous Peoples. Acknowledging this striation is an opportunity to check ourselves before too unequivocally celebrating the enmeshment of the human and nonhuman, or the presentation of nonbinary sexuality, and to recentre race and coloniality in our discussions of posthumanism and the ecoGothic. In its second part, this essay moves to undertake this check by considering how the flat and joyous ontologies that ecocriticism is fond of (in its celebrations of

our cellular propensity towards enmeshment and co-constitution, for example) tend to blur over inequalities in relations that take place above the level of sheer matter.

‘We Make Love to the Earth’: Nonbinary Ecosexuality in the Tropics

That Immalee’s desolate abode, just south of the tropic of Cancer and unmolested by the ‘crews of European vessels’ thanks to their being ‘assured by the natives that there was neither animal, or vegetable, or water, to be found on its surface’ (p. 273), should be a venue for nonbinary possibility is less surprising when we consider the gender ambiguity that accompanies Immalee’s first appearance. We are informed that a ‘female figure of supernatural loveliness’ is believed to be ‘an incarnated emanation of Vishnu’, a principal (male) deity of the Hinduism practised on nearby islands. The isle of Immalee is suspected to be the place where ‘their darling deity was about to fix *his* residence’ (ibid, emphasis mine). Although Immalee does not transpire to be a incarnated deity who has undergone male to female transition, the ambiguity channelled by this prelude does tease the ways in which her experience of sexuality, and of existence in general, on the island confounds binaristic thinking about gender and the human. A prototypical ecosexuality—a sexuality that enfolds nonhuman actants into the conventionally anthropocentric sphere of erotic experience—is teased in the response of the natives to Immalee’s seemingly providential materialisation on the island. In lieu of the ‘orthodox and legitimate offerings of nails grown into the hand’, the natives proffer ‘flowers, and fruits, and love vows, and the beatings of young hearts’ (p. 274). This multiple offering, which brings together the rhythms of the ecosystem with those of the human body, anticipates the thoroughgoing interconnection of ‘self’ and world in Immalee’s paradise (of course, such interconnection undoes any notion of a rigidly contained ‘self’ with manageable and defensible borders). Rather than a setting in which one Crusoe-like human agent is distanced from the world through his dominance over it, existence on Immalee’s isle depicts what Monique Allewaert (2013) sees depicted in a famous passage from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1610-1611): ‘not the disappearance of human agency but an emerging minoritarian colonial conception of agency by which human beings are made richer and stranger through their

entwinement with the operations of […] climatological forces as well as plant and animal bodies' (p. 1).[1]

When Immalee finally enters into the action of the tale, she emerges as a vision of posthumanism, an anti-Havisham who, rather than fading through time and isolation, has been rendered more pellucidly beautiful and deliciously *composite*: an image not of repellent decay but of blooming vitality. Her auburn hair is 'fantastically entwined with the flowers and feathers' that form her dress, a 'coronel of shells of hue and lustre unknown except in the Indian seas' crowns her head, and a loxia (a crossbill bird) is perched permanently on her shoulder (p. ?). This latter constituent has 'understood and adopted the predilection of the fair being he belonged to' to such an extent that he has taken on the office of dressing her by swooping down unprompted to retrieve for her floral ensemble the fresh flowers laid by young votaries in appeasement (p. 279). While this might initially seem to announce a situation where nature is compelled to be subordinate to the needs and caprices of the human, the opposite is soon affirmed to be the case. Relations on the isle are those of collaboration and co-constitution, not those of superior human and subordinate nature. The lexis of friendship is deployed to characterise the harmoniousness of the Immalee-island-complex in the 'Tale of the Indians':

> 'The sun and the shade—the flowers and the foliage—the tamarinds and figs that prolonged her delightful existence—the water that she drank, wondering at the beautiful being who seemed to drink whenever she did—the peacocks, who spread out their rich and radiant plumage the moment they beheld her—and the loxia, who perched on her shoulder and hand as she walked, and answered her sweet voice with imitative chirpings—all these were her friends and she knew none but these' (p. 280).

We next learn that fear, which draws us into consciousness of our boundaries by dint of their coming under threat, does not figure in the emotional landscape of life on the island. While the

[1] A link to *The Tempest*, and specifically to the fusion of the human and nonhuman brokered in its famous 'Full Fathom Five' passage, presents itself when the narrator observes the becoming-nature practices of 'the female votarists' to the island, who 'at last began to imitate some of "those sounds and sweet airs" that every breeze seemed to waft to their ears' (p. 275).

'elements might be supposed to have impressed her imagination with some terrible ideas', instead the 'periodical regularity of these phaenomena' results in them being 'divested […] of their terrors' (p. 280) The rhythmicity of terrifying tropical phenomena, in other words, inoculates Immalee against them, testifying to a reconfiguration of her affective disposition in collaboration with the environment, which could be said to incorporate her into the sublime refrain of its storms and other elemental set pieces. To these Immalee has become accustomed 'as to the alternation of night and day—[she] who could not remember the fearful impression of the first [storm], and, above, all, who had never heard any terror of them expressed *by another*—perhaps the primitive cause of fear in most minds' (p. 280).

Maturin here offers two short and surprising excursions into contested aesthetic theory, nodding to Edmund Burke's well-established theory that aesthetic experience fundamentally depends on a distinction between objects that give pleasure and pain, and on the incorporation of these objects into the self as mental images that can become memories ('Memories of experiences involve having a relation to a representation of one's past experience that, far from reenacting that experience, enables one to have the complete inventory of possible relations to it (embarrassment, pleasure, annoyance, and so forth) that people routinely have' (Ferguson, 1992: p. 7)).[2] Maturin nods also to the troubling possibility of third-party human influence ('*another*') triangulating one's experience of the sublime, thereby relativising the supposedly absolute. Implicit in both theories is the Lockean notion of the self-identical subject continuous with himself over time thanks to the organising function of memory, who can be voluntarily influenced by discourse and interaction with other human wholes.[3] It is this liberal model of selfhood that is flouted on Immalee's island, where selfhood is predicated less on experiences of terror that are both bolstered by public opinion and incorporated into the self that is continuous over time thanks to the cohesive affordances of memory, and more on co-constitution with the rhythms and events of the natural environment. In contrast to 'a north-wester' being awed by the island's 'terrific accompaniments of midnight darkness, clouds of suffocating dust, and thunders like the trumpet of doom', Immalee is recomposed instead of discomposed by her experience of the island's ecology (p. 281). Thus, although the unconventional topos of the exotic island seems to mark this episode out as a

[2] See Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).
[3] For John Locke's theory of the bounded self, see *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).

particularly *un*Gothic moment in the novel, the isle provides a venue to stage questions about the limits of rational selfhood that have recurred in Gothic fiction's engagements with the sublime.

Frances Ferguson (1992) observes that 'the dominant trajectory of literary history had identified the rise of the sublime as the rise of the individual subject' (p. 14). Although sublime occurrences such as those outlined above present the witnessing subject with an unincorporable vastness or excess, something which the subject is seemingly unable to integrate into his extant symbolic order or imaginative regime, ultimately the experience (as long as it does not kill him) causes the subject to stretch and swell to attenuate the sublime experience, to make its effects available for self-making subsequent to the sublime event. The sublime shocks the subject into awareness of a deficit in their powers of apprehension, making them a debtor to their experience of it: something is owed to the sublime to do it representational justice. But the debt is repaid with interest when the subject is able to incorporate the sublime as memorable aesthetic experience. As Gregory Marks (2019) writes, '[t]he sublime in its Romantic form compels the human mind to rise above itself, but not necessarily to become something other than itself. In the Romantic sublime the observer experiences, in Kant's terms, "a momentary inhibition" which redoubles the powers of the mind upon their return to order'. Kant would go on to expound 'the process by which the supersensible faculty triumphs over an awe-inspiring sublime spectacle by synthesising the conflict between reason and imagination' (Gentile, 2009: p. 19). In sidestepping the sublime and all its nature-fearing connotations, Immalee enjoys a life on the island that comes to resemble something closer to the ecophiliac picturesque:[4]

[4] I borrow the notion of an ecophiliac picturesque from Garland D. Beasley's (2019) essay on Ann Radcliffe's landscapes in the first issue of the *Gothic Nature* journal: 'Through the use of Burkean masculine sublime, Radcliffe illustrates the patriarchal reality for women in the eighteenth century, rendering the sublime as a space that sees both women and the natural world as little more than resources to be exploited. On the other hand, through the picturesque, Radcliffe offers us a vision of a different kind of world: one that insists on a place for the feminine and an appreciation of natural landscape not for its capitalistic value, but rather for its beauty, its majesty, and its spiritual consolation' (p. 178). Beasley's hope that Radcliffe's feminine picturesque automatically lends itself to pro-environmental concerns might be overly optimistic. Indeed, as Beasley points out, Radcliffe's picturesque, '[r]ather than attempting to destroy the worldview that has propped up Cartesian thinking, with its insistence on rationalism, as the height of humanity', actually seeks to bolster Cartesianism (p. ?). The proper ratios of the picturesque actually foster dualist thinking and support the enfranchisement of women as rational beings: 'In short, Radcliffe's project is to associate both women and nature with rationality and suggest that anything that exists outside of a system that holds gendered harmony with the natural world as its pinnacle is irrational.' (p. 187) The case on the isle of Immalee is antithetical: not the complementarity of two binarily opposed genders but the undoing of gender *per se*; not the bolstering of rationality but rather the sponsorship of disobedient, irrational couplings.

> 'When the rains descended in torrents, the ruins of the pagoda afforded her a shelter; and she sat listening to the rushing of the mighty waters, and the murmurs of the troubled deep, till her soul took its colour from the sombrous and magnificent imagery around her, and she believed herself precipitated to earth with the deluge—borne downward, like a leaf, by a cataract—engulphed in the depths of the ocean—rising again to light on the swell of the enormous billows, as if she were heaved on the back of a whale—deafened with the roar—giddy with the rush—till terror and delight embraced in that fearful exercise of imagination. So she lived like a flower amid sun and storm, blooming in the light, and bending to the shower, and drawing the elements of her sweet and wild existence from both. And both seemed to mingle their influences kindly for her, as if she was a thing that nature loved, even in her angry mood, and gave a commission to the storm to nurture her, and to the deluge to spare the ark of her innocence, as it floated over the waters' (p. 280).

Although the language of the sublime ('terror and delight', 'fearful', 'wild') does surface here, it is recontextualised by the scene of harmonious enmeshment and inter-rhythmicity depicted. The rhythms of the natural environment, though extreme to use, are all of a piece to Immalee—the mighty swelling and falling of the ocean and the blooming and bending of the flower are motions that are alike provocative of giddiness for Immalee. These experiences attest to rhythm's capacity to 'seem uninhibited, effortless—conveying "existential freedom" and expressing "presence and pleasure"', producing 'communal solidarity and bodily pleasure' and consequently doing 'serious political work' (in this case, the work of denaturalising the self-contained Lockean liberal subject) (Levine, 2017: p. 49).

The decentred model of selfhood practised by Immalee on her deserted island allows her to participate in the motions and rhythms of the natural world, affectively enmeshing with her surroundings to such an extent that the line between material and immaterial existence is blurred. Hers is an 'existence of felicity, half physical, half imaginative, but neither intellectual or impassioned'—where 'intellectual' seems to refer to the mental operations that would, among other things, synthesise affects into de-intensified memories for the delectation of a rational subject, and draw firm lines of division between self and world (p. 281). This fraught divisibility

of self and world is confirmed by Immalee's characterisation as being more alike to 'a young fawn, all animation, timidity, confidence, and cowardice, expressed almost in a single action' than to 'an European female' or 'an Indian girl' when confronted with the arrival of Melmoth on the island's shore:

> 'She sprung from the sands—ran to her favourite tree;—returned again with her guard of peacocks, who expanded their superb trains with a kind of instinctive motion, as if they felt the danger that menaced their protectress, and, clapping her hands with exultation, seemed to invite them to share in the delight she felt in gazing at the new flower that had grown in the sand' (p. 282).

As witnessed in Immalee's introductory scenes, there is an symbiotic dynamic between her as the 'protectress' of the isle and the island's nonhuman inhabitants who also act instinctively to protect her: together Immalee and the peacocks form an interlocked assemblage, as if each has incorporated an awareness of the other into its own organism as a kind of refrain, such that motions to include or protect happen more or less instinctively. The subject slippage in the later part of the sentence (where the verb 'clapping' initially seems to belong to the peacocks) affirms the impossibility of straightforward distinction between interior and exterior, self and world. Far from being one of Fred Botting's (2014) Gothic landscapes that 'stress isolation and wilderness, evoking vulnerability, exposure and insecurity', where 'Nature appears hostile, untamed and threatening' and 'darkness, obscurity, and barely contained negative energy reinforce atmospheres of disorientation and fear' (p. 4), Immalee's island is a shining example of 'the constitutive entanglement of mind and body, human and nonhuman being, material and cultural forces' that posthumanism takes as a principle of ontology (Ellis, 2018: p. 6).[5]

The story's budding posthumanism finds its apogee in Maturin's portrayal of sexuality on the island. The language of sexuality first arises in Immalee's attempts to articulate her situatedness in a continually changing scene where the appearance and affordances of any single element is

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[5] A Marxist-inclined posthumanist might at this point be tempted to observe that it is harder to codify the natural world as (exploitable, ripe for labouring upon) property if one cannot say exactly where human ends and world begins.

inflected by its relation to others, and where the centrality of the human is offset by the beauty of the world:

> 'He made many things more beautiful. The rose is redder than I am—the palm-tree is taller than I am—and the wave is bluer than I am;—but they all change, and I never change. I have grown taller and stronger, though the rose fades every six moons; and the rock splits to let in the bats, when the earth shakes; and the waves fight in their anger till they turn grey, and far different from the beautiful colour they have when the moon comes dancing on them, and sending all the young, broken branches of her light to kiss my feet, as I stand on the soft sand. I have tried to gather them every night, but they all broke in my hand the moment I dipt it into water' (p. 282).

The movement of the earth causes the rock to transmogrify into a shelter for bats; moonlight manoeuvring onto the tide supplies it with beauty. The waves 'kissing' Immalee's feet is an initial nod to the possibility of an island-bound ecosexuality, and the nod is affirmed by her answer to Melmoth's mocking inquiry as to whether she has 'fared better with the stars' than the water in her attempts towards tangible erotic experience: 'When I have been all night wooing a star, and it has listened and descended, springing downwards like a peacock from its nest, it has hid itself often afterwards playfully amid the mangoes and tamarinds where it fell' (p. 282). While this might initially seem to affirm Melmoth's insinuation of the insufficiency of protosexual relations with the natural world, this ignores precisely how *not* insufficient her experience of life on the island is presented as being. Indeed, Melmoth at first compares unfavourably to her extant cast of suitors: he does not 'show [her] strange shapes as [she sits] on the shore at sun-set', nor is he 'so bright as the stars that live in the blue sea above [her]' (p. 283). To understand sexuality on the island, one must, to borrow a phrase from Albert Camus, imagine Tantalus happy: this asks us to move beyond the humanistic principles of having and holding that erotic fulfilment seems contingent upon.[6]

[6] Camus' original phrase, in 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (1942), exhorts us to 'imagine Sisyphus happy'.

Pursuant to Melmoth's 'half-ironical, half-diabolical' probing of Immalee about her life on the island, Immalee's adumbration of ecosexuality reaches its climax when Melmoth broaches the topic of her relationship status, inquiring whether she has an especial 'companion'. Her reply:

> '"I have a companion more beautiful than all the flowers in the isle. There is not a rose-leaf that drops in the river so bright as its cheek. My friend lives under the water, but its colours are so bright. It kisses me too, but its lips are very cold; and when I kiss it, it seems to dance, and its beauty is all broken into a thousand faces, that come smiling at me like little stars. But, though my friend has a thousand faces, and I have but one, still there is one thing that troubles me. There is but one stream where it meets me, and that is where are no shadows from the trees—and I never can catch it but when the sun is bright. Then when I catch it in the stream, I kiss it on my knees; but my friend has grown so tall, that sometimes I wish it were smaller. Its lips spread so much wider, that I give it a thousand kisses for one that I get". "Is your friend male or female", said the stranger.—"What is that?" answered Immalee.—"I mean, of what sex is your friend?"' (p. 284).

The smirking superciliousness of Melmoth's line of enquiry is loudly and delightfully belied in this passage. While he has all along been covertly lancing her for her attachment to natural actants and phenomena that he cannot construe as offering a satisfactory reciprocity, the joke redounds onto him in his anxious response to the possibility of a male companion, ergo a potential rival. Although it is fairly clear from Immalee's description that her particular 'friend' is her reflection, and although the narrative de-escalates Melmoth's anxiousness a few sentences later by affirming that this was his suspicion, none of this adequately explains his hermeneutic jump to asking directly about the sex of her love interest, which is surely superfluous information given his suspicions. Despite this he is quick to resume his gently satirical mode of poking fun at Immalee's rusticity. It is true that Immalee's naivety may be endearing, but the butt of the passage's humour is ultimately (albeit this is unbeknownst to him and probably also Maturin's narrator) Melmoth, who is not imaginative enough (and perhaps too 'intellectual' if we take the term in its aforementioned sense of introducing binary thinking) to consider how the river itself is complicit in the eroticism of Immalee's relationship with her reflection, supplying both visual (play between clarity and

distortion) and tactile (wetness, splashing) material to their eco-erotic encounters. In an echo of the distorted scales involved in comparing Melmoth's personal appearance to the brightness of the stars she has been 'wooing', Immalee's erotic experience is multiplied by the river's qualities—a single kiss becomes a thousand kisses.

This scalar relationship corroborates a general trend in island life whereby Immalee, ergo the human, is decentred in relationship to the natural world. When articulating her experience of growing up on the island to Melmoth she relates how 'every thing had grown smaller latterly, for she was now able to reach to the fruit which formerly she was compelled to wait for till it dropt on the ground;—but that the water was grown taller, for once she was forced to drink it on her hands and knees, and now she could scoop it in a cocoa-shell', and she tells him how 'when I was born, I was not so high as the rose-bud, at which I tried to catch, now I am as near the moon as the palm-tree—sometimes I catch her beams sooner than he does, therefore I must be very old, and very high' (p. 283). In the midst of the world, she draws her sense of herself from her surroundings rather than imperiously ordering the world from a transcendent outsider perspective. Even when she is offered such a perspective by Melmoth (when he provides her with a telescope to observe life beyond the island's perimeters), she struggles to take the world she witnesses on terms other than those directly offered by it, such that she endearingly, if comedically, exclaims, 'I am there! — or are they here?' and laments 'Gone!—gone!—all that beautiful world lived and died in a moment' when the lens is withdrawn from her eye (p. 289). When the glass presents her with 'the outrageous lubricities of the Phallic worship', her innocence protects her from 'the slightest consciousness of the meaning of this phenomenon' (ibid). Her incognisance of, and lack of interest in, human displays of sexuality, coupled with the perspectival diminishment of the human in relation to the world, complements the model of nobinary ecosexuality outlined above (indeed, who would be interested in humans when you can get a thousand kisses from the river?). The sexless sexuality modelled by Immalee is one that resonates with the version of ecosexuality notably put forward by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens (2016), which Jeremy Chow (2020) describes as 'a brand of ecosexuality [which] suggests that the environment can become an active participant in queer sex positivity' and which emphasises the 'active pleasures of the environment that participate in queer environmentalist communities and congress' (pp. 44-45). Chow limns the

ecosexual stance elaborated in Sprinkle and Stephens' 'Ecosexual Manifesto' (a snippet from which forms the subtitle to this section):

> 'ecosexuality requires an inhabitation with the environment that seeks pleasure; it requires removing oneself from the confines of the internet and positioning erotic satisfaction within literal terrains. To be an ecosexual is to show the world your masturbatory praxis, to announce attraction to fruits, vegetables, or bodies of water and to make visible how this erogenous practice is endowed with environmental justice labour' (p. 45).

In its decentring of both the human and intrahuman sex difference, and its insistence on a thoroughgoing enmeshment with and co-constitution through the natural world, Immalee's life and sexuality on the island quite strikingly anticipates contemporary ecosexual concerns. What the translator of Gilles Deleuze's (1988) (highly influential for the field of ecocriticism and posthumanism) work on Spinoza says of his 'deep ecology' we might equally say of existence on the island: 'the elements of the different individuals we compose may be the nonhuman within us. What we are capable of may partake of the wolf, the river, the stone in the river' (p. iii).

Terror Incognita: The Only Good Primitivism Is a White Primitivism

Leading posthumanist thinker Donna Haraway is celebrated by ecocritics and queer theorists alike for imagining

> 'homemaking in terms of "naturecultural" exchange, reciprocity and relationality always being made and remade, never finished or closed. Haraway's proposition is that homes are "contact zones" produced by relationships between human and other-than-human "companion species", spaces of multicity and heterogeneity where a host of agents with an array of different intentions meet, coexist and jostle' (Mortensen, 2019: p. 209).

The primitivism presented by the 'Tale of the Indians' initially and delightfully seems to affirm this interrelational model of homemaking. If Timothy Morton (2010) is right to point out that extant ecocriticism, with its invocations of a particular kind of 'Nature' scaffolded by a particular kind of 'human nature', is too 'wedded to a biological essentialism that, strategic or not, is grounded on binary difference and thus unhelpful for the kinds of difference multiplication that is queer theory's brilliance', then he might take relish in the nonbinary ecosexuality on Immalee's island for the way it advocates for intimacies with other beings that queer theory also extols (pp. 273-74). Indeed, the passages cited above could certainly be said to delightfully collapse the inside-outside boundaries, or 'rituals of exclusion', on which both anthropocentrism and the gender binary is sustained (ibid: p. 275). However, we might pause before giving ourselves over to an unequivocal celebration of the 'Tale of the Indians', just as Jordy Rosenberg (2014) encourages us to pause before rejoicing in the queer primitivism offered by Morton and other like-minded ecocritics. The latter tend to fall into what Rosenberg views as the trap of installing queerness at the level of pure ontology. In other words, by emphasising the inherent queerness of all matter, by virtue of its innate predisposition towards interaction with, incorporation of, and transmogrification through the externalities it comes into contact with, queerness becomes, in Alexander R. Galloway's (2015) phrasing, 'sheer' to the point of being 'mere' (if absolutely everything is always already queer then arguably nothing is and queerness loses its value as a political rubric; the battle is always already won down at the very fundamental level of molecules and matter). To end our analysis of the 'Tale of the Indians' with a statement that merely affirms and celebrates its posthumanist credentials runs the risk of inattention to how even this seemingly radical, queer, ecosexual paradise may smuggle in and cover over racist presuppositions about what qualifies as properly human in the first place. Gothic novels are remembered for giving a platform to the irrational notions and impulses thrown up by the unconscious, and *Melmoth* does deserve praise for adding an ecological aspect to this tendency when, in the 'Indians' episode, it demonstrates how binaristic Cartesian rationality 'repress[es] the entire network of biological interdependencies and corporeal confraternities that shape and structure our material existence' (Ivhakiv, 2008: p. 107). But celebrating this must not lead us to forget that, as Sharae Deckard (2013) writes,

> ‘the world-system is a thoroughly differentiated physical environment divided between zones of production in which peripheral environments suffer heightened resource extraction and environmental degradation in an age of accelerating climate crisis, developing a methodology attentive to the systemic nature of combined and uneven development across the world-ecology is an urgent task for environmental literary studies’ (p. 13).

When well-meant statements are made about, say, the queer porosity of all matter, or the radical, self-undoing co-connectedness of actants in an ecology, they tend to forget that the capacity for such porosity or co-connectedness to lead to queer liberation or ecological parity is severely differentiated along racialising lines. The task of this essay is now to turn to how the ‘Tale of the Indians’, as well as offering a progressive thought experiment in posthumanism, is also a cautionary tale about the colonial assumptions that can underpin primitivist imaginings both then and, unfortunately, still now. Despite its progressive depiction of ecosexuality, the tale cannot help but laminate its fantasy of an unspoiled ecology with presuppositions about the proximity of Indigenous and Black(ened) Peoples to more brutal—in the dual sense of brutalising and brutelike—orders of existence.

Queer ontology fixates on ‘New-World-style fantasies about locations unmediated by social order’ (like the island in the ‘Tale of the Indians’) and ‘the conjuring of a realm—an “ancestral realm”—that exists in the present, but in parallax to historical time’ (Rosenberg, 2014). In their ‘lust for dehistoricization, for demediation, for a temporality outside of history’, even queer primitivisms ‘frequently and aggressively drive towards the occlusion of dynamics of social mediation’, installing queer as a new essentialism of the sort queer was initially intended to dislodge (ibid). In this respect, queer has much in common with the anti-slavery, proto-posthumanist materialisms diligently elucidated by Cristin Ellis in *Antebellum Posthumanism* (2018). Insofar as these materialisms attempt to describe a radical and ultimately irresistible drive towards security and parity as an innate property of matter itself, they end up counterproductively deleting the grounds for what Helen Hester (2014) would call ‘mesopolitical’ action (action which operates ‘between atomized, hyper-local interventions at the level of, for example, individual embodiment (micropolitics)’ and ‘big-picture, speculative projects premissed on the wholesale

overthrowal of power at the level of the state or beyond (macropolitics)' (p. 114)). In other words, if matter is innately and unstoppably unruly and queer, then what need is there for a practical politics that attempts to mitigate power as it acts on, say, small groups and communities? If matter will assert its queerness regardless of our actions, then agitating for queer rights is surplus to requirements. To help construe the mesopolitical, and to implicitly assert the value of literary study in coming to grips with such scalar questions, we might turn to Caroline Levine's (2017) work on forms:

> 'All of us, along with other species and objects, are located at the crossings of multiple unfolding networks that are perpetually linking bodies, ideas, and things through numerous channels at different rates and across different kinds of spaces. As they pattern relationships, networks—social, economic, electronic, ecological, viral, bacterial, legal, familial, national, and transnational—also run up against other forms, including territorial boundaries, which they sometimes cross and which at other times bring them to a halt' (pp. 130-31).

The first sentence of this excerpt could serve as an adequate description of the posthuman ecology presented by the isle of Immalee. In the second sentence Levine encourages us to think about the intersections of macro and micro forms or networks above and beyond the level of pure matter. Yes, we might be constantly being patterned by our interactions with the environment, but, also yes, this environment might itself be subject to patterning by human mesopolitical forces: '[…] forms very often find their organizing power compromised, rerouted, or deflected by their encounters with other forms' (p. 132). (Incidentally, the novel *Melmoth* would be a fine analogy for this conflict, as one tale is constantly derailed or detourned by another.) The universal fact of matter's polymorphously perverse porosity should not block our attention to how agents can operate at supra-molecular scales in a way that is opposed to the thriving of both nature and queerness, as well as Black(ened) and Indigenous Peoples.

Although it does not devolve to the level of the aleatory properties of even molecular matter, Immalee's primitive, untampered-with ecosexuality is analogous to what Rosenberg excoriates as queer 'primitivisms of the present' in two respects. Firstly, and happily, it does

strikingly assert the co-constitution of self and world and the radical non-sovereignty of actants in relation to each other, in a context where sex difference is utterly undercut as the arbiter of selfhood and sexuality. Secondly, and unhappily, it fails to stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples and their struggles at a mesopolitical, as opposed to strictly material, level. In the case of queer primitivism, this nonmaterialisation of solidarity is implicit.[7] In Maturin's case it is loudly explicit, especially in the passage immediately following Melmoth's unsolicited arrival on the island, in which he attempts to inculcate in Immalee his cynical worldview by showing her human life in the island's periphery. Inaccessible to the naked eye, Melmoth has come equipped with a telescope to show Immalee the world. The view through this glass constitutes precisely 'the "conquering gaze from nowhere", the "view of infinite vision", the "god trick" of an unmarked, disembodied perspective' that Stacy Alaimo (2016), citing Haraway (1991), identifies as the crutch for the West's sense of its epistemic supremacy, a 'presumption of mastery [granted] by detachment from the world' opposed to blissful but potentially subject-dissolving enmeshment (p. 5). In corroboration of this, Allewaert (2013) writes of how

> '[t]he eras of exploration and discovery as well as the Enlightenment understood to have developed from them are often described as having been shaped by human beings' preoccupation with uncovering, mapping, measuring, and (in most cases) instrumentalizing the natural world, all of which supposedly allowed human beings to perform synthesizing operations through which they attained their fullest potential' (p. 9).

In the telescopic episodes following Melmoth's arrival we witness how the erstwhile 'terra incognita' surrounding Immalee's island becomes cognisable, mappable ground under the racialising rubric of terror, as scenes are conveyed to Immalee and the reader in which horrifying acts of violence function to relegate the Black(ened), Indigenous populations to the lowest, most brutish and insensate rungs of humanity.

[7] 'When queerness comes to indicate an ontological or essential form of resistance, we can lose sight of the conditions that make queerness as such legible in the first place. Scott Morgensen describes this in terms of a "settler rationality" at the heart of Western queer subject-formation; "settler rationality" might thus be understood as a way for queer whiteness to appropriate fantasized forms of primitive indigeneity, so to naturalize the displacement and extermination of indigenous people from the settler colony' (Rosenberg, 2014).

It is notable that almost as soon as Melmoth enters into Immalee's life, binaries begin to establish themselves and retrofit her hitherto unsegregated experience of the world. The very text of the novel is itself binarised in this episode, in the supercilious footnotes that translate Immalee's crude phrasing of 'wonderful rocks' as 'buildings'—the same paratext that, in the prelude to Immalee's first appearance, alluded to an ober-discourse of explanatory orientalist thought by inserting Thomas Maurice's 1794 *Indian Antiquities* into the novel's intertextual orbit. The implied hierarchy of novelistic text and transcendent, better-knowing paratext mirrors the unevenness of the binaries set up in the telescope episodes. Firstly, we learn how 'the world of sense […] in her imagination' is 'rapidly' losing ground to 'the new-found world of mind' (p. 290). What is happening here is the opposite of what Lauren Berlant (2022) prescribes when they exhort us towards 'unlearning the overskilled sensorium that is so quick to adapt to damaged life with a straight, and not a queer face' (p. 84). Instead of a sensuous awareness of selfhood that is distributed around the natural elements with which it is contiguous, Melmoth is ushering Immalee towards an 'intellectual' self that is consciously differentiated from the world and other animate actants, ergo occupying a superior position on what Mel Chen (2012) terms 'hierarchies of animacy', hierarchies whereby 'matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise "wrong"' is relegated to a lower echelon of animacy that vulnerablises it to human-led depredation' (p. 2). This differentiation is suggested when Immalee reflects of the loxia bird that 'what an advantage I have over you!' thanks to the 'new anxiety' that her fledgling heteroromantic bond with Melmoth has promoted her into experiencing (p. 288). Chief among the differentiations introduced by Melmoth, however, is not that between different species but rather those between humans.

These binaries of course involve the nonhuman, or, more accurately, they involve particular genres of *Homo sapien in* the nonhuman. Contra to the abolitionist slogan 'am I not a man?', there was a spirited effort in the human science of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as in the moral philosophy of the time, to disallow the inclusion of Blackened bodies in the category of the human. 'Antiblackness', that is, has historically 'sought to justify its defacing logics and arithmetic by suggesting that black people are most representative of the abject animalistic dimensions of humanity, or the beast' (Jackson, 2020: p. 3). Blackness's intermediary location 'between the human and brutal creation' (a phrase picked up on by Erin Forbes (2016) to

explore the mechanisms of excluding not only Black but also crip and criminal from liberal citizenship) is attested in the scenes observed through Melmoth's telescope and those seen through the 'telescope' of the narrative that bracket the idyllic ecosexual episodes. These scenes repeatedly stress the instinctive and immanent, and in Chen's parlance 'insensate' and 'deathly', existence had by the non-White Indigenous populations that surround Immalee's island. Sadomasochistic scenes are depicted in which the superstitious locals torture themselves by mutilating their bodies with 'burning splinters' and 'nails grown into the hands', and even with 'suspending themselves downwards, till they were consumed by insects, or calcined by the sun, or rendered delirious by their position' (p. 274). Later, Immalee witnesses a moving mass of '[a] thousand human bodies […] trailing their charred and blackened bodies over the sands' towards the pagoda of Juggernaut, many of whom are 'crawling through the sands on their hands and knees; but hands through the backs of which the nails had grown, and knees worn literally to the bone' (p. 292). In an echo of the loxia's neglect of its own young that Immalee witnessed when observing the malnourished young drop dead from its nest, the scenes seen through the telescope are stacked with images of filiality gone awry: infants are left in baskets to 'perish with hunger, or be devoured by the birds', elders are immersed in rivers 'to be devoured by alligators' (pp. 293-294). The bloodthirsty behaviours witnessed by Immalee and Melmoth constitute a 'loathsome and withering desolation of animal and intellectual life' (p. 292). This statement might seem to be a contradiction in terms (surely a desolation of one term implies a supererogation of its opposite), but it makes sense in light of Blackness' status as 'between' human and brute: the masochistic natives are too brutish to be 'intellectual' (tantamount here to 'human'), and too 'human' (in their idolatry and superstition) to be properly 'animal' (i.e. 'natural'). Their inordinate striving after and capacity for forms of physical suffering corroborates the corporeal hardiness and insensitivity that Blackness was emphatically aligned with in the pro-slavery thought of the era.

Alas for our jubilant reading of nonbinary ecosexuality, it transpires that Immalee's life on the island is not only bracketed within but also traversed by racialising hierarchies of the human. 'Normative futurity', Andrea Smith (2010) points out, 'depends on an "origin story"', and the origin story in *Melmoth* is one where Whiteness is always already the rule for humanity, inserted into the scene of the seemingly primitive in order to shore up its innate supremacy over, and greater capacity for 'humanity' (for sentiments and finer feelings) than Black and Indigenous Peoples (p.

47). Our would-be rustic Immalee thus becomes the mouthpiece for certain racialising (and racist) assertions that the narrative, in casting her as uninducted in the ways and mores of civilisation, attempts to naturalise. She wonders about the 'creatures so dark, and with features so unattractive' that approach her island with offerings (p. 280); she compares Melmoth's figure favourably with the 'red and diminutive' locals (p. 283). Of course, Immalee transpires not to have been some uniquely uninflected instance of 'pure' humanity but rather a European of genteel origins explanted by accident; she thus approximates unspoiled Indigeneity as closely as possible without risking a secession from the 'conceptual protectorate' of the human that her Whiteness qualifies her for (Weheliye, 2014: p. 21). The myth of primitive humanity, of *Homo sapien* ground zero, turns out to be the myth of foundational and irrepressible racial difference: even untutored Immalee is immediately able to recognise her and Melmoth's intrinsic superiority from the Blackened populations around her. And, even in the face of her nonbinary ecosexuality, her always-already status as White smuggles sex difference into the island with it: we learn how she interacts with Melmoth 'with an air of solemnity, which her beauty and innocence made at once ludicrous and imposing, and in which she betrayed a slight tendency to that wish to mystify that distinguishes her delightful sex' (p. 283). Though she may live in ecosexual harmony with the natural actants around her, the blueprints for her differentiation as a White, female human are covertly already in place, affirming Haraway's (2008) insight that speciation always 'reek[s] of race and sex' (p. 18).

Versus the undifferentiated masses of suffering, self-flagellating natives, Immalee is distinguished by her status as a White woman; the primitivism she models is therefore striated with certain racist assumptions which are borne out in the subsequent tale. Her accelerated *Bildung* with Melmoth and her later reintegration into European society attest to what Kyla Schuller (2018) has diligently identified as one of the principal technologies of racialising biopower: Whiteness's evolutionarily advantageous plasticity, its capacity to reorganise itself morphologically in response to even the very fine-grain impressions it receives. Fine sentiments in particular, the likes of which Immalee demonstrates a rich and immediate capacity for, would elevate White peoples above races lower down on the hierarchy of animacy. As Schuller (2018) explains, these axes of differentiation played into paranoid fantasies about the threat posed by 'primitive' Indigenous populations:

> 'Impressibility and sentimentalism distinguished civilised bodies as receptive to their milieu and able to discipline their sensory susceptibility and as such in possession of life and vitality that required protection from the threat posed by primitive bodies deemed to be impulsive and insensate, incapable of evolutionary change, whose existence was very close to running out of time' (p. 4).

In staging Immalee's White primitivism, complete with nods to her innate femaleness and her capacity for self-advancement through impressibility, Maturin simultaneously corroborates the logic that would denigrate and even conscionably destroy the non-White primitive. In contrast to Immalee's subtle embodiment of Whitened and sexed norms, the Blackened Indigenous populations surrounding her have not reached the stage of embodying anything *period*, in the sense in which 'embodiment' is used by Hortense Spillers in her essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe' (1987). Partly, this is because their instinctive drive towards destruction pre-empts such a development, partly because this same instinctiveness relegated them to a condition of *enfleshment* rather than embodiment. As Spillers explicates, Blackness's 'ungendering', its reduction to fungible units of flesh in the middle passage, is the disavowed precondition for Whiteness's embodiment of dyadic gender. That Maturin cannot imagine a Black or native body that is not innately predisposed to self-mortification affirms Spillers' insights regarding the 'hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin colour' (p. 67). In other words, by representing Blackened flesh in the tropics that calls for its own brutalisation and scarification, Maturin essentialises as endemic to Blackness what is in fact hieroglyphically inscribed by the whip and firebrand of the coloniser (his depiction of an overfilled boat sinking with all hands into the ocean in the prelude episode is an equally egregious nod to and naturalisation of the mechanisms of enslavement). Effect and cause are inverted: the mutilatory consequences of the industrially sponsored project of colonialism are inserted into the ontology of race: Blackness as a *condition* of coarse enfleshment seems to cause mutilation, rather than such mutilation being the means by which a *process* of Black(ening) produces race. Spillers' remarks about the ungendering of Blackness as the *sine qua non* of White gender are increasingly, and rightfully, becoming central to queer and trans discussions of sex plasticity, where they serve

to check all too hasty celebrations of sex mutability.[8] The second part of this essay began with a cautionary glance at how queer ecology's too hasty proclamation of the inherent queerness of all matter runs the risk of ignoring how this queerness hardly prevents the enactment of anti-Blackness at a mesopolitical level. Reading the 'Tale of the Indians' through scholars such as Hortense Spillers allows us to become alert to how declaring the automatic laudability of any instance of sex plasticity can shun the way that even the concept of plasticity rests on the scarified flesh of enslaved Africans. To unequivocally celebrate a putatively nonbinary and ecosexual primitivism in *Melmoth* is therefore to fail to recognise 'blackness's bestialization and thingification: the process of imagining black people as an empty vessel, a nonbeing, a nothing, an ontological zero, coupled with the violent imposition of colonial myths and racial hierarchy' that such primitivism is laminated onto (Jackson, 2018: p. 1).

Of course, it is not as if the 'Tale of the Indians' is at risk of being trumpeted *en masse* as a shining and paradigmatic example of nonbinary ecosexuality, or construed by scholars as testifying to the absence or non-necessity of dyadic human sexuality at the scene of the primal. To an extent, this essay has needed to strawman itself, setting up an argument that—to my current knowledge—nobody is making (but which could conceivably be extrapolated from contemporary trends in nonhuman and ecocritical scholarship) in order to tell a cautionary tale about the deleterious effects an overly hasty avowal of radical posthuman and nonbinary ecophilia might have on our attentiveness to anti-Black, anti-Indigenous technologies and epistemes operating at scales above (and crossing through) our interest in the matter of individual bodies and their immediate environments. As is the case in other notable examples of the Gothic, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806) (and later Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897)), the contiguity of queerness and imperialism is not a prompt to segregate the two from each other, but a reminder that even queer primitivisms take place within an order of embodiment that deprivileges Blackness and Indigeneity as its most expendable—enfleshed rather than embodied, ungendered rather than engendered—forms. In the same way that the likes of Rosenberg and Smith assert the need for a queer and trans studies that treats race as central rather than ancillary to its concerns, this paper asserts the ongoing

[8] Two exemplars of this cautiousness vis-à-vis seemingly desirable plasticity from the field of contemporary transgender studies are C. Riley Snorton (2017) and Jules Gill-Peterson (2018).

necessity of a thoroughgoingly intersectional ecoGothic studies that is not afraid to critique even the most seemingly laudatory moments in its corpus, to put itself and its texts fully and unreservedly at the service of decolonisation. As one of queer theory's most diligent contemporary interlocuters reminds us, '[f]ighting against the policing and regulation of what Jordy Rosenberg calls "our constitutive porosity" means figuring out how we will manifest, architecturally and ecologically, biomes conducive to […] celebrating our collective permeability on a mass scale' (Lewis, 2020). This fight—which, without denying the queerness of our porous somatic potential, insists on being thought at the level of the mesopolitical mediation of this porosity—involves proactive antiracism and anticolonialism as much as it involves a joyous celebration of our innate mutability.

BIOGRAPHY

Desmond Huthwaite has recently completed a PhD at the University of Cambridge, where their research staged an encounter between Gothic novels of the turn of the nineteenth century and contemporary (trans)gender studies. They have published on Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1778), and have work forthcoming on the theoretical divergences of queer theory and transgender studies as well as on the racialising trans plasticity of Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya; or, The Moor* (1806).

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'Life is Sacred in Syl Anagist': Decolonising Magic and Technology in N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* Trilogy

Hannah Hellman

ABSTRACT

This essay examines how N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2018) depicts a group of the oppressed taking their land, and their lives, back into their own hands. Beginning with a discussion of Gothic storytelling, this essay invokes the Gothic as a barometer for anxieties we may feel as bodies labouring in capitalist societies that deem the viability of life on this planet as nothing more than the cost of doing business. This advances the Gothic Marxist tradition of solidarity with monsters as a strategy for pushing back against systems of oppression and climate change. Jemisin's depiction of the collapse of an energy-hungry empire that grew large enough to span the Earth itself offers the reader an opportunity to examine the history, and future, of the U.S. and other empires that consume the lives and land of Indigenous peoples in the name of technological profit-driven progress. This essay then argues that Jemisin's work tunes into the anxieties generated while living in a society dominated and steered by capitalism, concluding that embracing those made monstrous by these systems and joining them in revolution may be the key to slowing, and even preventing, complete catastrophe.

Keywords: *Gothic Marxism, Revolution, Technology, Empire, Decolonisation, ecoGothic*

'How did it begin? You must understand that fear is at the root of such things […]. But there are none so frightened, or so strange in their fear, as conquerors. They conjure phantoms endlessly, terrified that their victims will someday do back what was done to them—even if, in truth, their victims couldn't care less about such pettiness and have moved on'.

—*The Stone Sky*, pp. 209-210

Introduction

If one's way of life comes at the expense of the lives of children and other innocents somewhere far away, is that life ultimately sustainable? Is it possible to live honourably in a capitalist society that values growth and prosperity more than life? Why do people go to such extreme lengths to avoid seeing the truth about the world that they live in? These are just a few of the questions that N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2018) has inspired. Storytelling, particularly Gothic storytelling, has a way of sharing stories that convey the lived experience of injustice, and Jemisin's storytelling is a prime example of this. Steven Bruhm (2002) suggests that the Gothic has 'always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history' (p. 259). I propose that Jemisin's depiction of an empire that spans an entire planet and consumes more energy than it alone can produce does just that, tuning into anxieties of labouring bodies and climate catastrophe. People living under capitalism, especially within the U.S., may have noticed that the class injustice and violence necessary to power the rapid advancements in technology day in and day out cannot be sustainable. Naturally a fear begins to arise, that what is not sustainable is ultimately doomed. Marxist rhetoric, too, features discussion and examination of class injustice. China Miéville (2013), author of Hugo-winning *The City & the City* (2009), discusses his work as a sort-of 'solidarity with monsters', monsters referring to 'the outliers in a system of generalized commodity production'. Gothic Marxism in particular features vibrant discussions of the monstrous in relation to commodity production and the idea that 'history' is not over; instead we continue to create history each day. Margaret Cohen, in her book *Profane Illumination* (1995), discusses Gothic Marxism as 'the contours of a Marxist genealogy fascinated with the irrational aspects of social processes, a genealogy that both investigates how the irrational

pervades existing society and dreams of using it to effect social change' (pp. 1-2). The monstrous outliers that Miéville discusses, then, represent something that does not sit right with the rest of the machine; something made to be monstrous; something made to be ignorable and sacrificable for the sake of commodity production and progress.

In the *Broken Earth* trilogy these outliers are the Orogenes, descendants of the Niess, magic users that can save humanity or bring on its downfall with their power. In each of the novels, Jemisin includes in her worldbuilding specific examples of a very intentional, and systematically constructed, fear and hatred of Orogenes. The systems of hierarchy in the world of *Broken Earth* that design and implement racism are based on real systems of oppression, which Daniel Rasmussin explores in his book *American Uprising* (2012). On the role of oppression of slaves in shaping the young American government, Rasmussin writes, '[f]ear–not some sort of divine mandate–drove American expansion in Louisiana. A need to suppress the black population, and fear of external enemies, pushed Americans to develop a new sense of who and what the country was' (p. 176). Jemisin skillfully conveys the experience of a body who is forced to labour and seen only as a tool to bring profit or progress. In Syl Anagist—the utopia that existed 40,000 years before the events of the first two books of the *Broken Earth* trilogy—the imposed system of hierarchy begins with the fear and hatred of anyone different, like the Niess. The Niess were Indigenous to the land that Syl Anagist consumed, and so empathy with their cause was prevented through their designation as monsters. In the Sanzed Empire, it is the Orogenes that are made monsters: blamed for everything that goes wrong, used as a tool and thrown away at the first sign of defect. This structural oppression mirrors the systems put into place to subjugate African Americans throughout the history of the United States, which Jemisin discusses in her (third) Hugo acceptance speech (2018):

> 'I get a lot of questions about where the themes of the Broken Earth trilogy come from. I think it's pretty obvious that I'm drawing on the human history of structural oppression, as well as my feelings about this moment in American history. What may be less obvious, though, is how much of the story derives from my feelings about science fiction and fantasy. Then again, SFF is a microcosm of the wider world, in no way rarefied from the world's pettiness or prejudice'.

Jemisin has never hidden her feelings about science fiction and fantasy tropes and norms, and her fiction need not cater to them to achieve greatness. Jemisin bends storytelling to her will, successfully lining up the Gothic, decolonial, and ecocritical. She uses the anxiety generated to force the reader to *think* about the world around them and the bodies labouring in it. The *Broken Earth* trilogy shows a form of social justice through revolution and the downfall of two empires, each built on the backs of a subjugated racial minority. In the beginning of *The Fifth Season* (2016), we see the downfall of the Sanzed Empire at the hands of one Orogene, Alabaster. He is one of the most powerful Orogenes under the thumb of the Fulcrum, and he has suffered and lost more than most. He brings the empire to a fiery end, initiating a Season that would last centuries, but he *also* destroys hundreds, or thousands, of Node stations where Orogene children who could not be controlled are kept and used to dampen earthquakes near city or town centres—several of whom were children of his own. Alabaster's destruction was no mere rebellion; it was the spark meant to ignite a revolution.

I propose that N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy* depicts a group of the oppressed taking their land, and their lives, back into their own hands. Jemisin's depiction of the collapse of an energy-hungry empire that grew large enough to span the Earth offers the reader an opportunity to examine the history, and future, of the U.S. and other empires that consume the lives and land of Indigenous peoples in the name of technological profit-driven progress. Syl Anagist was an empire that depended greatly on energy (magic) harvested from life, just as the United States depends so desperately on fossil fuels harvested from the Earth. The energy that is consumed fuels technology that *supposedly* makes life better for everyone. However, as Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall and Ene Agi discuss in *Decolonizing Design* (2023), this is a myth. Tunstall and Agi write, '[t]he most insistent theme of the modernist project is that of technological progress, or as more popularly described, better living through technology' (p. 41). The rise of technology has made life easier for *some*, while making it far more challenging, even deadly or torturous, for many others.

When nations begin to mutate into empires and spread their creeping tendrils too far, collapse is practically guaranteed. One engine of this creeping spread seems to be industrialisation, which enables more profit, and so more *progress*. On the surface, it seems that technological advancement, like that seen in industrial revolutions, improves life for humans. However, as

Tunstall and Agi discuss, this is a myth. Much of the technological advancement that we have seen comes at a cost: child labour in countries we were persuaded to ignore; the removal of a land's Indigenous people to make room for industrial farms and plantations that grow miles and miles of a single crop; and funding and support diverted *away* from social programs that actually improve life and funneled into military industrial advancement, funding death and destruction instead.

Looking at the end of two empires in the trilogy at the hands of its oppressed, naturally, generates a form of anxiety that leads one to wonder whether current events in the U.S. represent the progression of the downfall of the American Empire. In his discussion of the American Gothic, Eric Savoy (2002) suggests American Gothic narratives 'express a profound anxiety about historical crimes and perverse human desires that cast their shadow over what many would like to be the sunny American republic' (p. 167). Racism, or the systemic hate that has been intentionally built into the structure and subconscious of the U.S., has long been a shadow cast over what we may otherwise tell ourselves is a bright and shining America. Cherrie Moraga wrote, in the preface to the 40th anniversary edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* (2021), '[r]acism, structurally executed through patriarchy, is the unredeemable and tragic cost of colonization' (p. xvi). If settler colonialism drives racism, what drives settler colonialism? Money, and subsequently power, seems to be the primary driving force. But to what end? Is the U.S. simply a beast that requires sacrificial offerings in the form of people of colour in order to prevent it from swallowing us all whole? What happens when there are no more people of colour to offer as sacrifices? We move on to our elderly and disabled? And after they are gone? Another system will be put in place to subjugate another group of people defined by *other* traits, instead of their skin colour or said 'barbarism'. This we see in *The Stone Sky*: centuries before the events of *The Fifth Season*, Syl Anagist disposed of the Indigenous people on the land that it stole, only to eventually be forced to genetically engineer *more* of them because Sylanagistines could not use magic like the Niess could. Inevitably, the hatred for the Niess remains in the form of a distrust and fear of all Orogenes, despite there no longer being specific racial traits to identify them. Everything that ever went wrong was blamed on Orogenes. Everything that people found themselves afraid of was tied, intentionally, to Orogenes.

Race is only real if one accepts that social constructs dictate biological truth. Racism is still very much an issue in the U.S., and I argue that it and the inappropriate power that it gives to one population over others will ultimately spell the downfall of the American Empire, just as it did in Syl Anagist and Yumenes. In *The Stone Sky*, we learn that both the Tuners and the sentient Earth tried to seize power through control of a planet-sized magic generator and destroy Syl Anagist. While the Tuners wanted to burn the city but save humans, the Earth wanted to destroy every human *and* everything they built. Humans need the Earth, but to Father Earth they are simply parasites, and each and every one of them is 'guilty. […] [C]omplicit in the crime of attempting to enslave the world itself' (p. 335). In the first pages of *The Fifth Season*, Alabaster uses his orogeny to open up a volcanic fissure in the earth miles long and obliterates the largest city and all who took everything from him. The oppressed *will* eventually break the system. It is not their responsibility by any means, but perhaps it is their right. Frantz Fanon writes early in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) that 'decolonization is always a violent event' (p. 1). Because colonised states are created through and maintained by violence, Fanon explains that violence is another tool that may need to be used to achieve freedom. This, too, is captured in Jemisin's story.

Empire

Syl Anagist was the name for every place, every city, every 'node' on Earth where humans have quashed an Indigenous culture and people to make room for more Syl Anagist. This consumption and genocide mirrors the fate of countless Indigenous people in our own world, which Jemisin discusses in her (third) Hugo acceptance speech, quoted previously. Jemisin pulls from human history, but she takes her parable a step further into the horrific, the Gothic, and delivers for the reader a glimpse into the lived experience, and hauntings, of the colonised. It is the traumatic past, experienced first-hand by Indigenous peoples in America's shadowy history, that Jemisin taps into to tell her story. American history contains not only *social* injustice, but ecological injustice as well, which manifests as stolen land, and also in the poisoning and contamination of the water and soil of the meagre lands left to Indigenous inhabitants. Savoy posits that Gothic texts 'return obsessively […] to national pasts to complicate rather than to clarify them, but mainly to implicate the individual in a deep morass of American desires and deeds that allow no final escape from or transcendence of them' (p. 169). This we see in the *Broken Earth*. An economy, and subsequently

an empire, built on growth, progress, and consumption inevitably either consumes itself or falls to those who it has betrayed: the many who are harmed or killed by the production of this technology and the harvesting of the energy or resources needed to maintain it. It is the reader who must internally confront the genocide, and ecocide, in the American Empire's past as they read of Syl Anagist's ultimate fate.

Syl Anagist consumed its own land and people and moved on to other continents. One of them was 'a small and nothing land occupied by small and nothing peoples […], the Thniess. It was hard to say their name with a proper pronunciation, so Sylanagistines called them the Niels. The two words did not mean the same thing, but the latter is what caught on' (2018: p. 209). Here we see the procedural colonisation: the land is seized, the people who are indigenous to said land are quickly dehumanised and given a name that does not actually reflect them or their culture in the least, and thus are subjugated. What made the Niess, the people of Cilir, different was the fact that they fought and fled, seeking a future for their culture anywhere it could take root: their descendents became part of *every* land, *every* people, blending in amongst the rest and adapting to local customs. They managed to keep hold of who they were, though, continuing to speak their own language even as they grew fluent in other tongues. They maintained some of their old ways, too—like splitting their tongues with salt acid, for reasons known only to them. And while they lost much of the distinctive look that came of isolation within their small land, many retained enough of it that to this day, icewhite eyes and ashblow hair carry a certain stigma (2018: pp. 210-11).

The way that the Niess fled their conquered land but maintained their sense of culture and identity resembles the plight of the Palestinian people, who, Rashid Khaldi (2020) explains, continue to be forced out of Palestine to make room for a large-scale immigration of European Jewish settlers empowered and enabled by the British Mandate authorities, spreading to the U.S. and neighbouring countries like Jordan as refugees (p. 8). Some choose to flee, while others remain at the potential expense of their lives. This forced removal and making monstrous of those who lived on the land before *also* happened in the development of the U.S. and Canada, as Tunstall reminds us:

> 'I will just remind you that in 1830 US President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which forcibly removed Indigenous nations from their homelands at gunpoint to the west of the Mississippi River. In Canada starting in the 1870's, Sir John A. MacDonald, Canada's first prime minister, was signing and breaking the Numbered Treaties by deliberately starving Indigenous Nations so that he could build the Canadian Pacific Railroad from 1881 to 1886. There was no better life through technology for Indigenous People' (p. 49).

It is important to acknowledge and remember that these events happened in U.S. history, particularly when it happened at the expense of life and for the sake of 'better living', like the railroad was suggested to provide. In the trilogy, even once the Niess had relocated and lost everything but their culture, racist rhetoric that dehumanised and degraded them persisted. As a result, they were eventually wiped out entirely. This process, of dehumanisation and implementation of racial segregation and bias, is illustrated quite clearly in the *Stone Sky*:

> 'Perhaps it began with whispers that white Niess irises gave them poor eyesight and perverse inclinations, and that split Niess tongues could not speak truth. That sort of sneering happens, cultural bullying, but things got worse. It became easy for scholars to build reputations and careers around the notion that Niess sessapinae [a magic-sensing/channeling structure in the neck] were fundamentally different, somehow–more sensitive, more active, less controlled, less civilized–and that this was the source of their magical peculiarity. This was what made them not the same kind of human as everyone else. Eventually not *as* human as everyone else. *Finally: not human at all*' (p. 210, emphasis added).

Yes, it is quite clear that Jemisin is drawing from systemic oppression in the U.S. and other empires, but what Jemisin makes most clear is that it begins quietly and builds, and builds, until any hint of humanity in the oppressed is removed from the public eye: they become only monsters. Institutional oppression, employed as racism, creates interpersonal oppression. Interpersonal oppression breeds internalised oppression. As an illustration of the idea that history is not 'done',

Hoa and the other Tuners choose a different fate for themselves and their future generations once they have learned the truth of their peoples' history: they choose revolution.

The apocalyptic end to Syl Anagist and the cause of the seasons occurred roughly 40,000 years before the events of the first two novels in the trilogy. Amal El-Mohtar (2017) writes in a review of *The Stone Sky* for npr, '[i]f the Broken Earth trilogy as a whole shows a world where cataclysm and upheaval is the norm, *The Stone Sky* interrogates what right worlds built on oppression and genocide have to exist'. This interrogation remains particularly relevant as we, those of us who are paying attention, do the work to dismantle systems of oppression and genocide in our world today. Gothic fiction, then, is crucial to seize the attention of readers and clue them into historic realities, and the opportunities to create different futures. In Syl Anagist life is sacred: murder is forbidden, even for the colonisers, but that does not mean that genocide and ethnic cleansing in the name of progress, or the empire, has halted.

Technology and Progress

In a piece featured in *Decolonize Conservation,* Juan Pablo Gutierrez (2023) suggests that René Descartes' metaphysics and theories of man '[c]ompletely removed man from his essence and made him 'master and possessor of nature' (p. 183). Ultimately, the coloniser views everything around him as a resource to be mined for profit or progress, and nature and the people living naturally with it are no different. Gutierrez lines this system up with the idea of 'progress' and discusses them for what they truly are: a motive to steal and to consume. The fact that Syl Anagist literally runs on magic that is created by life itself and *still* it strives for unreasonable amounts of energy production is what makes Jemisin's depiction of this settler-colonial, energy-starved, civilisation so brilliant: it is our future, if we do not make change. In the introduction to *EcoGothic*, Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013) discuss political orientations of the Gothic, specifically '[h]ow the Gothic's representation of "evil" can be used for radical or reactionary ends' (p. 2), and if we take Syl Anagist's subjugation of anything and anyone that does not further the Empire's progress to represent evil, it is a call to action to confront the anxiety that the ecoGothic generates within its readers. Is progress *worth* the reification and theft of Indigenous bodies and land?

Civilians in Syl Anagist are required to produce a certain amount of magic to be permitted to stay in the city—a sort of magic tax. Buildings have 'walls of patterned cellulose that can barely be seen beneath leaves, moss, grasses, and clusters of fruit or tubers' (2018: p. 3). Everything is beautiful because it is built to foster and encourage life. Syl Anagist is like a United States that grew and conquered and consumed until the entire world was just more U.S., removing from existence every culture and people that existed there before it. The difference, though, is that Syl Anagist ran on magic, rather than oil. That Syl Anagist is beautiful on the surface but vile and corrupt in actuality is an unsettling metaphor: Syl Anagist is full of life, and thus natural and beautiful, while America is industrial and dirty. Both are settler colonial states.

Life naturally creates magic, and so life is sacred in Syl Anagist. As the needs of the infrastructure grew, so too did the technology that created and fostered life of all kinds. Effectively, Syl Anagist colonised both magic and life itself:

> 'The people of Syl Anagist have mastered the forces of matter and its composition; they have shaped life itself to fit their whims; they have so explored the mysteries of the sky that they've grown bored with it and turned their attention back toward the ground beneath their feet. And Syl Anagist lives, oh how it lives, in bustling streets and ceaseless commerce and buildings that your mind would struggle to define as such' (p. 3).

The fatal push for Syl Anagist's prosperity was the building of the Plutonic Engine, a planet-sized magic pump that would allow 'Syl Anagist [to] feed upon the life of the planet itself, forever' (p. 322). An empire consuming life and being powered by a finite resource is a fitting metaphor: the fate of Syl Anagist is the ultimate fate of all non-renewable energy-dependent empires. This is the fate of the settler colonial state dependent on oil and systems of hierarchy that are created for the sole purpose of dehumanisation—of making one's fellow human monstrous for the sake of *progress*. The monsters that a capitalist society like Syl Anagist creates do not have sharp teeth or rotting flesh, but they represent a trauma nonetheless.

Naturally, the Sylanagistines and their descendants find other ways to make use of the bodies of Indigenous people that do not kill them (and thus halt their production and ability to channel magic) to power their advanced technology. The Niess were desired because their bodies could use and channel magic, even when they are not coherent or even conscious. Bodies of Orogenes and Niess are used by the empire in Syl Anagist *and* in Yumenes to create a quality of life that only some benefit from. In Yumenes, the bodies of Orogene children are used as earthquake dampeners to protect those living in affluent parts of the country and their property. In Syl Anagist, the bodies of Niess are used as batteries to fuel the technologically advanced cities. Here Jemisin has demonstrated commodity fetishism: the true nature of Orogenes (that they are as human as any non-magic user and can simply see and manipulate magic) is hidden behind a lie of their danger and monstrosity. The reality of the children in Node Stations, that they are tiny human bodies being forced to labour against their will, is detached from their perceived reality by those they unknowingly protect. Those living in Yumenes are told that the children in Node Stations are cared for, but in reality they are kept barely alive.

The Briar Patch and Node Stations are both examples of technology designed to provide better living for an elite few, enabled by the detachment of the Tuners and their kin's humanity from their commodity. This better living comes at a cost, though, as it requires sacrifice, just as the cotton gin was hailed as a technological marvel of its time, making the harvesting of cotton much faster. Tunstall and Agi remind us that the cotton gin alone accounted for a huge increase in the demand of slave labour and so led to a prodigious increase in captured slaves being brought to the U.S. from Africa (p. 50). More and more land was required to grow the cotton that could be processed at faster speeds, and so more labour was continuously needed. But as Jemisin demonstrates, there will come a point when every mile of the surface of the planet is one big empire. Even the stars have been explored to their fullest. What is left to conquer *then*? In the trilogy, it is the magic within the planet itself that Syl Anagist sets its sights on.

The Tuners were the key to the operation of the plutonic engine, and so they are secreted away, kept intentionally separate from the rest of the empire. Though they have been told they exist to serve Syl Anagist and its people, they are not allowed to be a part of the world that they further with their labour. The Tuners are told that when one of them fails or acts against the best

interests of their overseers they will be sent to the briar patch. Hoa finds the briar patch and witnesses for himself the gruesome fate of his kin, understanding for the first time the reality of his creation:

> 'They are still alive, I know at once. Though they sprawl motionless amid the thicket of vines (lying atop the vines, twisted among them, wrapped up in them, speared by them where the vines grow through flesh), it is impossible not to sess the delicate threads of silver darting between the cells of this one's hand, or dancing along the hairs of that one's back. Some of them we can see breathing, though the motion is so very slow. Many wear tattered rags for clothes, dry-rotted with years; a few are naked. Their hair and nails have not grown, and their bodies have not produced waste that we can see. Nor can they feel pain, I sense instinctively; this, at least, is a kindness. That is because the sink lines take all the magic of life from them save the bare trickle needed to keep them alive. Keeping them alive keeps them generating more' (p. 262).

There is much to unpack in regards to the horror of the briar patch. The thorns twist among the motionless souls, both embracing and confining them to their magical prison. The tragically slow breaths barely move the small bodies that were discarded carelessly, seemingly tossed into the cramped space. The threads of silver of course refer to the magic that darts between the cells within the bodies, that which the bodies generate for the sake of the Empire. The Tuners were genetically engineered, and naturally Syl Anagist did what it could to wipe any genetic-based source of higher emotions like love, empathy, sadness, or fear from their brains. They ultimately failed at that.

Just as plantation owners in New Orleans took credit for the work planting, harvesting, and processing sugar that countless slaves suffered for (Rasmussin, 2012), Syl Anagist used and claimed the technology and advancement made possible by countless, consciously and unconsciously, labouring Tuners to further their megalomaniacal ends. Discovering the way that Syl Anagist consumed the bodies and lives of their kin, the Tuners arrived at the only option that was left to them: revolution. It would not be enough to try and save themselves, they understood quickly. Instead they must free everyone, completely. Just as slaves in New Orleans in 1811

decided that they 'would die before they would work another day of backbreaking labor in the hot Louisiana sun' (p. 1), the Tuners resolved that they would rather die than continue to power the machine of Syl Anagist and live another day with the constant threat of the briar patch. The result of the Tuners' revolution is the destruction of Syl Anagist.

40,000 years after the Tuner revolution, those who survived the fall of Syl Anagist formed another society and simply reinitiated the segregation of and racist subjugation against the Orogenes. Node Stations were built to dampen seismic activity and keep human settlements from collapsing. In *The Fifth Season*, Syenite is shocked to see a Node Station, and a child's body trapped within it, for the first time:

> 'The body in the node maintainer's chair is small, and naked. Thin, its limbs atrophied. Hairless. There are things—tubes and pipes and things, she has no words for them—going into the stick-arms, down the goggle-throat, across the narrow crotch. There's a flexible bag on the corpse's belly, attached to its belly somehow, and it's full of—ugh. The bag needs to be changed… There's a stench of sickness in the air, but nearby is a whole shelf of bottled tinctures and pills; understandable, since it would take better antibiotics than ordinary comm-made penicillin to do something like this. Perhaps one of the tube things is for putting that medicine into the node maintainer. And this one is for pushing in food, and that one is for taking away urine, oh, and that cloth wrapping is for sopping up drool' (p. 139).

This child is no child of the Empire. This is a monster, treated inhumanely because its humanity has been stolen from it. The form of abuse in Node Stations is eerily similar to the briar patch in Syl Anagist. Not only is it a technological 'marvel' that functions to improve life for some (while clearly causing harm and suffering for a few unfortunate Orogenes, typically children), it is also used as a threat for Orogenes throughout their lives as tools. If they do not stay in line and do exactly what is expected of them, they will be sent to a Node Station, where they will suffer. Shortly after the text above, Alabaster explains:

> 'Sometimes a rogga can't learn control.' Now she understands that his use of the slur is deliberate. A dehumanizing word for someone who has been made into a thing. It helps. There's no inflection in Alabaster's voice, no emotion, but it's all there in his choice of words. 'Sometimes the Guardians catch a feral who's too old to train, but young enough that killing's a waste. And sometimes they notice someone in the grit pool, one of the especially sensitive ones, who can't seem to master control. The Fulcrum tries to teach them for a while, but if the children don't develop at a pace the Guardians think is appropriate, Mother Sanze can always find another use for them' (p. 140).

Life is precious in Syl Anagist, and so too is a certain kind of life precious in Yumenes, 40,000 years later. But it is never for the sake of those that suffer for the comfort of others. The reality that Orogenes are just as human as anyone else in Yumenes is kept intentionally separate from their commodity, the protection from unpredictable seismic activity their unconscious bodies offer. Thus it is only the protection that matters, and not the tiny body labouring in a wire cage of a chair hidden and forgotten, if it was ever known in the first place. But how to end it? The question becomes one of blame: who is truly to blame for violence against the empire? Will stopping one act of violence, citing reasons of civility and progression, ever break the cycle? Are revolting slaves truly responsible for the deaths of those who physically and emotionally abused them? Viewing this through a decolonial Gothic lens, I suggest we retain, and strengthen, our solidarity with our monsters. Decolonisation is a violent event, as Fanon reminds us, and so perhaps the question of whether to condemn acts of violence is instead a question of whether or not a violent act can *end* a series or pattern of violent acts against a people or a planet. In the case of the transition from the empire of Syl Anagist to the small country of Yumenes, it was brought about by violence. But the Tuner revolution was not ultimately enough to rid the world of this evil completely.

The Empire that placed technological (magical) progress and consumption above all else was allowed to flourish, growing incessantly and producing life for the sole purpose of fuelling the machine, until it was brought down by the hands of the very people it oppressed and made so monstrous. The story of the Tuners suggests that revolution may come, but it is never straightforward. It will come at the hands, and at the cost, of those oppressed and deemed to be

monstrous first and foremost. Until the fictional systems of hierarchy (Orogene, still, Black, White, native, settler) are torn down for good, we must ask questions. We must seek to learn more about our history so that the tragic events that catalyse settler colonial empires are not repeated. Even if true freedom is not achieved until 40,000 years after our own demise, the effects of one's actions today can influence the future: the Gothic reminds us that history is made every day. Striking fear into the coloniser is a worthwhile endeavour, and one that can have lasting impact. Just as planting a tree ultimately reduces the amount of carbon in the atmosphere, telling stories of revolution and social change ultimately empowers seemingly normal people, the parts of the machine that can break it. Perhaps this is what our revolutions will strive for: halting forward progress of oppression for *all*, instead opening the door for a future that is just, and safe, for those who have been harmed.

The *Broken Earth Trilogy* is a story that disrupts the perception of a technologically advanced utopia as something to strive for, and shows us that the fate of such a utopia is the fate of our own empires if we do not reckon with our monsters and our dependence on fossil fuels. Conceivably the relationship between Orogenes and the Earth, and the magic ability that Orogenes possess to both save or doom the planet, represents where we as a society find ourselves today: at the precipice of extreme, irreversible, damage to our planet. Despite imminent climate change, we as a people appear to be stepping on the gas, rather than the brakes, in the ways we are continuing to release carbon into the atmosphere and warm the planet. Acknowledging this is the first step to stopping it. Jemisin tells us this in her third Hugo acceptance speech. Acknowledging is key, and as a writer she states 'I look to science fiction and fantasy as the aspirational drive of the Zeitgeist: we creators are the engineers of possibility. And as this genre finally, however grudgingly, acknowledges that the dreams of the marginalized matter and that all of us have a future, so will go the world. (Soon, I hope)'. Jemisin's work makes clear what it is that is happening around us, as we who live on Earth with our blinders of privilege may miss. She is also cheering us on as we find other ways to fulfil our purpose: as we *make* change. There are ways of pushing back against the seemingly unstoppable boulder that is climate change that seems to be metaphorically barreling down a mountain towards us. Identifying and shutting down systems of oppression is a good start. Striking fear into the hearts of authoritarians and colonisers is perhaps even better.

BIOGRAPHY

Hannah Hellman graduated from Sonoma State University's English M.A. program in 2023. She currently works as Communication Specialist for the NASA partner organisation EdEon STEM Learning. Hannah is particularly interested in the ways that fiction forces readers to consider the world around them, including the systems of oppression and privilege that they may not otherwise ever see or consider.

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'Good Fruit Can't Come From a Bad Tree': Monstrous Bioengineering and Haunted Ecologies in *Farmhand* (2018-)

Brianna Anderson

ABSTRACT

From *Frankenstein* (1818) to *Jurassic Park* (1990), the horror genre has long used decolonial lenses to explore anxieties about biomedical engineering, capitalism, racism, and unrestrained scientific advancement. Building on these earlier works, Rob Guillory's comic *Farmhand* (2018-) uses killer plants, vengeful animals, and other ecohorror tropes to interrogate the intersections of bioengineering, race, and environmental justice. The comic centres on the Jenkinses, a dysfunctional Black family living in 'Freetown' in rural Louisiana. The family patriarch, Jedidiah, has invented genetically-modified plants that grow human body parts. At first, this literal organ farming seems like a revolutionary medical treatment that allows ill and injured people to receive new body parts. However, this scientific advancement soon turns sinister when the organ recipients develop horrifying mutations and leaked seeds from the farm wreak havoc on the local environment.

Farmhand invokes body horror and plant ecohorror to interrogate how harmful scientific practices disproportionately impact marginalised communities and vulnerable ecosystems. The organ recipients—known as transplants—are primarily people with disabilities and terminal illnesses and poor people who cannot afford safe healthcare. As the new organs cause their bodies to mutate, their technology-induced monstrosity highlights the perils of scientific advancement and evokes centuries of real biomedical experimentation on people of colour, people with disabilities, and prison inmates. Furthermore, as the narrative progresses, the haunted ecologies of the past increasingly influence the futuristic horrors faced by the town. This article analyses how Guillory uses the multimodal comics form to visually interweave the environmental and racial traumas

of the past and present, calling attention to the continual harm inflicted by colonialism and capitalist logics.

On January 7, 2022, David Bennett Sr. made history as the first living human to receive a genetically-modified animal heart. The 57-year-old man had end-stage heart failure and was ineligible for a conventional heart transplant due to a history of medical noncompliance. In a last-ditch effort to save his life, his doctor received emergency authorisation from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for an experimental xenotransplantation, also known as a cross-species organ transplantation. Faculty at the University of Maryland School of Medicine replaced Bennett's failing heart with a genetically-modified pig heart engineered by the biotechnology company Revivicor. Initially, the procedure seemed successful, but Bennett died two months later from undetermined causes. His transplant surgeon, Bartley Griffith, later revealed that the pig heart had been infected by a latent porcine virus, which may have contributed to Bennett's death. Still, the medical community largely celebrated the ground-breaking xenotransplantation, with Joachim Denner from the Institute of Virology at the Free University of Berlin declaring the experiment 'a great success' (Regalado, 2022). Similar experiments occurred at the New York University Langone Transplant Institute, where surgeons transplanted three gene-edited pig kidneys and two gene-edited pig hearts into deceased patients on ventilator support between 2021 and 2023 (NYU, 2023).[1] Proponents hail the experiments as a potential solution to the organ shortage crisis, but critics question the ethics of these procedures. Bioethicist Arthur Caplan called the discovery of the porcine virus in Bennett's pig heart 'a big red flag' for xenotransplantation (Regalado, 2022), while People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) (2023) denounced the experiments as 'unsafe, unethical, and unnecessary'.

While xenotransplantation with gene-edited organs is a recent advancement, anxieties about the ethics of bioengineering and the racialised hierarchies that often underpin these experiments have preoccupied speculative fiction narratives for centuries. Most famously, Mary

[1] These pigs have been genetically modified to remove the gene that creates alpha-gal, a biomolecule that triggers a response from the human immune system. In other words, this modification tricks the human body into accepting the pig organs instead of immediately rejecting them (NYU, 2023).

Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) and its many adaptations explore the consequences of unrestrained scientific advancement, as Victor Frankenstein splices cadavers and animal parts together to form his fearsome creature. Though the novel never explicitly mentions the creature's race, some scholars interpret it as a reflection of nineteenth-century fears about race, colonialism, and the preservation of hierarchical power structures. In *Black Frankeinstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*, Elizabeth Young (2009) argues, '*Frankenstein* offers an oblique account of white anxiety in the face of slave rebellion […]. Shelley presents a white protagonist who is haunted and undone by the rebellious monster he has created' (p. 21). Like Nat Turner and other real colonised subjects, Frankenstein's creature is demonised and ultimately punished for resisting his creator's control. Similarly, Michael Crichton's novel *Jurassic Park* (1990) and its film adaptation (1993) frame the dinosaurs as rebellious Others who resist human domination, warning the audience about the dangers of bioengineering and exploiting living creatures for entertainment and profit. As Dr. Ian Malcom rants in the film before the inevitable dinosaur rampage, '[y]our scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should'. These cautionary tales set the stage for contemporary works like Rob Guillory's comic *Farmhand* (2018-present), which uses killer plants, vengeful animals, and other ecohorror tropes to interrogate the intersections of bioengineering, race, and environmental justice. Like real-life xenotransplantation experiments, *Farmhand* and its ecoGothic predecessors raise unsettling questions about the boundaries of scientific experimentation and the often-intertwined exploitation of nature and of marginalised groups under colonial logics.

Farmhand (2018-present) centres on the Jenkinses, a dysfunctional Black family living in the small town of Freetown, Louisiana, in the 2030s. We learn early on that the family patriarch, Jedidiah Jenkins, was formerly a struggling farmer, who received a vision of 'the Seed', a new type of intelligent human stem cell. He revolutionises his farm by using these cells to bioengineer genetically-modified plants that grow human body parts. On Jedidiah's ultra-modern farm, organ harvesting takes on a more literal meaning as human limbs sprout from trees and eyeballs grow from flowers. At first, this literal organ farming seems a miraculous medical treatment that allows ill and injured people to receive customisable body parts. However, this scientific advancement soon turns sinister when the organ recipients, known as 'transplants', develop horrifying mutations —a plot development that will not surprise anyone familiar with the long history of plant/human

hybrids in ecohorror texts like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Scott Smith's *The Ruins* (2006). Additionally, leaked seeds from the farm wreak havoc on the local environment. With Jedidiah, we discover too that his former collaborator, the White Monica Thorne, has been recruiting and manipulating the transplants as part of a nefarious plot to take over Freetown—a name that is deeply ironic given the town's long history of slavery, racial violence, and familial trauma.

Figure 1. Jedidiah has a nightmare about his family's monstrous family tree in Rob Guillory's *Farmhand*, Issue 1 (2019).

From the very beginning, the comic makes it clear that its horror stems from the inextricable entanglement of environmental and racial injustices, woven into the Jenkins family's

personal and collective trauma. Issue #1 opens with Jedidiah's adult son, Ezekial (Zeke), having a nightmare about his childhood on the farm. In the dream, coyotes have slaughtered some of the family's livestock. As Zeke and his sister Andy gather the bloodied corpses, they discover their father buried in the ground. Ezekial tries to dig Jedidiah free, but red roots spring out of the ground and ensnare the children. With eyes glowing a demonic red, the nightmare version of Jedidiah says,

> 'I'm sorry, son. I tried. I really did. I wanted to *change*. But good fruit can't come from a *bad tree*, Ezekial. This seed was sown long *before* us. The roots are *deep* into black soil. Black as the heart of man. Our family tree…' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 1, 2019).

On the next page, Jedidiah morphs into a monstrous tree[2] with tiny humans hanging from its branches and trunk. Backgrounded by a bloodred moon, the tree says, '[w]e're just branches on a tree of woe' (*Figure 1*) (Ibid). No nooses dangle from the tree, but the image of the suspended humans—and the earlier slaughtered animals—nevertheless evokes the spectre of lynching. Jedidiah's grim dialogue reinforces the implication that the violence and trauma of the past have shaped the family's present. His assertion that 'good fruit can't come from a *bad tree*' conveys several levels of meaning in the context of the narrative. Most obviously, the nightmare foreshadows the failure of the Seed to heal the transplants, perhaps due to its 'bad' origins as an unethical experiment. From a decolonial perspective, however, these words also underscore the comic's ecoGothic exploration of the intersections between environmental exploitation, race, and trauma—a haunting that has taken root in both the land and the family. The nightmare points to the Jenkins family's personal struggles and business problems as products of historical and systemic forces outside their control. In other words, Zeke and the rest of Jedidiah's descendants are not 'bad seeds' in the traditional sense like *The Omen's* (1976) devilish Damien, but rather unwitting victims of a legacy of violence and oppression. This interpretation is reinforced by Jedidiah's claim that the family tree grows from 'black soil', which—given that the comic takes place in Louisiana—has presumably been 'blackened' by the blood of enslaved people and other

[2] As Elizabeth Parker highlights in *The Forest and the EcoGothic* (2020), monstrous trees are a staple in this genre, appearing in everything from *Cabin in the Woods* (2012) to *Harry Potter* (1997-2007).

victims of racial history. As a result, the nightmare implies that the family's contemporary troubles come from old wounds that continue to fester and cause intergenerational 'woe'. All the while, the prominent full moon in the background of the illustration suggests that these struggles are cyclical and unending.

While *Farmhand* often centres on the Jenkinses' interpersonal conflicts, it goes beyond personal family trauma to interrogate how harmful scientific practices disproportionately impact marginalised communities and vulnerable ecosystems, drawing clear parallels to colonial histories of exploitation. Jedidiah primarily gives his bioengineered body parts to poor and disabled people who cannot afford traditional medical treatments, turning them into unwilling test subjects, much like the victims of the Tuskegee syphilis study and other unethical experiments. Furthermore, as the story unfolds, the Jenkins family realises that the futuristic horrors consuming Freetown have been inextricably shaped by haunted ecologies—a term I use here to describe how past environmental and racial traumas, particularly those tied to exploitation and violence, disrupt the present. These hauntings and the ecological changes caused by the Seed converge, transforming Freetown into an increasingly horrifying Southern Gothic landscape where racial, gendered, and environmental injustices intersect. As Sharon Rose Yang and Kathleen Healey (2016) contend, '[d]isordered landscapes in the Gothic represent the chaos of a culture in transition, or the violence of passions seething beneath the veneer of civilized society. Gothic landscapes are a lens by which cultures reflect their darkness hidden from the light of consciousness' (p. 5). In *Farmhand*, this disordered landscape becomes a literal and metaphorical space where trauma and violence fuel the comic's ecohorror narrative, punishing Jedidiah and the (primarily White) townspeople for their colonial treatment of nature and vulnerable communities. By visually interweaving past and present traumas, *Farmhand* highlights how lingering injustices and capitalism continue to shape the environmental and ethical crises of today. Moreover, *Farmhand* plays on societal anxieties that nature will punish us for our environmental transgressions—fears that we see playing out before our eyes in the real world as wildfires, microplastics, and other human-made environmental issues damage ecosystems and people alike.

'I thought it was a miracle': The Horrors of Biomedical Exploitation

Farmhand uses ecohorror and absurdist humour to uncover the often out-of-sight harm inflicted by unrestrained scientific advancement and corporate greed, echoing colonial histories of exploitation and the marginalisation of vulnerable communities. The ethical issues raised by Jedidiah's manipulation of nature take centre stage from the first issue. The series begins with Zeke moving back to Freetown with his White wife and biracial children, who are based on Guillory's own family (Johnson, 2018). Ezekial and his father, it transpires, had a falling out years earlier following the death of Ezekial's mother. When Zeke returns home, he is shocked to discover that his father has transformed their humble family farm into a sprawling, high-tech laboratory. The issue's cover shows Jedidiah wearing a straw hat and worn overalls, with cash in one pocket and a gun in the other. He uses a battered watering can to tend a horrifying crop: sickly green hands emerging from the soil, foreshadowing the metaphorical ghosts who will rise from the dead to haunt the family. Inside the first issue, Zeke discovers that the rustic red barn of his childhood has been surrounded by a barbed wire fence and futuristic, dome-shaped greenhouses. This startling juxtaposition of the seemingly traditional Black farmer with his ultra-modern cash crop challenges stereotypical depictions of rural Black life. In a 2018 interview, Guillory remarked, 'I knew some folks would see a black guy standing in a field and think "slavery". But I liked the idea of playing on that expectation, then flipping it on its head by revealing that it's actually a sci-fi story […]. It wasn't some racial agenda' (Johnson, 2018). Despite Guillory's assertion—made early in the comic's publication—that the story is not about race, *Farmhand* repeatedly highlights how unavoidable haunted ecologies are, linking Jedidiah's actions to a legacy of exploitation and trauma—now upended with the Black farmer positioned as the wealthy exploiter instead of the exploited.

This shift in power is embodied by the commercialised laboratory that has overtaken the family's old-fashioned—and presumably more sustainable—farm, offering a scathing critique of both unethical bioengineering and the systemic exploitation of nature for food production. The modern farm uses misleading advertising that evokes the tactics of companies like Ben & Jerry's, which has been accused of using the phrase 'happy cows' to disguise the fact that its products typically use ingredients from mass-production factory farms (Danley, 2020). During a mock

hayride tour, Zeke and his family don virtual reality headsets as a farm employee says, '[p]lease sit back and enjoy this one-minute *highly expensive* theatrical retelling of our farm's rise from its humble beginnings—to its current place as a trailblazer on the frontier of *farmaceutical stem cell research*' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 1, 2019; emphasis in original). As the worker tows the family behind an old-fashioned tractor, they watch a VR narrative about the company's evolution from a modest farm to a 'farmaceutical' empire. The ride recounts Jedidiah's origins as a 'simple farmer from a long line of simple farmers', his vision of the Seed, and the financial support he received from Lafayette Oil and Gas (Ibid). The absurd contrast between the rustic tractor and the high-tech VR experience highlights the artificiality and commercialisation of Jedidiah's supposedly natural farming methods. Ezekial's son Riley further underscores the unnaturalness of this environment by pointing out that flashback scenes depicting Jedidiah's supposedly happy family use famous Black actors, not footage of his real children. Riley exclaims, 'Dad, Grandpa got Jaden Smith to play you?!!' (Ibid). Through this VR experience, Jedidiah deceptively markets his highly commercialised farmaceutical business as a 'simple', wholesome family farm. This misrepresentation reflects the displacement of traditional practices by capitalist-driven models of exploitation that commodify and control nature instead of nurturing it.

This cheerful corporate narrative does not just create a falsely idyllic vision of the farm; it also obscures the deeper connections between land exploitation and harmful industries. Like Jedidiah's fictional business, many real biotechnology startups have received funding from investors with ties to fossil fuel industries. For instance, the Qatar Investment Authority, funded by the country's oil and natural gas surpluses, has invested $5.5 billion in fifteen biotech companies since 2020 (Adam, 2023). In *Farmhand,* this link between healthcare and fossil fuels casts further doubts on the ethics of Jedidiah's bioengineered organs. The farm purports to use plants to heal people, yet it has monetary ties to an industry commonly associated with climate change, oil spills, and other types of environmental degradation—issues that disproportionately affect marginalised communities, including people of colour and residents of the Global South. This partnership, coupled with the farm's security measures, also underscores the corporatisation of the human body and life-saving medical advancements. Roger Lurkhurt (2015) argues that this industrialisation is a defining characteristic of biomedical horror, which 'is less interested in the theological transgression of the reanimated corpse than in portraying the depredations of the

physical body and the traumatic erosion of the boundary between life and death, and specifically in the armatures of a newly intensive medical-industrial complex' (p. 90). The horror in *Farmhand* partially stems from the unsettling structural ties between medical advancements and industrial interests. This framework transforms human and nonhuman bodies into commodities as business owners like Jedidiah—and real-world corporations—prioritise proprietary knowledge and capital over the common good.

Figure 2. The hayride transports Ezekial's family through Jedidiah's sterile laboratory in Rob Guillory's *Farmhand*, Issue 1 (2019).

Along with critiquing the impact of corporate greed on healthcare, the comic uses the bioengineered transplants to reveal how capitalism drives environmental exploitation in the agriculture industry. The hayride exposes this unnaturalness by taking the family into the heart of the laboratory. The narrator of the VR experience says, 'Jenkins Institute Bioengineers are able to

deliver safe, transplant-ready farm-grown organs, without the expensive limitations that hampered past bioengineering techniques. It's simple. Our farmhands just plant, add water… and Mother Nature does the rest' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 1, 2019). However, the visual narrative indicates that the creation of the plants is not as organic and peaceful as the narrator claims. A two-page spread shows human organs growing from neatly lined rows of plants enclosed in raised gardening beds or trees encircled by sterile concrete (*Figure 2*). Jedidiah attempts to exert total control over the environment on his sterilised farm, employing farmers and scientists to observe, prune, and mow the plants. Ezekial's family responds with horror instead of delight. Exclamation points surround the family's head when they spot a blood-covered employee snipping human fingers off the arm tree. On the following page, they see a tank with submerged trees that sprout kidneys from their roots. Riley asks, 'Momma… can I sleep with you tonight?' With a queasy expression, Mae responds, '*None* of us are sleeping tonight, sweetie' (Ibid). The family's revulsion and Jedidiah's reliance on futuristic technology emphasise the unnaturalness of contemporary factory farming and precision agriculture, replacing Mother Nature with technological innovations to extract the maximum profit from living beings. As Dona Pursall (2021) notes in her analysis of this scene, '[e]ven the hayride doesn't use real hay. These subtle ironies which poke at the incongruity between traditional and modern agriculture are intentionally playful and humorous, but also unsettling' (p. 12). As the comic reminds us, there is nothing natural about using science to harvest human organs, just like there is nothing natural about genetically modifying pigs and other livestock for food or medical purposes.

Figure 3. Mikhail screams in agony as he receives an arm transplant in Rob Guillory's *Farmhand*, Issue 1 (2019).

The unsettling strangeness of the plants and Jedidiah's questionable morality cross the line between absurdity and horror when the farmer performs nonconsensual transplants on marginalised patients without advocates or resources. Two Russian spies infiltrate the farm during the first issue to uncover the secret to creating bioengineered organs. Jedidiah's security team captures one of these spies, Mikhail, as he tries to steal a severed finger. They tie the orphaned boy to a chair in front of the arm tree, and Jedidiah removes the boy's prosthetic arm. The farmer asks,

> 'Did you lose your arm in the war, or were you born this way? Doesn't matter. You know, I began my research to help people like you. Victims of war. Disease. It's a broken world we live in […] [but] I make people whole here' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 1, 2019).

As Jedidiah delivers this seemingly noble speech, an employee severs a human arm from the tree with a machete. The animated limb crawls across the ground to Jedidiah like a snake, oozing a trail of bright red blood in its wake. In a harrowing sequence, another employee holds Mikhail down as the arm sprouts fangs from its bleeding stump and violently attaches itself to the boy's shoulder with an animalistic 'chomp!'. In the next panel, Mikhail screams in agony as sinister, green, vine-like tendrils appear under his skin where the teeth have penetrated him (*Figure 3*). This violent xenotransplantation bears little resemblance to the sterile, carefully coordinated organ transplantations typically performed by actual medical doctors. The horrifying scene further complicates conventional racial hierarchies by having Jedidiah, a Black man, perform the brutal procedure on Mikhail, a White boy. However, the gruesome imagery makes it clear that the audience should reject this inversion of power dynamics, not celebrate it, and recognise the dehumanising effects of capitalism.

Furthermore, the bioengineered arm evokes disgust and horror by unsettling conventional notions of plants—like colonised people—as passive and powerless. As Michael Marder (2013) observes, humans have traditionally overlooked the agency and subjectivity of the vegetal, with plants occupying 'the margin of the margin, the zone of absolute obscurity' (p. 2). The comic challenges this perception by tracing the limb's journey from the tree—which appears as a passive object in the background of many of the panels—to the centre of the page and the reader's attention. On Jedidiah's farm, the transplants are not just passive medical devices for humans to farm and use for their benefit. Instead, they are threatening beings with the power to inflict harm on the willing and unwilling patients who receive them. Additionally, the plant's uncanny agency and violent penetration of Mikhail's body evoke horror by physically and metaphorically violating the boundaries between humans and the vegetal. In her six theses on plant horror, Dawn Keetley (2016) identifies this dissolution as one of the ways that plants inspire fear: 'Plant growth always breaks what seeks to contain it, transgressing borders meant to confine and define' (p. 16). Like an invasive parasite, the arm does not simply attach to Mikhail's body but instead immediately spreads to the healthy tissue in his shoulder, erasing the barrier between his natural body and the foreign transplant. Even more horrifyingly, the plant's violation of Mikhail extends to his mind. At the conclusion of Issue #1, the arm forces Mikhail to shoot and kill his Russian employer after the man discovers the transplant and attacks him. The comic ends with a full-page panel depicting

the frightened Mikhail staring at his transformed limb in the mirror. Green tendrils snake to the top of his shoulder, and a red flower sprouts from his arm, visually echoing the blood splattered on his shirt. The boy's formerly blue eyes have also turned green, indicating that the transplant has invaded other parts of his body (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 1, 2019). This scene highlights the startling consequences of Jedidiah's bioengineering endeavours. Though the farmer claims that his transplants 'make people whole', they instead transform the patients into strange hybrids with fractured identities and no control over their bodies' mutations. Mikhail's transformation is made even more horrifying by his vulnerable status as a disabled orphan. The boy has no adult guardians to protect him from Jedidiah or help him cope with the traumatic aftermath of his unwanted transplant. The issue's final panel invites the audience to sympathise with him and reflect on the ethical implications of performing medical procedures on nonconsenting patients. This moral consideration is critical given that most real xenotransplantation experiments have been conducted on clinically deceased patients who cannot consent.

Building on this early scene, other transplant procedures deepen the comic's decolonial critique by more explicitly underscoring the intersections between disability, race, and medical exploitation. In Issue #8, a flashback reveals a conversation between Jedidiah and Jacob Roy, a White man blinded by a chemical spill. The first thirteen panels have solid black backgrounds with only speech bubbles, inviting the reader to 'see' the world from Jacob's perspective, where verbal communication is his primary means of navigating social interactions. Jedidiah offers to treat the man's blindness, saying, 'I know it's a tad hard to believe, but my invention can fully *restore* your vision'. Jacob answers, '[l]ook, I… I ain't rich. And my insurance is shit'. Jedidiah responds, '[i]t's on *me.* Your *family* needs you. Bein' a family man myself, I know what that's like' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 2, 2019). Jacob quickly agrees to the free procedure, and the visual narrative shows the moment he regains his vision after Jedidiah gives him plant-grown eyes. A cloud of gold disrupts the all-black panels, and the next frame shows Jedidiah gazing down at Jacob in an angelic halo of light. This flashback builds empathy for the blind man and reveals one of the motivations for patients to undergo Jedidiah's seemingly miraculous treatment: the inability to pay for other treatments. Other issues reveal that Jedidiah has also given transplants to a woman disfigured by her partner during a domestic violence incident (#2), an elderly Black woman with a physical disability (#11), and others that occupy precarious social positions. The farmer's focus on these

vulnerable patients is partially motivated by charity but also by the fact that the FDA has not approved the transplants. As a result, only desperate people who cannot afford safer alternatives, or who have complex disorders that cannot be treated with conventional medicine, are infected by the plants.

These troubling scenes evoke centuries of biomedical experimentation on people with disabilities, people with low incomes, and people of colour. As Jonathan D. Moreno (2000) has detailed, the American military and scientists have a long history of using these marginalised groups as the unwitting subjects of plutonium injections, irradiation experiments, and other unethical procedures. Like the U.S. government and immoral researchers, Jedidiah has no qualms about testing his cure on vulnerable people, even though he does not fully understand the effects that his transplants have on their bodies. His experimentation highlights how unethical scientific advancements disproportionately affect marginalised people with few resources—and how these groups can sometimes participate in larger systems of oppression out of necessity, or, in Jedidiah's case, greed.

Figure 4. Jedidiah cures Jacob's blindness, but the transplants cause his eyes to mutate into sunflowers in Rob Guillory's *Farmhand*, Issue 8 (2019).

Farmhand uses body horror to confront readers with the long-lasting harm that Jedidiah's unethical treatment inflicts on Jacob while also inverting racist depictions of 'monstrous' Black men. Immediately following the procedure, the man gazes tearfully from new organs resembling regular human eyes, except for the green, vein-like growths surrounding them. The next panel, however, reveals that Jacob has paid a high cost for his 'free' procedure: his eye transplants have mutated into bright sunflowers, with pupils shrinking to small green circles, perhaps suggesting that his perspective has been permanently altered as he sees the world through a more ecocentric

lens. Instead of viewing his transformation as empowering, the man says, 'I thought it was a miracle. But I was wrong' (*Figure 4*) (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 2, 2019). The comic's intimate depiction of Jacob's healing journey in the flashback makes his unwilling transformation into a plant hybrid all the more startling and depressing. Returning to the present day, the comic portrays the full extent of the man's mutation as he breaks into Jedidiah's house to seek help. Strange red appendages dangle from his hands, and green vines cover his face and fingers. In an echo of Shelley's novel, Jacob begs for help from 'Black Doctor Frankenstein', a term that Ezekial uses to describe Jedidiah in a previous issue (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 1, 2019). Unlike Frankenstein's creature, though, Jacob wants his creator to reverse his transformation, not create him a mate. He describes the strange effects the transplants have had on his body, saying, '[i]t's like… an *itch* I can't scratch. Like somethin's *crawling inside* me, and it *won't stop* [….]. *I-I lost* everything. My wife. The *kids*. They got scared 'cause I can see things they *can't*' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 2, 2019). Jacob's alienation from his body and his family reflects racialised anxieties about fatherhood and masculinity that often pervade Black Frankenstein stories. In these stories, Young (2008) writes, 'the figure of the monster is consistently intertwined with fantasies and anxieties about masculinity, relations between men, and the male iconography of the American nation' (p. 5). Instead of depicting monstrous Black men, the comic reverses this stereotype by showing Jacob's transformation into a literal plant monster. By contrasting this failed patriarch with the deeply flawed—but still loving and very much present—Jedidiah, the narrative 'expose[s] the instability of white power' (Young, 2008: p. 5) and encourages readers to envision new, more inclusive narratives about fatherhood and masculinity. At the same time, Jacob's horrifying transformation underscores the threat that unrestrained scientific advancement poses to all marginalised peoples, foregrounding the intersectional nature of colonialisation and oppression.

'This here's my land': Nature Strikes Back

While Jedidiah's human patients experience some of the most dramatic mutations, the bioengineered plants also exert their strange agencies on the ecosystems in and around Freetown. This contamination vividly reveals the dire ecological consequences of unethical farming practices and scientific experimentation. Initially, the Jenkins family believes they have contained the organisms on the farm, because only Jedidiah can activate the Seed and cause the plants to grow.

His daughter Andy tells an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) inspector, '[o]f course we've restricted *unauthorized* seed propagation with a *terminator gene*. So each plant is completely sterile'. The inspector counters, '[u]nless the Seed *evolved* a way *around* the restrictions'. Andy responds, '[t]he Jedidiah Seed can only grow in response to my father's *command* and his *presence*. It has to be *told* to grow. Even if someone *did* manage to *steal* one, it would be completely worthless to them' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 2, 2019). This scene alludes to a similar moment of hubris in the *Jurassic Park* film when Dr. Henry Wu tells Malcolm, '[p]opulation control is one of our security precautions here. There is no unauthorized breeding in Jurassic Park […]. Because all the animals in Jurassic Park are female. We engineered them that way'. Both the Jenkins family and the Jurassic Park scientists drastically overestimate the control they exert over their bioengineered creations. In *Jurassic Park*, the dinosaurs' amphibian DNA allows them to change their sex and reproduce independently. Meanwhile, in *Farmhand,* the Seed has evolved to grow and reproduce independently outside the control of Jedidiah and the farm. As the mutation spreads beyond the farm, the Seed empowers the environment to seek vengeance against the human townspeople who have exploited it.

Figure 5. The townspeople recoil in horror when they discover that the Seed has invaded a domestic pig they have slaughtered for the Freetown Annual Cajun Boucherie in Rob Guillory's *Farmhand*, Issue 5 (2019).

The comic uses several role reversals to depict how the Seed upends the power dynamics, not just between humans of different races, but also between humans and nature. In Issue #5, townspeople gather for the Freetown Annual Cajun Boucherie. A narrational caption explains the purpose of the ceremony: 'A celebration of the first Acadian immigrants to South Louisiana, the *boucherie* (meaning *butchery*) was a way local families could share in the bounties of local wildlife in an era before refrigeration' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 1, 2019). The ceremony begins with the participants slaughtering a domestic pig. A harrowing sequence shows the bright pink pig with its mouth curled up like a smile; a close-up of the muzzle of a firing rifle; and the dead pig lying upside down on the ground with blood leaking from its mouth and a large bullet hole in its forehead. The shocking contrast between the first and third panels forces readers to contemplate the horror and violence of slaughtering animals for food. The gruesome death of the cheerful pig also suggests that the townspeople have strayed from the original purpose of the ceremony; instead of sharing hunted wildlife as a survival mechanism, they now kill domestic animals for their entertainment and gratuitous consumption.

The horror of the scene intensifies when the townspeople slice open the pig and discover that its body is filled with the sickly green roots that have infected the human transplant recipients. A disgusted onlooker gasps, '[i]t—it's in the *meat*', while another bystander clasps his hand over his mouth to hold back vomit (*Figure 5*) (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 1, 2019). Splayed upside down on a rustic wooden table, the pig's mutilated body distinctly resembles a human corpse. This visual parallel implies that the infected human transplants have the same plant growth in their 'meat', even if they—like the pig—have not yet shown symptoms. The illustration also uses cartoonish imagery to highlight the dissonance between contemporary perceptions of animals and the darker reality of their consumption and exploitation. A girl standing to the right of the table wears a shirt with a cat sticking its tongue out, while the man who cut open the pig wears a blood-splattered apron with a cartoonish pig and the phrase 'Pig Boss' (Ibid). This whimsical clothing depicts animals as cute, harmless, and easily mastered. The dead pig and a pet dog lapping blood from the ground provide gritty counterpoints to these cartoon representations by demonstrating how humans exploit real animals as food and pets. The ironic contrast between the cute cartoons and the bloody reality invites readers to question the ethics of this treatment of animals and underscores the inherent wrongness of using living creatures for human benefit.

While the comic depicts the slaughtered pig as a victim, the Seed empowers other creatures to fight back against humans. A role reversal of the pig scene occurs in the following issue (#6) when Jedidiah, Ezekial, Riley, and Mikhail venture into the woods for a fishing trip. As the two boys explore a nearby trail, they encounter a wild boar infected by the Seed. Unlike the domesticated pig, this animal is powerful and menacing—a Frankenstinian creature shaped by nature instead of humans. Green vines snake through its brown fur and its decidedly un-smiling mouth bristles with sharp fangs. The boar chases the boys and the two men away from their fishing spot, crashing through the fishing equipment they have already used to catch one fish. When the humans climb a tree to escape, they are horrified to discover that the Seed has also infected the vegetation, transforming the woods into a haunted landscape filled with fragmented human body parts (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 2, 2019). Significantly, the horror in this scene—like the pig slaughter—stems from human action, not from the woods itself. Analysing the role of the forest in the ecoGothic, Elizabeth Parker, in conversation with Trang Dang and Michelle Poland (2022), argues that one of the primary ways that 'the woods manifest as frightening is revealed in the idea that it's actually *humans* in the forest that make it dark, that make it Gothic. It is a good, or at least a neutral space until we infect it and *make* it ominous' (p. 123). The Jenkins family and Mikhail are terrorised by the boar and vegetation Jedidiah has inadvertently corrupted, not by an inherently malevolent natural environment. The direct correlation between human misdeeds and the boar's frightening retaliation draws on a central trope of ecohorror: nature striking back. In these texts, Parker maintains, '[y]ou're always going to have humans at the centre in some way: humans being attacked and being punished' (Ibid: p. 116). Though the Jenkins family does not participate in the boucherie, the infected pigs and trees reveal that Jedidiah has unintentionally caused harm by contaminating organisms outside the farm's boundaries with the Seed. The boar's menacing of the family serves as a karmic punishment for this environmental degradation and reverses conventional power dynamics between humans as exploiters and livestock as powerless prey.

The environment's punishment of humans extends beyond the Jenkins family to affect other townspeople. Issue #12 begins with an employee emptying bait traps at the Comeaux Crawfish Farms. Shaking out a trap, he finds an infected crawfish with glowing green eyes and vines growing out of its shell. The crawfish latches onto his hand with its claw, and other crawfish climb over the side of the boat to attack him. The scene ends with the screaming man trying to

fight off the creatures as more infected crawfish peer out of the water next to one of the traps meant to harvest them. Andy visits the crime scene after the discovery of the employee's mutilated body, and the farm owner, Otis Comeaux, confronts her about her father's role in the death. Otis declares, '[t]his here's *my* land. That's *my* crawfish he *ruined* and *my* hired hand he *killed*. Ain't the *first* time Jed's *Devil Seed* leaked into one o' my fields […]. You tell Jed: This *blood* is on his hands' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 3, 2020). Otis tries to assert his dominance and ownership of the land and the crawfish, but the mutated creatures fight back against his employee's attempt to harvest them. The vengeance of the crawfish has tangible implications for the humans who profit from their deaths. The Louisiana Crawfish Production Board chairman warns Freetown's mayor, '[t]hat's the sound of our economy *collapsing* […]. We've got buyers from all over the world worried their seafood might *turn* on them' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 3, 2020). By transforming the crawfish into vengeful animal-plant hybrids, the Seed unsettles anthropocentric notions of seafood, plants, and other agricultural 'products' as commodities and resources for human consumption. These nature-strikes-back narratives, Keetley (2016) argues, aim to strike fear in audiences by portraying seemingly powerless, often overlooked creatures—like plants and crawfish—as agentic threats. She writes, '[h]umans have, however, long *oppressed* plants as well—exploiting and destroying vegetal life for our own self-serving uses; thus plants doubly threaten to stage a vengeful return, forming a potent force of both the repressed *and* the oppressed' (p. 19). The comic highlights the interconnectedness of human activity and ecosystems to offer a cautionary tale about the dangers of exploiting nature for food, medicine, and entertainment.

'We're just branches on a tree of woe': Bringing Together Freetown's Ecological and Racial Injustices

While *Farmhand* uses ecohorror to variously explore historical trauma, environmental injustice, and racial violence throughout, these elements most powerfully converge in the aforementioned terrifying tree demon that haunts the Jenkins family. Though this figure initially appears in Zeke's nightmare, it soon becomes clear that it is a literal manifestation of the haunted ecologies that have entangled the family and the broader Freetown community. In Issue #1, for instance, Ezekial pauses outside a liquor store after failing to secure a job. As he gazes at the shop, two demonic trees appear at the edges of the panel, and the sky momentarily turns a vivid red. One of the trees

tells the audience, '[i]t is only a matter of time' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 1, 2019). In the following panels, Ezekial clasps a sobriety chip from Alcoholics Anonymous and turns away from the liquor store, defeating his inner demons momentarily. However, the past continues to haunt Ezekial throughout the series as he struggles to cope with his alcoholism, grief about the death of his mother, and the guilt from an extramarital affair. By linking these challenges to the influence of the tree demon, the comic suggests that ancestral trauma continues to shape the personal struggles experienced by the contemporary characters. A. Timothy Spaulding (2005) identifies this entanglement of the past and present as a defining feature of postmodern slave narratives, writing, 'by mining genres that many regard as escapist […] African American writers reform traditional historical representations of slavery from a contemporary perspective. They compel us to re-examine the past in a way that acknowledges its impact on the present' (p. 7). The comic uses staples of the horror genre, like vengeful demons and nightmares, to visualise the lingering effects of racial injustices on the present-day Jenkins family.

Figure 6. The tree demon lurks behind Jedidiah as he discusses his motivations for buying the land in Rob Guillory's *Farmhand*, Issue 16 (2022).

A flashback scene featuring the tree demon provides additional insights into the intergenerational traumas contributing to the family's tale of woe, heavily implying that Jedidiah's biotechnology venture is doomed from the beginning due to the inescapable ghosts of his past. Issue#16 begins with Jedidiah visiting the property that will later become the farm with Randall Lafayette, the wealthy oil company CEO who financially backs the company. They tour the dilapidated, polluted property, which bears little resemblance to the sleek farmaceutical company that Jedidiah later builds. The farmer encourages Randall to imagine how they can transform the land, declaring that their business will 'be bigger than *Disney*'. Randall counters, ''cept Walt didn't

build his park on land where his granddaddy got *lynched*'. His face cast in shadow, Jedidiah explains his reasoning for choosing the location:

> 'My granddaddy *built* this town. And what'd he get for it? A *noose*. I try to run my farm, and they do everything they can to put me outta business so some white man can take my *land*. Now I got something they don't have. Something *special*. When they see what we build here, they'll know—*They lose. I win. Fuck 'em*' (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 4, 2022).

Jedidiah envisions the act of buying the land as an empowering show of defiance against the white people who lynched his grandfather and tried to sabotage his farm. However, the visual narrative undercuts his bold statements by showing the demon's face on a nearby tree, its mouth twisted in a silent, sinister laugh (*Figure 6*). A later flashback in Issue#20 reveals that Jedidiah's grandfather was lynched from this same tree. Thus, the ecohorror in *Farmhand* comes not just from Jedidiah's manipulation of the environment but from the emotional and historical traumas embedded in the land. Jedidiah tries to reshape the family's destiny by building his empire on the property, but he cannot eradicate the stains of hatred and violence from the blackened soil. In this way, the tree serves as a visual representation of Toni Morrison's concept of 'rememory'. As Morrison's protagonist Sethe explains in *Beloved* (1987), 'Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world' (p. 47). The multimodal comics format allows Guillory to visually inscribe the traces of past traumas onto the landscape, emphasising the ways that rememory shapes the present even after the physical evidence of violence fades.

Figure 7. Past and present familial traumas merge in Rob Guillory's *Farmhand*, Issue 20 (2022).

This past violence inflicted on the Jenkins' ancestors disrupts the present in later issues as Jedidiah loses control of the Seed, and Ezekial increasingly gives in to his self-destructive and violent urges. In Issue #17, for instance, Ezekial kills a stranger with a rock after Monica Thorne tricks him into believing that the man plans to murder his wife. Paralleling the family's downfall, Freetown devolves into a dystopian hellscape populated mostly by mutated transplant recipients and encroaching vegetation. The town divides into two factions: people who want the Jenkins family to find a cure for the mutations and those who want to embrace their new identities as plant hybrids. The latter group is controlled by the aforementioned Monica, a scientist who helped Jedidiah develop the Seed but later made a deal with the tree demon to save her life. The conflict between these groups climaxes in Issue #20 after Monica captures Ezekial and takes him back to the farm. Her lackeys tear open his shirt to reveal a vivid orange and green seed growing from the centre of his chest, even though Ezekial never received a transplant. Speaking through Monica, the

tree demon reveals that it has influenced the Jenkins family bloodline over generations, making them wicked and corrupt. The demon says,

> ‘If you knew the *patience* it took to cultivate *just* the right soil—bit by bit. Choice by choice. *Generation* by generation. A *nudge* here, a *whisper* there. An *idea* seeded at just the right time. With enough patience, you can *mold* the human heart into whatever you *like*. With enough *pain*, enough *hatred* and enough *bitterness*—you can grow a *tree*’ (Guillory, *Farmhand* vol. 4, 2022).

As the demon speaks, images of past traumas experienced by the Jenkins family fill the two-page spread (*Figure 7*). The left side of the page shows Jedidiah watching his living grandfather write, kneeling at the base of the lynching tree as the grandfather hangs limply from a branch and holding the man’s corpse. In the centre of the page, Jedidiah grows from an angry young man to an elderly farmer cradling one of his bioengineered plants as the demon looms in the background. Finally, the right side of the page shows Ezekial arguing with his father as a teenager and sitting at a bar as an anguished adult. This powerful imagery wordlessly knits together past traumas with present wounds, demonstrating how the pain caused by the grandfather’s death and Jedidiah’s rage has echoed through the generations and contributed to intergenerational conflicts.

The demon has used this anger and trauma to shape Ezekial into a ‘tree’ that it intends to utilise to open a gateway to another realm. It frees Ezekial and encourages him to kill his father, saying,

> ‘But to open this door, you need a key, a key made of *blood*. The blood of an *old age*, giving birth to the new. Kill him, Zeke. *Remember* all the *pain.* All the *loss*. All because of *him.* In your heart, you’ve *wanted* this. His sins are *many*—and they must be paid for in *blood*’ (Ibid).

Driven by the rage that the demon has instilled in him, Ezekial attacks his father, but he stops when Jedidiah gives him a letter from his mother that contains her handprint in green sap. Touching the substance, Ezekial has a vision of his mother in her hospital bed, where he discovers that she had

mutated into a plant hybrid before she died. His mother encourages him to make peace with her death and forgive his father, telling him to do 'the one thing you've *never done*' (Ibid). Returning to the present, Ezekial chooses to embrace his father instead of killing him, and the seed that the demon planted in his chest dissolves along with his rage. This moment of forgiveness seemingly frees the family from the demon's curse as Ezekial breaks the cycle of intergenerational trauma and violence that the demon and townspeople have perpetuated. In doing so, the comic mirrors biblical stories like the prodigal son and Joseph and his brothers, which promote atonement and forgiveness as the only productive avenues for healing relationships. However, the issue ends on a cliffhanger as the enraged demon stabs Ezekial with a thorn and kills him, perhaps suggesting that personal growth cannot fully protect people of colour from the lasting scars of historical trauma and oppression.

Guillory has not yet released the final six issues of *Farmhand,* so it is uncertain if the Jenkins family or the demon will triumph. It is also unclear if Ezekial will remain dead or be resurrected by another scientific innovation. However, the first twenty issues of the series demonstrate how ecohorror enables creators to interrogate the ethics of biomedical engineering, scientific experimentation, and the exploitation of the natural world and marginalised communities for human gain. While the idea of plants sprouting human organs may seem absurd or unrealistic, recent xenotransplantations between pigs and humans suggest that this concept may not be as far-fetched as it first appears. *Farmhand*'s use of body and plant horror reminds us to approach these innovations cautiously and consider the human and environmental toll of such advancements. *Farmhand* reveals how the multimodal comics medium can confront readers with the enduring legacies of slavery, racial injustices, and intergenerational trauma—and, potentially, reimagine new stories. As Guillory (2018) commented during an interview with *The Comics Journal*, '[t]he South, much like Farmhand, much like all humanity, lives in the shadow of a curse passed down from generation past. The question I'm interested in asking in *Farmhand* is, "How can we walk out of that shadow into the light?"' (Dueben, 2018). The comic's emphasis on rememory suggests that confronting the horrors of the past and recognising their enduring legacy is one way to accomplish this goal. In this light, *Farmhand* not only critiques the exploitation of nature by industries, but also calls for a reckoning with how the environment and vulnerable individuals have been, and continue to be, colonised and objectified. As the pharmaceutical and agricultural

industries continue to develop new ways to exploit nature for human gain, comics like *Farmhand* demonstrate how ecohorror can help us interrogate our place in the world and our often-monstrous relationship to the environment and each other.

BIOGRAPHY

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'I Want to Walk in a World of My Own Making': An ecoGothic Reading of Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend*

Barbara Beatie

ABSTRACT

Jesmyn Ward's 2023 novel, *Let Us Descend*, unflinchingly declares that the institution of chattel slavery was hell. Set in early nineteenth-century America, the novel conjures the ghosts of chattel slavery, excavating the horror of monetising Black bodies into colonised, fungible possessions. Throughout the novel, the main character, Annis, suffers gruesome terrors. Ward employs classical Western myths, in particular Dante's katabasis as a parallel to Annis' slave march from the master's house southward to the slave market in New Orleans. In the midst of such historical brutality, this ecoGothic reading of the novel pursues a focused exploration of Annis' experiences of unique kinship—with the bees, the fungi, and the spirits, both old and new, who are with her on this journey. This essay argues that Annis' odyssey to create her own narrative transgresses boundaries. Analysing the novel's perspective in reading the generational trauma of chattel slavery, in other words, opens observation of how the colonisation of nature enforced controlled, mastered, curated spaces of the plantation, thus erecting spaces of horror that linger. Hence, this essay investigates the ways in which *Let Us Descend*, through vocalising ghosts of the past, wields the circularity of time expressed in the Gothic. By conveying the precarity of liminal spaces like the swamp, the Gothic horror of continual vulnerability, and the ever-present danger of being contained and possessed, hunted and haunted, Ward portrays the horrific precarity that natural spaces and people of colour continue to experience. In so doing, the essay underscores the extent to which *Let Us Descend* speaks to the contemporary era on multiple levels. This ecoGothic reading suggests it is in forming new colonies—new constellations—we craft new stories, observing and amplifying previously silenced voices, that all might move closer towards decolonisation, ascending into spaces of healing where hope might be found.

‘These narratives suggest something seemingly paradoxical […], that descent might be a movement towards revelation rather than deprivation. Our common verb “to understand” itself bears an old sense of passing beneath something to fully comprehend it. To discover is to reveal by excavation, to descend and bring to the light, to fetch up from the depth’.

—Robert McFarlane, *Underland*

‘And perhaps what I’ve truly discovered so far on my journey is that
chattel slavery and its effects on the spirit of Black people is a curse
in and of itself, spreading out into a plague of confinement, chains,
and strung-up dreambodies of forever.
The methods of enslavement and freedom were and are rootwork—a practice of conjuring an immaterial force onto or out of an object—a spell cast over the mind to make it believe whatever its master wants it to, believing it doesn’t exist even and truly. To subvert the spell, to break the magic, one must find the buried root amongst the loam and waters of the Earth and resist the
colonization not only of the body, but of
the imagination, too; seeing the world as it is and the worlds we must destroy in order to be’.

—Jonah Mixon-Webster, ‘Impetus/Impetere: The hauntologies of slavery’

Jesmyn Ward’s *Let Us Descend* (2023) hums with ghosts as well as spirits, bees, mushrooms, and water in a harrowing horror narrative about chattel slavery. This novel pays homage to those American writers of colour such as Harriet Jacobs and Toni Morrison, whose respective slave narratives Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) and Beloved (1987) express the relentlessness of the pain of slavery as a hell state. Such literature shares dehumanising violence that cannot be unseen, and illustrates that colonial worldviews which support chattel slavery—the practice of humans owning other humans—inflict reverberating traumas that are deeply embedded because of such systematic brutality. Jacob (1861) writes, ‘[t]he degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe’ (p. 27). Thus, when Jacobs further asserts, ‘from the distance spectres seem to rise up

from the shores of the United States. It is a sad feeling to be afraid of one's native country' (p. 209), this is read as a sociocultural critique of American chattel slavery. Through an ecoGothic lens, we might read these lines and consider that such outgrowths further permeate the natural spaces—they are in the soil, the water, the air. In 'Bodies Tumbled into Bodies', the introduction to Arts of Living on a Dangerous Planet (2017), editors Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan and Heather Anne Swanson affirm that 'the winds of the Anthropocene contain ghosts'—'vestiges and signs of past ways of a life still charged in the present' (p. 1). This ecoGothic reading of Ward's novel examines these spectres, these ghosts, human and nonhumans, articulating that the past is not ephemeral, but something carried across time. By situating the novel in Gothic liminal spaces, and then weaving assemblages between human and nonhuman in such spaces, *Let Us Descend* envisions a possibility of a shared future of decolonisation that begins with telling one's story.

Set somewhere at the beginning of the nineteenth century, *Let Us Descend* is narrated by the young slave, Annis, who works in her sire's house (her referential phrase) with her mother. This perspective, coming from the first-person narration of Annis, embodies the horrors of the American past. Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013) highlight the critical importance of this point of view in their definition of ecoGothic, explaining 'how the body as a site of Gothic fear—sexual, injured, dismembered and celebrated—can be seen and positively re-membered in a literary landscape' (p. 8). Ward's choice of point of view unfurls the haunting; that is to say, *Let Us Descend* does not flinch or waver in expressing these horrors. Annis' mother and Annis coexist in the confined spaces of the plantation as slaves of the man who raped her mother. Ward provides a history for the family where Annis recounts her family of women: Azagueni, Mama Aza (her grandmother), and Sasha (her mother), and their lineage of warrior skills as they passed down the training Azagueni mastered in Africa before being stolen and forced onto a slave ship for passage. Annis shares, 'Mama […] who gives me a gift when she unsheathes herself in teaching me to fight once a month' (p. 4). The implied parallel here, of once-a-month training following the moon cycles and menstrual monthly timing, works to heighten the brewing terror that Annis is being stalked by her sire, who is '[w]atching [her] like a hound' as she grows into womanhood (p. 15). This surveillance is lecherous, continuing, and terrifying.

In telling Annis' blood ties, her matriarchal heritage, and her master/sire and stalker declared, the horrors of sociohistorical transgressions whirl into focus. Annis reports,

> 'I wonder if my mother felt her heart beating as quickly as the heart of a rabbit hunched in a field at twilight, shying from the shadow of a hawk. I pull at his laces, as far away as I can be from him […]. I unknot and shuck his boots as quickly as I can […]. He raises one arm, makes as if to palm my head, grab my hair, pull me toward his lap, but I rise and lurch away from him' (p. 10).

If there is space for recounting such horror, it is to be found in the literary Gothic. As Teresa Goddu argues in Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation (1997), '[t]he Gothic serves as a primary means of speaking the unspeakable in American literature' (p. 10). Writing about such historical horrors is critical work, as Morrison (2019) further reminds: 'Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination' (p. ix) Both Morrison and Goddu call out the inherent contradictions of American liberty, the foundation of which is built upon the philosophy that 'all men are created equal',[1] arguing that such ideals are at odds with the practice of owning humans under chattel slavery. As a female slave, Annis is outside of this tenet of American liberty, and its rights and protections.[2] Without such rights or protections, Annis is instead intimately situated inside the master's house where propinquity heightens the dangers of her physical location and reiterates her bodily confinement. In The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation (2014), historian David Brion Davis (2014) deems the confinement under which slaves lived to that of 'captured or domesticated animals' (p. 11). This confinement of embodied persons is notably not just spatial, however, but social, political, and economic:

[1] 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' (Declaration of Independence, 1776).

[2] In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), Franz Fanon writes, '[t]his world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species' (p. 40).

> '[C]hattel slavery was modeled on the property rights traditionally claimed for domesticated animals, which meant that human beings could be bought, sold, traded, leased, inherited, [...] gambled, or lost as debt—abrupt changes in identity that negated or deeply compromised marriage, parenthood, or family relations in what historian-sociologist Orlando Patterson has termed a state of "social death"' (Ibid).

Captured, colonised, constrained, and 'socially dead', Annis is thereby placed in the liminal state outside of liberty and beyond humanity where she is subject to all the terrors of chattel slavery.

Grappling with these horrific transgressions made against humans, reading *Let Us Descend* through an ecoGothic lens provides narrative tools to extrapolate how these transgressions ripple to the land, nature, and the environment. American chattel slavery is rooted in American geography—first, physically, slave's blood seeping into the ground, the soil of the plantation system, but further, the tie linking the attitude towards slaves to (mis)treatment of the environment. This ecoGothic perspective reads the parallels between the trauma of chattel slavery and the current climate crisis. Building on the idea that trauma from slavery is embodied, Farhana Sultana (2022) explains in The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality that '[t]he colonial wound is embodied, it is engraved in bodies and minds. Structural racism structures the world in unequal ways through colonial and imperial violence' (n.p.). Accordingly, an ecoGothic reading connects how slave societies' commodification of slave bodies expands to American consumption and desecration of Nature. In Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South (2022), David Silkenat examines how the colonialist practice of chattel slavery, with its inherent exploitation, consumption, and depletion, led to the death and annihilation of people and the ecosystems. Silkenat writes, '[t]he scars manifested themselves in different ways, but the land too fell victim to the slave owner's lash' (p. 2). Certainly, colonisation's insistence that slaves could be held for life as property meant slavery was a permanent state heritable through the mother. Slaves could be worked until death. Such a world view exemplifies an attitude of consumption towards everything that can be owned or possessed. As Dawn Keetley and Matthew Sivils (2017) maintain, 'America was already a haunted land: the ghosts born of colonialism and its attendant environmental perversity grew entrenched in the very soil of North America's contested ground'

(p. 1). An ecoGothic reading of *Let Us Descend* notes how historical colonial trauma remains as blood in the soil, and ghosts in the geography—as well as what spectres and spirits are conjured from the annihilation of the soil and of the geography of the plantation economy.

Annis has been brought up foraging for herbs and mushrooms, and she pays attention to the ecology around her, particularly the bees. This presents opportunities to align Annis alongside American nineteenth-century nature writers,[3] such as Henry David Thoreau. Ward's writing conjures remembrances towards Thoreau's writing of the ants, or of the bean fields.[4] This seems a purposeful stance. 'Nature writing', Erin Sharkey (2023) writes, 'is rooted in the American experiment (think independence, innovation, Western expansion), but who is left out of the canon?' (p. 16) Sharkey is directly addressing the omission of American Nature writers who are not cisgender white men. However, it is not just Nature writing, but ecology and environmental activism as well, that exhibits a very white canon. Ward pushes back against the spectre of racism by challenging certain expectations of the canon. That begins with Annis telling her story.

Decolonisation requires the disruption of silence and the sharing of personal narratives. There is power in telling your own story—there is agency. While critics such as Sarah Begley (2017) and Ellen O'Connell Whittet (2018)[5] have compared Ward to another white Man of Letters, Southern Gothic writer William Faulkner, in various interviews Ward has demonstrated her quest to respond to the canon by writing back to it. In her words,

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[3] Quoting Noah Rawlings (2023): 'American nature writing as an essayistic subgenre—as opposed to the larger category of "writing about nature", which extends much further back—emerged simultaneously with the politico-geographic entity that is the United States. The subgenre congealed throughout the centuries in which the United States became a nation (1776), acquired the Louisiana Territory (1803), annexed Texas (1845), signed the treaties of Oregon (1846) and Guadeloupe Hidalgo (1848), and made the Alaska Purchase (1867). Those were the political preconditions for the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1803-1807), the Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel (1867-72) led by Clarence King, the geological surveys of John Wesley Powell (1867-72), and John Muir's move to Northern California (1868)—all of which generated canonical works of nature writing' (p. 61).

[4] 'When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky, and was an accompaniment to my labor which yielded an instant and immeasurable crop. […] When I paused to lean on my hoe, these sounds and sights I heard and saw anywhere in the row, a part of the inexhaustible entertainment which the country offers' (Thoreau, 1854: n.p.).

[5] Please see: Begley, S. (2017) Jesmyn Ward, Heir to Faulkner, Probes the Specter of Race in the South. *Time.* Available from: https://time.com/4913697/jesmyn-ward-heir-to-faulkner- author-profile/; and Whittet, E. O. (2018) Jesmyn Ward and William Faulkner's Apocryphal Counties. *Ploughshares*. Available from: http://blog.pshares.org/index.php/jesmyn- wards-and-william-faulkners-apocryphal-counties/.

> 'I don't think he [Faulkner] serves his black characters well. […] He doesn't allow them the same humanity and complicated quality that [his] white characters possess. I am always thinking about my characters—I feel them, feel for them, and I feel conscious of the ways black characters are short-changed in his work'.[6]

Leila Taylor (2019) reports to Caitin Potami in 'The Gothicness of Black America', '[i]f the gothic narrative is metabolized fear, if the Goth aesthetic is romanticized melancholy, what does that look and sound like in Black America?' (n.p.). Writing in her chapter 'American Gothic' from Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul (2019), Taylor continues, 'Blackness in America is still in the middle, residing in the place between opposites: living in the present while carrying the past, being human but perceived as other, considered both a person and a product' (p. 36). Ward, as well as Tayari Jones, Tananarive Due, Margaret Wilkerson Sexton, and others, write back, pushing back against the traditional canon of literature. Writers such as Sharkey also seek to push back on traditional Nature Writing, reshaping how environmentalism engages with people of colour, remembering and recasting, shedding light and holding space for those whose voices were not heard.

Bearing witness is part of the decolonising message of Ward's writing. In *Let Us Descend*, one night on the march to the slave market, Annis hears her friend and lover Safi screaming as she is raped by the slave traders. Annis says, 'I hear Safi, crying out in the dark. I don't cover my ears. If she must bear it, the least I can do is bear witness' (p. 46). This bearing witness Annis models exhorts readers to not look away from the horrors of chattel slavery. Bearing witness is a step towards decolonisation.[7] By telling Annis' story as a journey, Ward's storytelling broadens the

[6] Please see: Long, K. (2018) Jesmyn Ward On The Politics Of Being A Southern Writer. The Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. The Cleveland Foundation. Available from: https://www.anisfield-wolf.org/2018/11/jesmyn-ward-on-the-politics-of-being-a-southern-writer/. Please see: Ward, J. & Bradley, R. (2023) Something Beautiful out of the Darkness. Gothic South. Southern Cultures. Available from: https://www.southerncultures.org/article/something-beautiful-out-of-the-darkness/.

[7] Scholars warn that care must be given so that the work of decolonisation does not continue to colonise and conceal. Here, Saidiya Hartman's work is critical. Writing about the fungibility of chattel slavery, Hartman (1997) asserts that it is in it is in 'the interchangeability and replaceability' of enslaved Black bodies, that 'the captive body is vulnerable to projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values' (p. 21). The work of decolonisation therefore must be vigilant to bear witness in ways that do not continue to re-colonise or create imagined generalisations of the capitalist colonist system.

view beyond just one master, or one house. Multiple brutal scenes of violence are panoramically reported. This works to exponentially compound the horrors. By widening the lens to myriad spaces of chattel slavery, thus multiplying the incidents of its brutal horror, Ward's writing shares how the Black enslaved body was being desecrated on a large scale. An ecoGothic reading connects this to the scale at which the environment is being pillaged. Both require an othering to facilitate such carnage. Like slaves, the outside, the natural world, is cast as 'the other', creating fear of, for example, the forest, the mushrooms, the swamps. Ward's broad view takes in the scene of a vermin infestation at the sugar plantation where the plantation response consists of systematic, violent measures so resounding, the resulting devastation makes a sober point about the colonial drive to dominate, control, annihilate and destroy: 'There is no singing […], only the thud of killing. Slight children follow the hunters and pick the rats up by their tails, holding them like wet, brown fruit […]. Can't leave them there […]. [W]e've got to gather them and burn them (p. 145). By recounting such violence against nature, Ward urges the reader to pay attention, to bear witness to such acts.

Bearing witness, Annis is paying attention, weaving connections on her journey towards coming into her own agency. This journey is especially noteworthy because, as Tiffany Lethabo King (2016) writes, 'Black flesh is significant to the self, the community, and spirit world in ways that cannot be contained by slavery or the rubric of Black labor' (p. 1037). In 'The Labor of (Re)reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(ly)', King expounds,

> 'The practice of getting free constantly changes and can never be anticipated in advance under slavery's mode of fungibility. Since new modes of captivity and fungibility are always unfolding and expanding under slavery, freedom is ever unfolding and expanding as well. Modes of freedom existed in garret spaces, leaving the body, going insane, suicide, interracial sexual liaisons, same-gender love, gender play, setting fire to the slave estate, murdering the Settler-Master, revolt, escape, or just surviving' (Ibid).

Using her body and her spirit, Annis transgresses, pushing back against this system of containment—and each containment she is forced to endure throughout the novel—by imagining her new space of freedom: 'I want to walk through a world of my own making' (p. 250).

Annis is enslaved and bound in this plantation system. The ecoGothic lens opens up a reading of how such a system decimates people and nature because 'gothic's profound interest in "transgression, excess, and monstrosity" makes it a supremely suitable chronicler of the violence of climate change' (Edwards et al., 2022; p. xi). Studying devastating transformations of such diverse kinds, sparked by 'extractive and enclosed plantations' (Haraway 2015; p. 162), scholars appositely coined the term Plantationocene; yet it is important to remember that even this term requires decolonisation to bear witness to those silenced in the process of scholarship. Hence, Mythri Jegathesan (2021) outlines how '[m]ore recently (2018 to present) non-Black and non-Indigenous scholars working within the Plantationocene have begun to reinstate the work of Black women scholars such as Deborah Thomas, Monica White, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore into the frame' (n.p.). Focusing on decolonisation, Maan Barua's (2023) research further elucidates how 'Plantationocene grounds the alteration of landscape in histories of colonialism and race and takes the plantation to be a pivotal engine for producing novel but fraught natures' (pp. 13-29). Fungibility in this system requires such force:

> 'Plantations deepen domestication, reintensifying plant dependencies and forcing fertility […]. European planters introduced cultivation through coercion. The plants were exotics; the labour was forced through slavery, indenture, and conquest. Only through extreme order and control could anything flourish in this way; but with hierarchy and managed antagonism in place, enormous profits (and complementary poverties) could be produced' (Tsing, 2012: p. 26).

This force is deadly, evidenced in Tsing's conceptualisation of the plantation's consumption as 'the decimation of local peoples and plants' (pp. 38-39). This decimation is the space of terror and horror of the Gothic, and it is this horror that accelerates fungibility to certain annihilation. Terrifying as it is, bearing witness is one way forward. In 'Archaeology and Bearing Witness' (2018), Mark W. Hauser writes,

> 'At its most general level, bearing witness is a valuable way to scrutinize violent encounters, traumatic events, dislocations, and structural inequalities. Bearing witness can take the form of communicating traumatic personal experiences or documenting for others the dislocations, institutionalized violence, and kinds of difference-making that often escape social examination' (p. 535).

To walk through such a world of annihilation, Annis must cross multiple boundaries to evade the decimation, including the transgression of creating and possessing one's own narrative. As Emily Carr (2013) argues, these transgressions are Gothic moves. Ward is also transgressing traditional canonical boundaries (Ibid: p. 162). Beyond Thoreau and Faulkner, Ward transforms the conversation of another canonical text by taking the novel's title from Dante Alighieri, who in The Divine Comedy (1321) writes, '[l]et us descend into the blind world' (Canto I). Voicing this imperative, Ward exhorts us to enter her story as witnesses to the revenant of the trauma of chattel slavery, the profound grief of losing family, and to recognise how this echoes throughout our modern industrial prison system and the Covid pandemic, the way this long history of racism haunts the landscape and all of us. Recalling 'Was blind, but now I see' of the 'Amazing Grace' hymn,[8] Ward asks readers to consider what it means to witness fully—calling upon both definitions, 'to bear witness' and 'to take note' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Such witnessing in *Let Us Descend* focuses on how we encounter the other—spirits, insects, animals, land.

Annis is always alert and witnessing. As a house slave, daily young Annis follows her mother into the kitchens of the plantation house. Working tirelessly polishing and cleaning the house, Annis cannot help but witness by overhearing the school lessons given to her white half-sisters: 'These girls, sallow sisters, read from the texts their tutor directs them to, ancient Greeks who write about animals and industry, wasps and bees, and I listen' (p. 7). One such lesson is about Aristotle and the bees. The tutor tells the girls, 'Aristotle's advice on those who labor, and the fruits of that labor are sound: leave a hive with too much honey and a beekeeper encourages laziness' (Ibid). Annis listens and replies in her narrative: 'I know he is using the bees and the old Greek to speak on all of us who labor' (Ibid). This story explains much to the reader, situating the sire's

[8] See the hymn's lyrics: 'Amazing Grace' (1773) https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/313.

house as one steeped in classical ideas. Annis understands how the tutor clearly aligns slaves with worker bees, to illustrate the way the tutor is simultaneously indoctrinating both Annis and her half-sisters to comprehend Annis' nonhuman status. These lessons are validated by the institution of classical education, and by the tutor, the gatekeeper of knowledge, who laughs and corrects the textbook, setting himself up as the authority of knowledge in this space. In this short scene, Ward expresses how slavery not only colonises the Black body, but also Black consciousness, while working to ingrain this colonisation into the children, giving root to another generation of racism.

Ward begins *Let Us Descend*, however, not in the sire's house, not with the daily work, but outside, where Annis finds herself in the woods like Dante. In Canto 1, Dante writes,

> 'In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh, and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear. It is scarcely less bitter than death: but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there' (lines 1-3).

Outside, we witness Annis beyond the daily slough of forced, fungible labour. Annis recollects that as a small child her mother woke her and took her 'out to the Carolina woods, deep, deep into the murmuring trees, black with the sun's leaving' (p. 1). In 'Earthbound', bell hooks (2011) reiterates the power of this outside space, writing that in nature, '[u]ltimately, no matter what was said or done, the spirit called us to a place beyond words, from a place beyond man-made laws' (p.185). Here, Annis is parallel to Dante—both on the precipice of a bildungsroman. The nighttime walks to the woods, where Annis seems half-awake, half-asleep, recalls the Gothic trope of somnambulance. Dante and Annis have not died. Both are alive as they are poised to transgress this boundary to Hell. Yet, while Dante enters hell, Annis is already in hell, or in a circle of it. In Dante,

> 'We have come to the place where I told you that you would see the sad people. And placing his hand on mine, with a calm expression, that comforted me, he led me towards the hidden things' (Canto 1).

Transgressing the myths, Ward shows that there is no need to imagine crossing rock to enter hell because slavery is hell:

> ‘I see my mother tolling in the hell of this house. Walking down from that hot, crate-choked attic, to a second floor clustered with bedrooms where my sire’s children creed through the keyholes after their mother died, after my mother became their nursemaid and pulled them from her breast, down to the first floor, where my mother grew sere over a burning stove, to the potato-and-onion rank basement, rat-infested […]. More hell’ (pp. 33-34).

Ward’s prose, in its beautiful aurality, expresses that while called by other names like Georgia or New Orleans, the spaces in the novel are indeed hell. Annis is clear that while Dante needs to journey to hell, in this world, hell is here: ‘you didn’t need to go to heaven or hell to witness it: she knew it was all here’ (p. 111). Citing Jay Ellis (2013), Bev Hogue (2018) reminds that ‘the Gothic Mode “continually takes us out there, below ground, and behind the door we would rather leave closed”’(p. 150). *Let Us Descend* records the quotidian everyday violence and brutality of chattel slavery and the constant threat of being sexually violated. Most significantly, Annis’ naming the plantation owner who raped her mother, Sasha, not by a Christian name, but by his function, ‘sire’, amplifies the horror because sire connotes the noun and the verb, ‘to sire’, and this verb implies that siring is a function that happens cyclically, setting up the threat of a coming day when her sire will wish to sire again, and turn to her. The perverse nature of this system violates the cultural taboo of incest, instead requiring the adoption of a worldview in which Annis is just another fungible body with no relationship to anyone. It underscores the pervasive dangers and horrors of enslaved persons. Sasha tells Annis of Mama Aza,

> ‘“This place, these people, this world”, she sighs, “was new to her. She ain't know how to move through it. Didn't know the order of it. Just a few short months after the ship, she found out. The old master come into the cabin after she birthed me, and he laid claim to me, me wet with birthing blood and bawling. This owning from birthing to the grave, and on down, through children—this world overwhelmed her” […]. “This place horrified her”, Mama whispers. “When I got older, I thought I

> knew. Thought I understood how wrong this place was, but I didn't". Mama squeezes her middle. "I didn't understand how wrong until you came squalling out of me"' (p. 16).

Sasha rebuffs and resists by training Annis to fight in the matriarchal art and spirit of her mother, Mama Aza, an African warrior who hunted elephants with other powerful warrior women before being sold into slavery. Yet, in the hell of the chattel slavery system where every action by slaves might have deadly consequences, fighting appears futile. This is painfully expressed when Sasha manoeuvers Annis away from an encounter with the licentious sire, and then Sasha is sold to the Georgia Man, and dragged off in chains; fighting seems useless. Ward writes powerfully here not just of the pervasive, never-ending danger of being violated, but also of the despair of being powerless to fight: 'Why we do this if we can't do nothing with it?' (p. 11).

Such grief entreats the reader to notice the trauma that Annis' narrative is expressing. Susannah Radstone (2006), as cited by Stef Craps (2012), observes 'that it is the sufferings of those, categorized in the West as "other", that tend not to be addressed via trauma theory' (pp. 46-47). Craps goes on to suggest that the experience of racism does not fit either of the 'classical' forms of trauma: 'Unlike structural trauma, racism is historically specific' (p. 49). Following Craps, Sonya Andermahr (2016) therefore concludes that 'racially based forms of trauma historically rooted in the global systems of slavery and colonialism pose a significant challenge to the Eurocentric model of trauma as a single overwhelming event' (p. 2). The stories passed from Mama Aza to Sasha to Annis underscore how the 'psychological and emotional consequences of mass traumatic experiences can be transmitted to subsequent generations through physiological, environmental, and social pathways' (Hankerson et al., 2022: n.p.).[9] This is another instance where *Let Us Descend* echoes back to Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Speaking of her 'old master's death', Jacobs explains, '[h]is departure from this world did not diminish my danger. He had threatened my grandmother that his heirs should hold me in slavery after he was gone; that I should

[9] 'This results in an intergenerational cycle of trauma response, including physical (e.g., compromised immune system, endocrine impairment, adrenal maladaptation); social (e.g., domestic violence, child maltreatment, substance abuse, involvement in crime); and psychological (e.g., depression, panic/anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder)' (Hankerson et al., 2022: n.p.).

never be free so long as a child of his survived' (pp. 220-221). Both texts describe brutal grief—the feeling that is no freedom from colonisation, that there is no escape.

Consequently, trauma stretches across time. According to Kai Erikson (1976) as cited by Kazuma Matoba (2022), '[h]istorical traumatic events destroy "the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality"' (p. 5). Scholars and researchers link this intergenerational historic trauma to the climate crisis. Matoba (2022) continues, '[o]ur profound individualistic egoism prevents us from noticing both what we are doing to each other and our planet as well as to the ways we are beneficiaries of the slave system, of colonialism, and of carbon-dependent industrialism' (pp. 7-8). This resonates with Tsing's research in The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins (2015) and resounds with the themes so prevalent throughout this ecoGothic reading—chiefly how the past is entangled with the present so that horrors perpetuate and repeat. But if we can imagine ways to reconfigure entanglements, there might be a path out of this cycle.

Certainly, ecoGothic entanglements observe Nature as a source of wonder and terror. Annis interacts with the mushrooms and fungi for nourishment and healing. But many are afraid of the mysterious power of mushrooms, warning Annis to be fearful because you cannot tell which are poisonous. Arguably, the mushroom unsettles because the mushroom refuses to be domesticated. 'Domestication is ordinarily understood as human control over other species', explains Tsing (2012), but 'that such relations might also change humans is generally ignored' (n.p.). Moreover, 'domestication tends to be imagined as a hard line: You are either in the human fold or you are out in the wild. Because this dichotomisation stems from an ideological commitment to human mastery, it supports the most outrageous fantasies of domestic control' (Ibid). Yet Annis' mother has trained her in the art of mushroom foraging, and this knowledge of Nature and relationship with Nature affords Annis agency:

> 'Just as there are mushrooms that grow on trees, there are mushrooms that sprout from insects. These mushrooms are small specks in the air, light and tiny as dust, and they float until they land on a bug or the worm of a bug. If the insect is alive, they kill it, and they send flowering stalks into the air. Sometimes they arise from

> dead moths in long, pale trunks with little yellow buds at the end. Sometimes the mushrooms rise from the bodies of beetles in fluffy clouds, dense and ivory. Sometimes the mushrooms rise from moth caterpillars in tiny ghostly trees with yellow limbs and white branches as thin as yarn (p. 195).

Annis's art of witnessing, noticing, does not bifurcate the wild and the domestic. Rather, it is Annis' ability to notice multiplicities that unlocks many more many entangled relationships. Annis' noticing resounds in Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene, where Tsing (2017) asserts,

> 'Lichens are symbiotic assemblages of species: filamentous fungi and photosynthetic algae or cyanobacteria. Lichens are themselves a kind of landscape, enlivened by their ghosts. Many filamentous fungi are potentially immortal. This does not mean they cannot be killed; yet, unlike humans, they do not die just from age. Until cut off by injury, they spread in networks of continually renewed filaments. When we notice their tempo, rather than impose ours, they open us to the possibility of a different kind of livability' (p .9).

It is these new tempos of possibility that then inspire, including other ways of conceptualisation. In short, another way of forging new assemblages is to observe and amplify other voices.

Artist Yanique Norman is dreaming up such possibilities as art and narrative coalescence. Reconceptualising the idea of fungibility, Norman reconfigures (2020)—as the work 'Mood Ring' expresses—the poetics of Black Fungibility: 'While other theorists, such as Saidiya Hartman, have conceived of Black Fungibility in terms of the commodification of Black bodies, Norman returns to the word's etymological root: fungus itself […], an alternate dream model that borrows ideas from mycology to create complex and imaginative representations of Blackness' (n.p.). In Norman's work, 'Eleven Theses on Black Fungibility' (2020), ecoGothic themes similarly reverberate:

> 'Black Fungibility is an ideological dream model with no stable physical attributes. It's always seeking a new container to hold its ever-expansive ideas. It's a shapeshifter and an itinerant, and thus its aesthetic vernacular is subjected to continuous change;
> Black Fungibility's unique identity politics extend beyond racist tropes, imagining new futures that can both overpower and obliterate all racist ideologies;
> Black Fungibility is neither anti-Black nor anti-white;
> Black Fungibility strives to create symbiotic relationships between provocative ideologies and mythologies that generally don't gel well together. Such a conceptual crisis tends to create a unique visual disjointedness—a primary aesthetic feature of fungible works;'[10]

The ecoGothic seeks out such entanglements and such networks. Norman's work on fungibility conjures shapeshifters and *Let Us Descend* interacts with the nonhuman: 'The world was sopping with spirit' (p. 111), Annis expresses. Even in such hell space, Annis has encounters with Nature, such as bees who appear throughout the story as travellers between the liminal spaces. Ward might be voicing mythic traditions that hold that bees, 'often found inhabiting cracks and crevices in rocks', are able to travel 'into the Underworld'.[11] *Let Us Descend* invokes these classical myths as Annis' mother continues to tell the ancestors' stories as the bees hover. Some stories Sasha does not know; there are many histories that were lost from the past or were never told. One ancestral spirit represents a woman, calling herself Aza, and while this was Annis' grandmother's name, this is not her grandmother's spirit; rather the spirit is a trickster, playing with and manipulating Annis. Aza seems to track Annis, like bees, as she is sold to the Georgia Man after her relationship with another female slave is discovered. Annis and her lover Safi are chained to other slaves and made to march to New Orleans. Like Sethe in Beloved, Annis thinks the spirit is familiar. Then Annis is not sure:

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[10] For the visual experience, please see: Norman, Y. (2020) Mood Ring: Notes on Black Fungibility**.** Available from: https://burnaway.org/magazine/mood-ring-black-fungibility/.

[11] As per Jane Wright (2020), 'See, for example, Pliny, Natural History X.xi.30-31. Virgil began Georgics IV: "Next, I will discourse on Heaven's gift, the honey from the skies" (1-2), and later remarked that, blessed with "divine intelligence" (220), bees do not die but instead "my unto the ranks of the stars"' (pp. 224-25). The Bees of Rome: Representing Social and Spiritual Transition in Victorian Poetry. *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. [Online] 14 (3), pp. 395-411.

> 'I see a mirage of another white-shrouded woman in the clearing, but there is no one there but me and Safi and my bees […]. I squint through it, blink to see a white-wreathed woman in the shadows, her skin gleaming darkly in the light […]. There is a wash of muslin […] in the shape of a woman […]. There is a flash of white in the trees: the phantom woman is back […]. I know someone is out there. I know a woman follows us […]. "You said you would come if I called. You said Mama…"
> I realize it's not her. This woman must be some other sister, wife, mother, caregiver' (pp. 32-64).

Annis finally confronts the Aza spirit for neglecting to aid and rescue her mother when she called her: 'I look Aza straight in her storm-dark eyes, and I let my loathing for her billow […] for forsaking my mother, for failing Mama Aza, for leading me to this place' (p. 142). But Annis also notes that Aza is not the only spirit. Annis observes, '[t]his place is gutted with people, with beings, with spirits. There are so many here' (p. 181). Truly, Annis reflects, '[i]t can be difficult to navigate this world' (p. 181). Annis must negotiate every encounter with the spirits to discern whether each spirit means good or ill, much as she must manoeuvre the power structures of every relationship in this brutal era: 'But I don't see any [tenderness] in this being, not in the marbled black of her eyes, not in the predator's tilt of her head' (p. 66). The spirits have their own agenda; thus, Annis is forced to negotiate or fight with each ghost who haunts this journey, just as she must wrestle with the transgenerational trauma she carries.

This struggle with the spirits of the past compounds every other challenge along this journey. Annis is starving, exhausted, and feels utterly alone. As part of the 1619 Project, Jesmyn Ward (2019) created the poem 'Sold South', expressing the horror of slave marches:

> 'The farther we marched, the hotter it got. Our skin grew around the rope. Our muscles melted to nothing. Our fat to bone. The land rolled to a flat bog, and in the middle of it, a city called New Orleans. When we shuffled into that town of the dead, they put us in pens. Fattened us. Tried to disguise our limps, oiled the pallor of sickness out of our skins, raped us to assess our soft parts, then told us lies about ourselves to make us into easier sells. Was told to answer yes when they asked us

> if we were master seamstresses, blacksmiths or lady's maids. Was told to disavow the wives we thought we heard calling our names when we first woke in the morning, the husbands we imagined lying with us, chest to back, while the night's torches burned, the children whose eyelashes we thought we could still feel on our cheeks when the rain turned to a fine mist while we stood in lines outside the pens waiting for our next hell to take legs and seek us out. Trade our past lives for new deaths' (pp. 161-162).

The river spirits call to Annis to just submit, to answer yes and give into their watery embrace. At this low point, such submission, suicide, seems almost tempting: 'I wouldn't have to walk no more. I would drop in this living tide, let it submerge me. I could swallow you, this river says. I would ever hold you. […] That storm spirit would be worse. […] She would rend you with her winds. […] I would keep you whole. […] You could be free' (pp. 73-75). Despite these whisperings, despite her grief, despite the hell of chattel slavery, Annis persists.

After her odyssey to the slave port and slave pens of New Orleans, Annis is sold in New Orleans to owners of a sugar plantation. Annis learns that the punishments inflicted there include time in The Hole, a door that opens into the dirt, where slaves are kept in the dark with no food or water for an extended period of solitary confinement. Annis ends up in this hell hole: 'The hole a wedged coffin. The bottom packed hard from all them who come before me […]. No rest in this slick clay tomb' (p. 158). In Underland: A Deep Time Journey (2019), Robert MacFarlane writes how these underlands have long 'symbolized what cannot openly be said or seen: loss, grief [...] and what Elaine Scarry calls the "deep subterranean fact of physical pain"' (p.12). Ward is again both summoning and pushing back against classical myth and symbolism while articulating Annis' katabasis. As an epic motif, the katabasis has, Edith Hall and Justine McConnell (2011) explain, 'featured in […] Virgil and Dante, Homer and the Epic of Gilgamesh [...]. During a katabasis, the traveller undergoes a series of trials through which he is metaphorically destroyed and reborn anew, often with new strength or knowledge' (p. 354). During her katabasis, Annis encounters the spirits named They Who Take and Give. These spirits talk to Annis, sharing, 'We speak. […] Because you hear' (p. 160). Annis finds something like hope: 'They said I could crawl, could

burrow, could make my way out through this earth' (p. 225). The Earth Spirits tell Annis of their entanglements:

> 'We transmute. We take corpse and piss and blood and break it and break it and press it to its smallest self' and later, 'We eat to transform. You become stone and trunk, sap, and grub. Mushroom and pollen. And turn and turn after and beyond, your hair and skin and blood burn to a star' (p. 162).

They also advise Annis about Aza:

> 'She that you call Aza […]. That is the one who never gives […]. We devour but we bestow. […] I will hold you, the earth rumbles. […] I will hide you, They Who Take and Give groan' (pp. 163 & 259).

The Earth Spirits offer comfort, an ecoGothic assemblage, telling Annis, '[y]ou could bear children in the dark' (p. 260). Calling back to a mythic womb-like Earth and pushing against the colonial claims clamped on children of enslaved mothers, Ward is playing with dark as secret. Further, Ward finds the ecological rebirth (bearing children) suggesting the fruiting of mushrooms (in the dark). In the Hole, Annis decides her fate and claims her own definition of freedom. It is the combination of these worlds and spirits that Annis comes from, and, ultimately, the spaces between both, the liminal borderlands, that Annis will walk into. Recalling Dante's words, 'I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh, and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear' (Canto I, lines 1-3), Annis chooses this, wants this liminal space; 'I want to find a swamp so thick even the Georgia Man can't walk through it' (p. 277). Chillingly, a fellow slave warns her of walking into the swamp spaces:

> 'They brand with the fleur-de-lis on your face, […] so everybody, every person who sees you, knows you done fled and got caught. They put chains on your feet, make you walk with steel bracelets 'til they grow into your skin […]. And that's if

> they don't shoot you, if they don't hang you, if they don't slit your throat because you had the gall to take yourself back' (p. 264).

Nonetheless, Annis seizes the narrative— 'I came to myself'— and, despite fear, acts to forge a new entanglement in the swamp, '[o]ne so thick, only spirits can find me' (p. 277). Tsing (2015) asserts that this is the way forward: 'Moving away […] requires attending to what may be left to patchy landscapes, multiple temporalities, and shifting assemblages of humans and nonhumans' (pp. 19-20). From her katabasis, Annis has realised that she must now move into such unknown territory.

The liminal space of the swamp, the half-water, half-land entity, the ecoGothic space, promises new possibilities for Annis. Ecologically, swamps,[12] Annie Proulx (2022) reminds, are 'carbon sinks that absorb CO2, and they are unparalleled in filtering out human waste, material from rotten carcasses, chemicals, and other pollutants. They recharge underground aquifers and sustain regional water resources, buffering the excesses of drought and flood. In aggregate, the watery parts of the earth stabilize its climate' (n.p.). And yet, swamps have been cast as monstrosities, ominous, uninhabitable. Annis observes, '[t]hey are afraid of what lurks in the marshy darkness' (p. 86). This othering of swamp wetlands has perpetuated ecological devastation to once immense spaces of swampland. The devastation is passed on to the entangled communities inhabiting the area. As Edward Struzik (2021) urges in Swamplands: Tundra Beavers, Quaking Bogs, and the Improbable World of Peat,

> 'Very few projects, if any, look at what happens to the 601 species of fungi, the dominant microbes in many acidic peatland ecosystems. It's an important consideration, because fungi also have a powerful relationship with orchids and other plants that grow in peatlands. As facilitators of decomposition, they play an

[12] Quoting the Environmental Protection Agency's 'Classification and Types of Wetlands' (2023): 'A swamp is any wetland dominated by woody plants. The highly organic soils of swamps form a thick, black, nutrient-rich environment for the growth of water-tolerant trees such as Cypress (*Taxodium* spp.). Swamps serve vital roles in flood protection and nutrient removal. Floodplain forests are especially high in productivity and species diversity because of the rich deposits of alluvial soil from floods. Many upland creatures depend on the abundance of food found in the lowland swamps, and valuable timber can be sustainably harvested to provide building materials for people' (n.p.).

> important role in carbon mobilization and storage. And by linking the roots of different plants, the mycelium of fungi allow the plants to share nutrients or shield themselves from toxic chemicals that invasive plants might bring' (p. 264).

Ever observant, Annis reads that the swamp contains multitudes: 'We smell the swamp before we see it […]. The scent of dying giving way to the living', the living connoting the natural world, 'duckweed bright and green, floating on the murky wet. Cypress fresh with rain, shimmers' (p. 78). The assemblages formed in this liminal space are different: 'I lay down with the frogs, […] a tuft of yellow and black, whirring through the air […]. The bee threads its way along, and I rise and fall with the land' (pp. 282-83). The bees signal this liminal space of the swamp: the decaying matter, the spirits from beyond. Annis describes how '[t]he swamp hums in assent around me, sealing me in its secret heart' (p. 284). Reflecting on her time by the river, now, decidedly, Annis is not alone: 'a family of boar slips through the underbrush, and I watch them go, the bellies of the smallest piglets tickling the earth and I think: I am not alone. […] I look up and there are myriad bees, all awash in the moonlight, above me (pp. 291-292). Feeling buoyed by this kinship around her, Annis decides to stay in the swamp. She declares, 'I want this green room, this bed padded with moss and cypress needles' (p. 297). *Let Us Descend* illuminates that '"We" are ecosystems that span boundaries and transgress categories. Our selves emerge from a complex tangle of relationships only now becoming known' (Sheldrake, 2020: p. 18). There is resurrection here in the cycles of nature and in the animals who share Annis' home, while Ward's bees remind that it is possible that bees can form new colonies, mate, have new queens, and begin again.

In *Let Us Descend*, Annis declares, 'I want to walk through a world of my own making' (p. 250). Echoing Claire Colebrook (2017), as cited by Fred Botting (2022), this world, '[t]he life emerging in this milieu […] is not especially human but is a multiplicity of temporal and spatial non-overlapping incompatible lines of life and time' (p. 332). In the purposeful movement to the liminal space of the swamp, this act of resistance across and through boundaries moves Annis to a community—human with non-human—and the end of the novel finds Annis navigating these relationships on new terms, with a sense of shared agency for all. In 'Decolonial Geographies', from Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50 (2019), Michelle Daigle and Margaret Marietta Ramirez refer to these new relationships, these entanglements, as constellations:

> 'Constellations are in formation all around us, re-envisioning and re-embodying a politics of place by interweaving spatial practices of resistance, refusal, and liberation. These historical and always emerging relationships across decolonial struggles transcend colonial boundaries, differentially situated peoples are renewing and creating futures that have always been present in their/our own communities […] draw[ing] from the histories and geographies of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples to re-root and re-route toward more accountable relations' (p. 5).

Like Annis, we can learn to perceive the dead, the othered, the erased. By observing, by listening, and then by reorienting and respatialising, we can witness these voices. We can choose then to begin to craft new assemblages of humans and nonhumans, entangled, in constellations, casting a new myth, the stuff of stars.

BIOGRAPHY

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Reviews

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Gothic Nature

Gothic Nature V

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The Evolution of Horror in the Twenty-First Century

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Sara L. Crosby

2023 marked the ten-year anniversary of Andrew Smith and William Hughes's coinage of the term 'ecoGothic' in their seminal collection *Ecogothic* (2013). To celebrate, in the last issue of this journal, Smith and Hughes cast an evaluative eye over the state of ecoGothic studies and concluded that the genre provides 'a coherent and adaptable critical vehicle with which to make sense of our modern malaise' and that, furthermore, '[a]s the climate crisis continues to escalate, so our field takes on an increasing political importance' (2023: p. 20).

The Evolution of Horror in the Twenty-First Century (2023) affirms this assessment of ecoGothic's (and ecohorror's) growing cultural impact and political centrality, at least to some extent, as it suggests that the Venn diagram of horror studies and ecohorror/ecoGothic studies, while certainly not a single circle, is overlapping more and more. The final section of this wide-ranging overview of contemporary horror, for instance, is devoted to 'Evolving Themes' that could all be considered ecocritical topics: folk horror, subgenres of ecohorror/ecoGothic, extinction, contagion, and cyborgs. Even the introduction to the volume suggests a close relationship with ecohorror/ecoGothic studies: editor Simon Bacon identifies the key dynamics in twenty-first-century horror as 'entanglement' (p. 5) and 'a call to action' (p. 3), which chime with ecocriticism's theoretical insights and activist edge or 'political importance'. Likewise, in the book's first chapter, which evaluates the state of horror theory, Kevin Corstorphine devotes two full pages to 'the question of the environment' (p. 21) and ends by arguing that 'an awareness of the enmeshed, or networked, nature of the text in terms of […] the environment' is one of the key ideas 'currently driving horror theory forward' (p. 24).

For ecocritics interested in the intersections of environment and horror/Gothic, this is a promising beginning, and so one might expect ecohorror/ecoGothic concerns to be fretted through the collection. While that is mostly the case, readers anticipating extensive ecocritical analysis

must still wait until the aforementioned final section, which contains only five out of the twenty-one essays in the collection. Nonetheless, the *The Evolution of Horror in the Twenty-First Century* does help us see the edges of that Venn diagram and, thus, is a valuable resource for grasping an overall sense of the current state of horror and ecohorror/ecoGothic's place within it.

The first section examines 'Frameworks and Classics of Twenty-first-Century Horror'—or theories and textual predecessors that are exerting their influence upon current horror and its analysis. Essays in this section explain how the 'cinematic' quality of 'prestige' TV horror has aestheticised viewer experiences (Weinstock: p. 30); how 'the historical antipathy' of censors such as the BBFC and MPAA 'has mutated into a pragmatic acceptance' of horror (Jackson: p. 54); and how 'the original Universal monsters continue to provide a rich source of material for contemporary horror films and streaming series' (Booker: pp. 68-9). The section ends with a particularly relevant and fascinating analysis of how Shirley Jackson's 'unconventional family units lay the groundwork' for millennial/queer horror so unlike the old heteronormative Gothic (Passey: p. 77). This insight into Jackson's 'liberatory' (Passey: p. 82) potential may help explain her current vogue in popular culture—i.e., as a progressive riposte to the recrudescence of fascistic homophobic politics.

The next section, 'Media and Consumption', looks beyond these content 'remixes' to focus on contemporary horror's new media, modes, and venues. The innovations analysed include the pedagogical application of monsters 'to expose, plot, trace, and […] unfix the repressive/ oppressive categories that precipitate marginalization' (Browning: p. 89); the use of music in Black horror 'in opposition to the horrors of white supremacy' (Steinskog: p. 110); the emergence of the theatre 'in horror, fear, ghosts, and monsters' and its modern continuance 'in a much more sophisticated, self-aware, and immersive form' (Wetmore: p. 126); and the similarly 'immersive' trend in horror video games, which 'are on the cutting edge of epistemological and ontological shifts in how we understand ourselves as mediated beings in the world' and 'are on the path to delivering more complex experiences of horror than ever before'—although perhaps uncomfortably too real at times (Peaty: p. 131). Part Two then concludes with an intriguing overview of horror's appearance in wild new places from Reddit to TikTok, with the

accompanying implication that 'any creator has the potential to shape the next twenty years of horror' (Littles: p. 153).

Part Three, 'Recognition and Evolution', investigates the new and incredibly impactful efflorescence of marginalised voices in horror and delivers some of the most fascinating essays in the collection. Carina Bissett's 'The Future of Horror: Evolution or Revolution?', Maisha Wester's 'Black Lives Matter (BLM) Horror', Jacob Floyd's 'Indigenous Horror in the Twenty-First Century', Natasha C. Marchini's '"Stepping Out of the Closet": The Evolution of Queer Representation and Tropes in the Twenty-First Century', Angela Marie Smith's 'Involution, Adaptation, Mutation: Horror's Disability Dynamics', and Brandon Grafius's 'Sympathy for the Candyman: The Politics of the Past in Supernatural Horror' all focus on how previously ignored or excluded creators and characters—women, BIPOC, queer people, and people with disabilities—have taken hold of twenty-first-century horror and opened it to new and politically efficacious narratives. Bissett's essay inaugurates this section with a brilliant overview of how women writers have been working an end-run around the stodgy horror establishment (exemplified by the Bram Stoker Awards) to make the genre socially and politically relevant through the 'representation of marginalized voices', thereby reshaping horror into 'a safe place for discourse on impactful issues such as gender inequities, women's rights, racial discrimination, global warming, and economic instability' (p. 164). Wester's chapter surveys the new subgenre of Black Lives Matter horror (which includes Jordan Peele's films among others) and points out that, like its near ancestor, New Black Gothic, BLM horror works 'to record and demystify the sociopolitical forces dooming Black life to vicious bio- and necropolitics', but, unlike New Black Gothic, BLM horror also 'stresses the importance of fighting back' (p. 173).

Floyd's examination of Indigenous horror includes works like Jeff Barnaby's *Blood Quantum* (2019) and hews closer to specifically ecoGothic concerns, which is not unexpected since, as he points out, 'The Other that was the object of horror or associated with the otherness of wilderness, was Indigenous Peoples and lands' (p. 187). But this painful 'genre history' means that '[h]orror operates differently for Indigenous Peoples' who have nonetheless used 'the genre label […] [to] help Indigenous works reach wide audiences' (Floyd: pp. 187, 194). By contrast, queerness and queer creators have long been central to horror, with queer authors like Mary

Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Oscar Wilde setting the genre's foundations. Furthermore, as Marchini points out, 'queerness in the twenty-first century has finally outed itself from the shadowy realm of subtext' (p. 212), and so queer horror has shifted from imagining monsters that embody queerness to exploring the monstrosity of homophobia—a positive development that Marchini nonetheless accuses the powerhouse queer horror series *American Horror Story* (2011-) of missing.

In contrast with Marchini's celebratory view of queer voices in horror, Smith's take on the genre's representation of disability is far more critical—and, conversely, hopeful. She notes that '[c]ontemporary horror films still associate disability with atavism, human degeneration, and psychological aberration' (p. 219). But, after analysing representations of disabled characters such as the deaf protagonist of *A Quiet Place* (2018), she contends that 'despite horror's regressions, disability also emerges in the genre as a dynamic embodiment that is responsive and adaptive to a changing and often hostile world' (p. 219). This argument implies that centring disabled characters in Anthropocene narratives may help readers/viewers think through the current crisis in a more creative and effectual fashion, something which a genre like sci-fi has been doing. One thinks, for instance, of Octavia Butler's classic *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), and how Lauren's hyperempathy makes her vulnerable to violence in a climate-change-ravaged America but also ultimately provides her the means to craft a new 'adaptive' community. So too, in Smith's words, 'the future of horror lies not only with intrepid disabled protagonists but also diverse and diversely disabled communities' (p. 227).

The final essay of the section maps a potentially more activist and progressive future for Gothic horror. One of the more troubling problems with the Gothic is that 'the return of the repressed' is often followed with its renewed repression. Grafius examines how that repression operates in films that create a sympathetic connection between a living protagonist and ghost. Films like *Candyman* (1992) and *Mama* (2013) thus tether 'a past injustice to a present melancholy or personal misfortune', which 'has the effect of minimizing the injustice experienced by the ghost and avoids the need for the film to reckon with the ongoing injustice in the present' (Grafius: p. 239). However, the newest iteration of *Candyman* (2021) 'offers a new model, in which the

protagonist is forced to confront this history of injustice' (Grafius: p. 239)—creating a genuinely activist (rather than quietist) Gothic narrative.

The last section, 'Evolving Themes', builds on this 'call to action' with a turn to ecocritical topics. In 'The Futures for Folk Horror', Mikel J. Koven contends that 'if folk horror does indeed have any future, it is as a mechanism for these voices from the periphery [of nations, groups, and places] to be heard', especially 'the Rural' (pp. 256-7). In 'The Rise in Ecohorror and Ecogothic Criticism', after a brief nod to the ecoGothic, Teresa Fitzpatrick turns her attention to ecohorror, with its 'focus on the uneasy relationship between human and nonhuman' (p. 260) and performs a sweeping survey of ecohorror scholarship. Her bibliography is impressive and provides a solid starting point for anyone interested in entering the field or just checking where it stands now. She glances over disaster narratives, creature features, plant horror, and nautical and cosmic ecohorror and argues that the last three are particular growth areas. In fact, she notes that ecoGothic and ecohorror scholarship is 'growing steadily' and evolving into a powerful means of understanding not only contemporary ecophobia and its fallout, but for tracking these structural problems back into older texts (p. 271). The next essay, Ian Fetters's 'Undying Earth: Extinction Romances in the Age of the Anthropocene', follows up on a subgenre of ecohorror that Fitzpatrick had to glance past: human extinction narratives. Focusing on Hideo Kojima's game *Death Stranding* and William Hope Hodgson's novel *The Night Land* (1908), Fetters argues that the genre is 'well-suited to expressing humanity's fraught relationship to the postapocalyptic deep time chasm of far futures and the looming catastrophe of our present day, reminding contemporary readers […] of our species' gradually shrinking niche in the Earth ecological network' (p. 287).

One cannot have catastrophe, however, without body horror and contagion. Laura Kremmel's chapter, 'Fear of Infection: Negotiating between Community and Isolation in Gothic Contagion Narratives', is reminiscent of Grafius, in that it too adumbrates an alternative, activist strand in a horror subgenre, in this case, pandemic narratives. Kremmel argues that 'twenty-first-century Gothic literature is […] confronting disease, illness, and contagion as legitimate circumstances of horror, without hiding behind some of the supernatural metaphors and tropes relied on in the past' (p. 291). Such horror is also providing a much needed if forcible reminder of humanity's 'interdependence' (p. 301). The final essay in the volume, 'The Metal and the Flesh:

Techno-liminalities, Bio-subversion, and the Enhanced Super-Body as a Horror Space', delves further into the ecocritical terrain of body horror with a surprising turn into a genre not typically considered horror at all: Marvel superhero movies. Taking Bucky Barnes/the Winter Soldier as her chief case study, Lorna Piatti-Farnell discusses the many Marvel characters who have endured 'experimental bio-technologies' that induce disturbing 'physiological transformations', and she argues that these painful physical changes 'can be positioned productively within a horror framework' (p. 302). If body horror has now become a way of understanding even the superhero, then ecohorror/ecoGothic is truly everywhere.

Taken holistically, the essays in this collection are primarily surveys and so sometimes frustrate a desire for theoretical depth and historical detail, and I must admit that the grammar pedant in me would have appreciated greater attention to the horror of occasional subject-verb disagreement. But such quibbles aside, my overall evaluation of this ambitious, extensive, and engaging book is that it provides a useful resource for scholars (or even patient horror fans) who wish to survey the current critical and creative terrain in horror studies. Ecocritics in particular should find this volume affirming of the growing importance of their work, and I expect *The Evolution of Horror in the Twenty-First Century* to become a touchstone throughout the rest of the twenty-first century.

BIOGRAPHY

Sara L. Crosby is Professor of English at the Ohio State University at Marion and author of two books about poisonous women in nineteenth-century American literature and multiple ecocritical essays, such as 'Gothic in an Age of Environmental Crisis' (Cambridge's *History of the Gothic*), 'Beyond Ecophilia: Edgar Allan Poe and the American Tradition of Ecohorror', and 'American Soil, Louisiana Dirt: The Metaphor Enabling the Sacrifice Zone' (*ISLE*). Her current book project investigates the disastrous interplay between extractive interests and American popular culture's ecohorror/ecoGothic representation of South Louisiana.

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Gothic Travel through Haunted Landscapes: Climates of Fear

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Madalynn Madigar

Stepping away from the interior spaces of desolate haunted houses and abandoned churches, Lucie Armitt and Scott Brewster turn towards the unwalled spaces of the outside as sites of haunting and inspiration for Gothic narratives. In *Gothic Travel through Haunted Landscapes: Climates of Fear* (2023), Armitt and Brewster investigate the ways in which seemingly natural places 'give you the creeps', giving particular emphasis to the role that movement and travel, particularly foot travel, play in primarily rural and suburban settings in generating feelings of the uncanny, the strange, and the thrilling. This book of literary criticism brings landscape itself to the fore—no mere backdrop against which gothic action unfolds—and engages with a wide array of Gothic texts from the late eighteenth century to the contemporary. Mirroring the travel of literary journeys, the four main chapters of the book guide readers through a variety of regions and terrain mainly focused on the United Kingdom, including the coastline of Eastern Scotland and England, the English Channel, Wales, and the Scottish Highlands. As the authors establish in the Introduction, the central aim of the book surrounds the sensorial, corporeal, and affective dimensions stemming from the embodied human immersed in and moving through the elements of different spaces; these pathways through landscapes are integral for Gothic texts and ghost stories.

In Chapter 1, 'Climate and the Elemental Gothic', Armitt and Brewster focus on the two central landscapes of the polar regions and Atlantic coastline of Eastern Scotland and England. The authors begin the first subsection, 'The Polar Uncanny', by highlighting the place of fear and the sublime in the extreme geographies of Gothic narratives set in the Arctic and Antarctic. Tracing the context of these narratives to the cultural interest in polar navigation and expeditions, Armitt and Brewster direct attention to the sensorial qualities—cracking of the ice, stinging of the cold, the blurred visibility from snow and fog—that mark the poles as landscapes of thrilling, but terrific, places of unknown possibility. The polar regions are inextricably connected to climate and indelibly altered by global warming; the instability of melting sea ice therefore compounds upon an already unpredictable local setting while extends to a global exchange of biogeochemical

interactions that haunt environments around the world. The next subsection, 'Creeping Coastlines', also picks up on the role that an unstable landscape plays in generating terror and disorientation. Literally placing travellers on the edge, coastlines and the ocean waves beside them churn with precarity, not least because the specific Scottish/English coast under discussion is quickly disappearing. The 'soft geology' and fast erosion (p. 42) of this coastline generate a sensory experience of 'insecure footfall' ideal for imagining 'narratives of haunting' (p. 43). This section is particularly compelling for readers of the ecoGothic who are concerned with questions of futurity and climate from the standpoint of Gothic Studies.

Chapter 2, 'Stopping Points and (Final Un-)Resting Places', turns inwards from the outer fringes toward more southerly regions and those lying closer inland. The ecoGothic investigations of this chapter involve the intervention between the subterrestrial and the human body in three particular types of environs. The subsection 'Wetland Burial' guides readers down the coastline of the previous section and around the English Channel for a consideration of narratives immersed in marshlands and saltmarshes. These landscapes complicate the ability of travel in flooded, unsolidified places and hide secrets beneath murky and ever-changing waters. 'Upland Burial' carries on an analysis of the role of flooding and the uncovering of the buried to 'narratives of North America and South-West France' (p. 58). The uncanny, felt by unseen but traceable interments, echoes through the valleys, canyons, and caverns of this subsection. The authors focus closer on human intervention in the landscape in the last subsection, 'Earthworks and Spectral Turbulence', in which the disturbances felt from partially hidden tunnels and subterranean railways generate anxiety in the aesthetic intersection of the Gothic and the Industrial Sublime.

Unease remains a central affect in Chapter 3, 'At the Edge: Gothic Extremities in Britain and Ireland'. The chapter addresses journeys around the 'peripheries of Britain and Ireland' (p. 94) and the importance of narratives in this local tourism that negotiated national boundaries: 'Gothic fiction reoriented the home traveller's gaze; to navigate terrain at once familiar and foreign was often an ambivalent experience, generating fascination and apprehension in equal measure' (p. 93). The subsection 'Irish Bogs and Ruins' focuses on two major settings in Gothic literature placed in Ireland. Strangeness and estrangement play a central role in journeys through Gothic landscapes in encounters that navigate colonial discourses. The authors next consider fictional

journeys and the interplay between mapping and understanding in Wales in the following section 'The Welsh Borders', a landscape that 'is at once an accessible site of escape, and a place apart far removed from the labyrinths of London or pastoral England' (p. 116). Finally, 'The Scottish Highlands and Islands' concludes the chapter with a focus on landscapes that call into question the familiar and a sense of belonging for narrators in both Romantic and contemporary Gothic narratives. The range of works and analyses in this chapter make it valuable for ecoGothic scholarship concerning these regions. Armitt and Brewster effectively centre the affective involvement of movement, as well as the perceptions of travellers in places that are uneasily unfamiliar to supply novel ecoGothic criticism and inquiries.

In Chapter 4, 'Walking Abroad: Ghosts and Landscapes', Armitt and Brewster embark on a closer analysis of the connections between ghosts and mobilisation, specifically the interplay between haunting/spectral encounters and walking. The authors consider the placement of ghost stories along footpaths, country lanes, and old walking trails in the subsection 'The Beaten Track'. The focus on the pedestrian extends into 'Late Rambles', which further tracks the significance of walking with both encounters and solitude in Gothic tales and ghost stories. The authors draw distinction between recreational walking, wandering, and travel with a purpose in the context of haunted narratives involving characters lost, bewildered, and transformed by their journeys. The final subsection, 'Dead Men's Footsteps', expounds upon ghost-walking as a practice of immersion into haunted landscapes as Armitt and Brewster transport readers far away to the Himalayas for their final textual analysis of the chapter, Michelle Paver's *Thin Air* (2016). The common thread between the varied narratives and locations in this chapter, walking, demonstrates the embodied interchange between the human and the landscape that comes from movement on foot and the feelings of haunting that can be found in these locations. The focus on the production of haunting from the physical involvement with the landscape is a valuable discussion for scholars invested in recent ecoGothic and Affect Studies discussions that question the role, source, and importance of haunting in relation to inner experience and the outer world.

The authors conclude the work with an insightful discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that the global outbreak caused on the action of movement of all kinds. Throughout the work, Armitt and Brewster do not lose sight of the current ramifications of the ecological crisis

in their ecocritical considerations, and they argue for the relevancy of unstable environmental relationships in Gothic texts in times marked with the label of the Anthropocene. While unable to represent all of the rich variety of landscapes traversed by haunted and haunting travellers, Armitt and Brewster employ a wide variety of Gothic texts in their analyses to make this work an informative resource for scholars interfacing with the ecoGothic in the contexts of place, embodied affect, and the interface between locale and experience.

BIOGRAPHY

Madalynn L. Madigar (she/her) is a Colorado-born citizen of the **ᏣᎳᎩᎯ ᎠᏰᎵ**/ Cherokee Nation who is a PhD student in English at the University of Oregon located on Kalapuya ilihi. She recently completed her M.A. in English Literature with a focus in Ecocriticism and a Certificate in Environmental Ethics from the University of Montana. Her central areas of interest outside of Gothic Studies include Petrocultural Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Media Studies. Her MA thesis focused on the cultural appearances of oil in tandem with monstrosity and she is currently working on several projects involved with the Petrogothic.

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Rebecca Duncan (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Globalgothic*

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Kristy Strange

Since its inception, the Gothic has been haunted by modernity—both fascinated and fearful of the speed at which its uncertainties unravel into new realities that expand, infect, and mutate all corners of the globe. Ten years on from the 2013 collection Globalgothic edited by Glennis Byron, Rebecca Duncan's new collection offers expanded and diverse approaches to understanding the globalgothic. As the economic-centred world-systems version of globalisation spreads, the ghosts of the past have become the monsters of the present (pp. 26-27). These modern-day, systemic monsters desire nothing more than to continue historical practices of extraction, exploitation and accumulation. The explicit realities of colonial heteropatriarchy have taken on a modern disguise in implicit systems of capitalistic heteropatriarchy. It is this disguise that The Edinburgh Companion to Globalgothic aims to unravel, revealing the historically entangled systems of colonialism that cannot be separated from the globalisation of capitalism and its neoliberal philosophy. This edited collection shows why the practice of naming matters and tasks the reader with questioning the current imbalances of narrative control.

The importance of naming is immediately made apparent to the reader in the collection's introductory chapter. Duncan outlines her argument in the definition of the term globalgothic that she posits in opposition to traditional 'globalisation theory' rooted in a world-systems analysis approach that locates the spread of capitalism in the twentieth century (p. 2). Duncan argues that this positioning dismisses the impact of early colonialism, specifically how the act of conquest enabled both foreign land and bodies to be viewed and used as exploitable resources. Instead, she suggests that the globalisation of capitalism 'begins in the "long" sixteenth century, when the powers of Western Europe set out to expropriate the resources of the so-called New World' (p. 2). This New World, the bedrock for a global economy, is a focal point for Byron's original definition of the globalgothic. In contrast, Duncan takes an alternative approach by turning to Moore's theory of world-ecology. World-ecology unearths the encoded violence in the cyclical pattern of 'crisis and global transformation' made visible in capitalism's accelerated exploitation and exhaustion of

resources (pp. 5-6). The argument for this ecological definition of the globalgothic is greatly needed in the rapidly developing context of an entangled Planetary Gothic, to which Duncan turns her attention in the coda of the collection.

The collection is structurally organised into four parts: Approaches, Issues, Modes, and Regions and Geographies. Although I suspect most readers will engage with this text by selecting specific chapters to read, I would encourage everyone to read the entirety of 'Part I – Approaches'. It provides a basis for a wide range of popular debates and challenges how scholars might approach a nuanced analysis of these diverse narratives and their histories. Topics include decoloniality, necropolitics, Black diaspora, queering ecologies, ecohorror, and more. The first chapter, 'Decolonial Gothic' by Sheri-Marie Harrison, lays the foundations for this collection's reworking of the global and, fundamentally, the Gothic by emphasising a decolonial rather than a postcolonial analysis as necessary for the context of a world-ecology approach. The decolonial analysis thus supports a resurrection of 'cultural legacy' traditionally neglected in privileged narratives (p. 70). This is further explored in Maisha Wester's chapter on 'Gothic and the Black Diaspora'. Wester speaks to the threat of historical and corporeal erasure through the abuse of language. An excess of language results in the transmutation of truths—a fabrication of selected voices and histories. Like the Extractive Gothic, proposed by Sharae Deckard (2023) in her contribution of the same name, the act of unearthing buried histories of violence and exploitation must be examined to expose the depths of the commodification and exhaustion of human and nonhuman resources, revealing a blood-stained bedrock composed of skeletons.

Part II ranges from colonial conquest and war to terrorism, technologies, and entangled ecologies. The role of the "invisible" imperiality of the United States takes centre stage across several chapters with an examination of its origins as a British colony to its participation in battles for conquest and its alienation of others, especially in the 'pure paranoid potential' of terrorism (p. 179). In the chapter, 'Terrorist Gothic', by Steffen Hantke, language is once again questioned as he notes the continued instability of the definition of terrorism and, subsequently, terrorists, arguing that the Gothic provides a uniquely intimate space for internal perception. This reflexive potential is further explored in examinations of neoliberal globalisation and its murderous, suicidal drive for a dominant so-called 'individual' identity (i.e. White, heterosexual, and male)—a

desperate war for supremacy in a changing world. Such change is presented in issues perhaps more familiar to the *Gothic Nature* reader, including the chapters 'Uncanny Globalgothic Ecologies: Animate Intimacies' by Chloé Germaine—a personal favourite from the collection—and 'Pandemics and Globalgothic' by Johan Höglund. As we mutate our lives into the so-called 'new normal' in a (contested) 'post' pandemic period, Höglund discusses a new term in the hotly debated battle of the 'cenes': Virocene. The Virocene contains strains throughout history that infect and thus expose reactive narratives of global inequalities and injustices: a mutation of what it means to be human.

The in-depth examination of these dominant issues resurrects the globalgothic's capacity to offer insights into the hidden and buried realities of the planetary polycrisis. Crucially, these chapters also critique the traditional gothic narratives and their contemporary appropriations for their role in perpetuating racism and xenophobia through maintained dualisms (that benefit a capitalistic and neoliberal ideology) to justify the conquest over the 'terrifying other'. However, one issue that is noticeably lacking is that of globalgothic ideas on competing/conquering theologies, which is especially important to consider because of the central influence of religion on imperial Britain (and the imperial United States, as argued by Kevin Corstorphine in his essay contribution) and, thus, globalisation. This surprised me, considering the long history between the Gothic and religion and the fact that the prevalence of theologies, as an ingrained issue, is mentioned in several of these chapters. Despite this, the surface of the topic is never breached. The absence of this issue is also notable due to the planetary implications (i.e. the justification of possession and consumption of resources—and people). Although the separation of religion and state has, perhaps, led to an invisibility of influence, the roots of its histories are still entirely intertwined in the realities of globalisation.

'Part III – Modes' presents topics including translations, tourism, travel writing, Folk Horror, Brexit, and Online Gothic. Personally, this is the section that felt the most disjointed. As previously noted, most readers will likely engage with this text in select ways, so my critique will not necessarily be relevant to readings that follow this approach. To make this part more cohesive, another mode or two is necessary to bring together a few of the (temporarily) dropped strands of discourse. In this part, mode is used to reference specific forms of writing. Thus, a chapter on

Speculative Fiction (e.g. Sci-Fi) and the Gothic would help strengthen the lost discourse of ecologies and subsequent gendered/queer approaches, which were championed in part one. Nevertheless, this is a minor issue in an extraordinary collection, and these chapters are no less impressive. The section begins with Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos's chapter, titled 'Globalgothic Translations and Migrations: From Britain to Brazil', which argues that the appropriation of Gothic tropes through its globalisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries means that the globalgothic can be considered beyond the exclusive borders of contemporary narratives—an argument that has wider implications and applications than the chapter's focus on Brazil and Britain. These considerations are especially significant if we consider how previous analysis of the globalgothic has focused primarily on contemporary or recently revived gothic narratives (i.e. appropriated folklore). This issue is examined in the following chapters that turn to tourism, which 'often shadows the routes of historic colonialism', and travel writing, focusing on bringing the ghosts from these travels home (p. 280). The migrations of the consequences of colonial histories are riddled with haunting violence and silenced disembodied voices, translating into the fears and anxieties examined in the 'homely' context of Britain through the modes of Folk Horror and Brexit Gothic.

'Part IV – Regions and Geographies' challenges geographical separations in global discourse and highlights a variety of perhaps lesser-known categories of the Gothic, including emerging localities such as the Desert Gothic. Of particular interest, Rebekah Cumpsty's chapter, titled 'Gothic and the Global South', presents readers with an opportunity for reflection on the ways that the historical, binary separation of the Global North and South is not only lacking in its understanding of complex global relationships but simultaneously perpetuates uneven lived experiences and denies culpability and responsibility of oppressors—a denial of entangled local and global histories. The section speaks to fabricated 'open' borders and the relationship between harsh, natural environments and militia in the implication of constraints and obedience. Borders are built and broken as local folklore is appropriated and commodified to suit a global market, and feminine bodies are subjected to an increasingly violent neoliberal modernity (i.e. Gore Capitalism). In resistance to this violence, dispossession and erasure, attempts of restorative histories are inspected, violated, and disposed of irrelevant to physical corporealities. The chapter titled 'Queer Gothic Narratives of Palestine in Alon Hilu's *The House of Rajani* and Ayman

Sikseck's *Tishrin*' by Karen Grumberg is an exceptional piece of analysis that demonstrates the globalgothic discourse of challenging 'historical truths' through an examination of contested/competing, alternative/restorative histories at the heart of dispossession and possession, especially over disputed lands and, subsequently, identities and bodies. Grumberg states that 'the narrative mechanisms become the stories themselves'; the haunting of language calls attention to both narrative voice and its oppositional, oppressed silence (p. 441).

Ultimately, Duncan's edited collection highlights that the globalgothic is more than a response to globalisation but resurrects the 'undead' violent, colonial past to expose the illusion of globalisation as a world-system as erroneous—an illusion that actively engages in local, historical erasure and its impact on globalisation. Although intimidating in its size, the careful consideration and dedication to each topic means that this collection succinctly compiles a thorough, robust analysis of the globalgothic. It encompasses a range of ideas, recognising the potential pitfalls of current dominant discourses and increasing the visibility of historically overlooked voices and experiences. For this reason, I believe that this text should be an essential part of any university library. The scope of this book is beyond the (permeable) borders of the Gothic; globalgothic provides alternative approaches that focus on the visibility of hidden, neglected anxieties and realities that are ever-present in literature and other forms of popular culture. These approaches define modern scholarly discourse: can the Gothic be anything but global in its history?

BIOGRAPHY

Kristy Strange (she/her) is a second-year PhD student at the University of Westminster. She holds an MLitt in The Gothic Imagination from the University of Stirling (Scotland) as well as a BA in both English Literature and Applied Psychology from Bishop's University (Quebec, Canada). Her doctoral thesis presents an ecofeminist examination of the use of the gothic mode in women's speculative fiction, arguing that these narratives highlight the climate crisis and its silenced histories in conceptualising climate change as an embodied haunted/haunting encounter.

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Steve A. Wiggins, *The Wicker Man*

(Liverpool: Auteur, 2023)

Ali Cargill

Released in 1973, the film *The Wicker Man* was directed by Robert Hardy, written by Anthony Shaffer, and starred Edward Woodward, Christopher Lee, and Britt Ekland. The film is a classic in the folk horror tradition and in the ecohorror tradition alike. In the story, known to many, Police Sergeant Neil Howie (Woodward) is summoned to Summerisle, a fictitious Scottish island, to investigate the disappearance and possible death of a young girl. Summerisle appears idyllic, but the natural world of the island is blighted by the failure of the previous year's crops and its human inhabitants hide a dark secret: the girl is alive and Howie has been lured to the island as a May Day sacrifice to restore the harvest.

The recent publication *The Wicker Man* (2023), by Steve A. Wiggins, is one of a series of *Devil's Advocates* books 'devoted to exploring the classics of horror cinema'. In his exploration (of the original theatrical version), Wiggins validates *The Wicker Man*'s position as part of the folk horror subgenre (p. 2). Indeed, the film supports this in a number of ways, perhaps most evidently via the apparent dichotomy of the civilised (strict Christian belief) and the primitive (rural, Pagan belief) presented in the film's diegesis. Wiggins' agenda in examining this conflict is to characterise the film as holiday horror, specifically when those religions clash over a holiday with an alleged history of sacrifice. It is this, Wiggins asserts, which drives the energy of the film and leads to its horrific ending.

An ecohorror interpretation can explore the way in which the human-natural world relationship, presented in the film as rooted in rural Paganism, is turned uneasy by the conflict between the two religions. This relationship with Paganism is founded upon pre-Christian ritual as a response to season and landscape. Further, the island's primitive culture is one where the landscape is turned uncanny: there is not just unease, but fear. The May Day rites are familiar—this is only maypole dancing, after all—yet why does it disturb? Perhaps it is because the joyous nature of those rites is bound up in the esoteric culture of Pagan belief as presented in the film—human turned nonhuman, wild in wild space. Indeed, the Pagan world of the island is constructed

as Gothic place of chaos, place of other, where boundaries between desire and fear, living and dead, good and evil become obscured. Summerisle is a liminal place of change, made uncanny in its upending of order: men, women and children become masked animals, and Punch the Fool is king for a day.

Wiggins follows a thread of historical enquiry which locates ancient Celtic ritual as a response to the turning of the Wheel of the Year (p. 36), articulated in seasonal marking of the astronomical seasons and phases of the moon. It is interesting to locate elements of the ecoGothic and ecohorror here: the islanders' May Day rites are woven into the natural world's own uncanny habit of being both known and unknown. This re-engagement with ancient history underpins the current religious culture that pervades the island of Summerisle, and there is an interesting parallel to be observed in the way in which Wiggins' repositioning of the film as holiday horror similarly draws on the past but at the same time looks forward to the current moment where 'Pagan is now neutral and heathen discarded' (p. 18).

Wiggins' suggestion that it is the history of sacrifice associated with the May Day holiday that summons the 'horrifying solution' (p. 11) in the film provokes an interesting discussion of the extent to which historical record of ritual can be understood as authentic or not. In the context of the film, Wiggins asserts, pre-Christian Celtic Beltane rites, and of course the wicker man, exert power, even when as 'modern reconstructions […] [they] aren't historically accurate' (p. 44). Certainly this exposition shifts *The Wicker Man* further towards ecohorror: the island on May Day is both liminal space and time, which, Wiggins contends, carries danger.

The correlation between May Day sacrifice and celebration expressed through fire turns the human-natural world relationship presented in *The Wicker Man* more sinister. The sun, element of fire, is significant in solstice celebrations, and may explain why, for example, in the 2019 film *Midsommar* sacrifice by burning seems so appropriate within the culture of the film. In the same way, May Day rituals are those which include a celebration of the sun's role in encouraging growth, ripening crops and, ultimately, bringing in a good harvest. It is human belief in this elemental power wielded by pre-Christian gods, Wiggins asserts, which leads to the sacrifice of a

man by burning in the wicker man effigy. There is nothing supernatural here, only a literal interpretation of religion.

Wiggins' exploration does not extend to an ecoGothic perspective where, rather than the traditional revenge model, the natural world relationship may be understood in terms of ever-presence, or indifference towards humans. This more nuanced interpretation may lend *The Wicker Man* new relevance: the rituals of the inhabitants of Summerisle present them as not so much organically rooted in the uncanny natural world of the island, but rather emphasises their ontological separateness from that natural world. In this way, the history of cultivation of the island's fertile soil that underpins the film's diegesis becomes mere meddling at the edges. In *The Wicker Man*, the natural world produces at random a failed harvest; is it this *lack* of engagement which drives the humans to their extreme solution of invoking an ancient rite of sacrifice by burning? By whatever means they come to it, to engage with Wiggins' work is to gain a greater understanding of the ancient connection which gives rise to the wicker man's dark, sinister silhouette, twisted and woven by human hand. Shaped by ritual and rite, this thing of ancient, natural world origin rises from the landscape; it *is* the landscape. Ensnared within it, the human animal squeals and burns.

BIOGRAPHY

Ali Cargill has previously written for young adults and has contributed towards and published Advanced Level English study guides, including her Guide to Ecocritical Interpretation. She completed her doctorate in creative writing in 2023. In her thesis novel, *Wyrd Magic*, she uses the strident voice of a witch-figure narrator to articulate the personal pain of grief. She has published a number of creative pieces in journals and is currently reworking *Wyrd Magic* towards publication. Ali's research interests include folk horror and other fiction where the natural world is turned Gothic. Her latest work in progress is a collection of Victorian Gothic short stories.

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James Morgart,

The Haunted States of America: Gothic Regionalism in Post-war American Fiction

(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2022)

Daniel Otto Jack Petersen

James Morgart's monograph is a highly informative and wide-ranging road map of the Gothic in U.S. literature, taking the reader on a coast-to-coast journey across the nation, the cumulative effect of which is significant. While Morgart rightly acknowledges the prominence of Gothic tropes within contemporary U.S. literature, such as the role played by the American wilderness and intermixture of human with nonhuman, he focuses more or less exclusively on the social machinations of regional works that disclose 'how certain groups maintain power over others' (p. 3) and how thereby the nation's identity is formed (p. 5). Such a focus is made more subtle, however, by discussion not only of how those in power marginalised others, but also how the marginalised opposed power either through the same or via alternate Gothic themes and imagery (p. 3). Robert Bloch, for example, repeatedly narrated his midwestern serial killers (most famously Norman Bates) to be not the exception to, but the product of the idyllic small-town values of (white) nuclear families so prized in that region. Shirley Jackson, on the other hand, countered New England's centuries-long tendency to cast nonconforming women as witches by adopting that designation as a path to freedom from the region's hypocrisies: 'her characters fight back by embracing their Otherness through black magic, witchcraft and sisterhood' (p. 68). Morgart conceptualises this 'Gothic regionalism' as 'a synthesis of the Gothic with critical regionalism', which studies 'how regional culture often shapes the ways that Gothic language, imagery and conventions are mobilised in American fiction' (p. 3).

Such an emphasis acknowledges that there are 'several Americas' behind what is often perceived as a monolithic nation (p. 4). Each of the five chapters explores a region: the South, New England, the Midwest, New York City, and Southern California (as Morgart also notes, there remain many more regions that could be covered). Rather than focusing exclusively on well-known purveyors of the Gothic, such as Edgar Allan Poe or Shirley Jackson, Morgart instead—and valuably—highlights Gothic themes evident in writers from many genres, including crime,

science fiction, family saga, and 'literary' fiction. The book limits its focus to the post-World War II era, which, Morgart argues, is when mass culture in the U.S. began to form (p. 3). This mass culture nevertheless belies regional specificities distinguishable from a national psyche rooted in 'Cold War politics', which Morgart notes is the usual emphasis in studies of this period (p. 4). Relying especially on Freud's account of the uncanny and Kristeva's notion of the abject (pp. 8-9), the Gothic treatment of such regional trends discloses 'how dominant regional identities bury horrific events, histories and treatment of others' and thereby consciously and unconsciously 'repress or abject certain groups' (p. 5). The novels thus engaged tend to 'unveil hidden regional secrets that undermine both the national narrative and the dominant regional narrative' (p. 6). This is explored in rich detail from the main works surveyed in each chapter, each of which proceeds with a brief summary of both the social history and Gothic writing from the pre-World War II era of the region under consideration.

Chapter one discusses how both Truman Capote and Carson McCullers purvey a Southern Gothic where 'abnormality is celebrated', as opposed to the region's past tendency to demonise alterity through Gothic tropes (p. 20). As a result, abnormality is de-fanged through a gradual realisation that 'grotesqueness' is a construct of dominant Southern culture (p. 20). In the works of William Faulkner and William Styron, Morgart notes a host of Gothic environmental and animal imagery. This rich nonhuman material is examined for the social critique it enables Capote and McCullers to develop, though readers with ecocritical interests will find much material here that speaks to ecoGothic imaginaries. Each nonhuman image is approached as a 'Gothic trigger' (p. 45) for revelations of strictly interhuman concerns. The animals indexed (in this chapter and others) tend towards presenting a negative view of nonhumans, as ciphers of the morally 'beastly' (p. 38) and inhumane, consistently conjoining the 'animal and horrid' (p. 45), such that comparison with animals exemplifies a character's 'dehumanised state' (p. 160) or otherwise 'debased primal behaviour' (p. 169). While Morgart's study is not primarily interested in what this says about how authors have imagined or treated animals, it offers suggestive matter for the ecoGothic critic. In chapter two, after discussion of Grace Metalious' *Peyton Place*, it is noted that Shirley Jackson's approach has similarities to the celebration of abnormality found in Capote and Cullers. Yet Jackson's work innovates on this theme. Rather than 'breaking down monstrosity in order to disarm the dominant culture's false narratives' (p. 21), Jackson tends to encourage monstrous

others, especially women, 'to embrace their Gothic Otherness as a source of empowerment' (p. 71). Ecocritics will note that 'Jackson's Gothic innovation of embracing Gothic Otherness as something positive in one's struggle within New England's oppressive patriarchal culture' (p. 83) may be applied to the othering of nonhuman beings and places, as witnessed in the early settlers' horror of the New England wilderness (p. 52).

Chapter three offers a fascinating discussion of the oft-neglected Gothic Midwest. The counternarratives of writers as diverse as Richard Wright, Robert Bloch, August Derleth, and Ray Bradbury depict their home region as 'a place of horror and trauma rather than idyllic safety' (p. 97). The Frontier Gothic of Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* is especially significant in regard to colonialist repression of both Indigenous peoples and lands and the possibility that native animism is morally and spiritually superior to Euro-settler values (p. 110). This observation evinces a fruitful dissonance with other portrayals of the nonhuman across the works studied in Morgart's book. While chapter four acknowledges the prominence of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin as figures for the New York Gothic, Morgart opts instead to explore how Gothic themes in Chester Himes' gritty Harlem detective cycle unveil the abjectification of Black experience in that famed metropolis. Finally, chapter five surveys Gothic linkages between land, animals, women, and ethnic minorities in the Southern California Gothic of Raymond Chandler, Richard Matheson, Margaret Millar, and Ross MacDonald. Here ecocritical concerns are more explicitly in view, if not necessarily discussed in depth. It is testament to the intersectionality of ecocritical, feminist, and racial studies that Morgart's tight focus on social concerns cannot help but spill over into nonhuman relations. This is especially so in the discussion of MacDonald's *The Barbarous Coast*. Through oil and other industries, the California landscape in the novel becomes an 'alienated abstraction', a 'dream country' with 'ghosts of vegetation', a 'thing to be owned' and 'transformed' (p. 171). However, anthropocentric hierarchy is explicit in Morgart's interpretation of the various novels' vivid zoomorphisms: 'In a culture promoting self-interest, it is only logical that the end result would be a nightmare of humans regressing into animals following their most base desires' (p. 170). In this respect, *Haunted States* thereby works as a welcome provocation to ecoGothic scholars.

Morgart's book is highly recommended as a readable, informative and enjoyable journey through the Gothic themes that pervade certain regions of the U.S.. It is a model for similar approaches to other regions of the U.S. as well as regional approaches to other nations. Indeed, we may even hope for similar studies in Gothic Bioregionalism.

BIOGRAPHY

Daniel Otto Jack Peterson resides in Glasgow, Scotland. When not writing and researching ecocriticism and monster theory in contemporary works of horror fiction, he attempts to write his own weird speculative stories and eat copious amounts of Mexican food. Other research interests include Native American Studies, U.S. western fiction, ecopsychology, biosemiotics, and object-oriented ontology. He will also not hesitate to tell you that Reservation Dogs is the best television series that Turtle Island (aka the United States) has produced so far.

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Emily Horton, *21st-Century British Gothic: The Monstrous, Spectral, and Uncanny in Contemporary Fiction*

(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024)

Han O'Flanagan

Emily Horton's wide-ranging introduction to twenty-first century Gothic is a work that is both timely and well-placed in our current geopolitical system. Further Horton asserts that some twenty-first century 'British literary enactments' of the Gothic see it emerge 'as a challenge to received conservative and market-driven thinking' in order to counter 'the dominant networks of neocolonial and neoliberal power in favour of more decolonial, feminist, queer, and planetary perspectives' (pp. 2-3). In an academic landscape that can itself feel Gothic at times, and, moreover, given the emphasis of many institutions and key figures on market growth and the commodification of academia, Horton's intervention here feels particularly opportune.

21st-Century British Gothic weaves together at times apparently disparate and unconnected texts to show how the traumas expressed and experienced by the modern age are not so dissimilar not merely from one other, but from the traumas explored in the Gothic fictions that came before them. In the Introduction, Horton clearly establishes her sense that contemporary British Gothic refuses a politics of 'uncritical utopianism and empty sentiment', arguing instead that it favours 'a materialist ideological engagement with sociopolitical critique (p. 3). In constructing this reading, Horton places both her own critical voice and the texts themselves solidly alongside other readings, calling upon major theorists to demonstrate the urgency of this work. For Britain specifically, Horton also evokes Nira Yuval-Davis by demonstrating that 'twenty-first-century British Gothic expressly navigates [its] changing national and international landscape, reinterpreting its resistance to borders and boundaries in terms of Gothic shifts and disruptions' (p. 8). By navigating the increasingly global outlook of the Gothic, and through her careful selection of texts to include a number of different voices embodying the vibrant cultural diversity in modern Britain, Horton firmly indicates her sensitivity to the status of the Gothic in the twenty-first century.

That sensitivity and careful selection is clear from the chapters that follows, with each focusing respectively on one of the thematic strands Horton has identified as running through British Gothic in the twenty-first century. Acknowledging that her choice 'is by no means exhaustive', she explains that her intention is to offer 'a focused and selective critical intervention […] concentrated specifically on Gothic decolonial, feminist, queer, and ecocritical anxieties and their *fictional* representation' (p. 28). Starting with 'Post-9/11 Gothic' in Pat Barker's *Double Vision* and Patrick McGrath's *Ghost Town*, Horton begins by questioning the extent to which 'trauma discourse actually aids' the supposed agenda of permitting 'a widespread recognition of national disbelief, horror, and loss' rather than simply 'further abetting military aggression and violent "securitization"' instead (p. 34). She further argues that, in our post-9/11 world, 'trauma has become a convenient excuse for a state sanctioned restriction of civil liberties and the authorisation of radically undemocratic interventions abroad' (p. 34). This focus on trauma and the ways the texts illustrate and excavate it is continued into the second chapter 'Decolonial Gothic', in which Horton analyses works by Tash Aw and Nadeem Aslam. Within this chapter Horton also shows how Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* in particular creates a 'subterranean Gothic, which incorporates both horror and revelatory spectres' (p. 59). This is where one of the most prominent ecoGothic strands of Horton's book begins to emerge, alongside the digital ecocriticism within the fourth chapter 'Digital Gothic', the Capitalocene and urban ecology explored in chapter five 'Gothic Homelessness', and the horrors of post-apocalyptic landscapes in the penultimate chapter, 'Pandemic Gothic'.

There is undoubtedly a fragmented feeling throughout Horton's book, that is reflective of the different ecoGothic strands she explores throughout each chapter. Moreover, some of these strands are stronger than others, particularly when viewed through an ecoGothic lens. As I have already suggested, Horton's notion of the 'subterranean Gothic' is one of the most convincingly ecoGothic themes uncovered within her work. There is a distinctly urban sense to the readings Horton makes, which suggests that as humanity continues to develop and technologically advance, with population growth increasing the sizes of human settlements and encroaching ever more into natural spaces, the ecoGothic itself and the questions it asks will also shift and change. The effects of war and human military engagement are seen as physical scars on the land, with Horton noting the 'much less verdant' setting of *The Wasted Vigil* and how it represents 'the war-torn and desolate

terrain of modern-day Afghanistan' (p. 59). Our influence and the damage humanity inflicts upon the earth is also represented through these events; not only are the characters plagued by 'disturbed, trauma-laden psychology' in the aftereffects of war, but so too is the land (p. 59). The penultimate chapter's consideration of a post-pandemic, post-apocalyptic landscape also uncovers this new ecoGothic perspective, where the land can itself carry the trauma caused and experienced by the humans that live off of it. Horton's 'viropolitical' reading of the texts by Kazuo Ishiguro and M. R. Carey included within the chapter reconfigures ideas of monstrosity but also raises further questions about the effects of humanity on the land within 'discourses of illness, pandemic, and contamination' against a backdrop of viral outbreaks such as AIDS and COVID-19 (p. 178). The biopolitics at the heart of both Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) and *The Boy on the Bridge* (2017), Horton particularly argues, places human life as 'sacrosanct in the search for immunity' within a world in which fungal infection (and, perhaps, the world itself) threatens the very existence of humanity (p. 182).

Perhaps the strongest chapter of the collection is the final chapter focusing on 'Wet Gothic' in the fiction of Julia Armfield, Daisy Johnson and Zoe Gilbert. Horton demonstrates how what she terms 'Wet Gothic' is different from 'Nautical Gothic', with her chosen texts reflecting an ecophobia that encompasses all water rather than simply the terrors of the ocean. As Horton states, scholars of Wet Gothic 'highlight socioeconomic and political difficulties raised by water immersions and trespasses, while also registering key Gothic interventions and challenges to these often ecophobic histories' (p. 198). The specifically ecofeminist angle of the chapter, as reflected in the texts Horton has included for analysis, allows Horton to 'navigate a range of Gothic sentiments and emotions connected to female sexuality and desire', as well as to participate (through the texts) 'in ecofeminist politics by celebrating weird transformations and inter-species chimerism, as well as by recognizing "monstrous-feminine" perspectives that disturb and upend the terrestrial norm' (pp. 215-216). Horton's readings of the texts throughout the chapter, as in the chapters preceding, are astute and convincing, particularly in the way in which she explores monstrosity, spectrality and uncanniness against the main thematic strand of the chapter.

21st-Century British Gothic creates a convincing picture of the state of the Gothic against the backdrop of a rapidly developing, politically volatile world, from the millennium bug to 'the

more viscerally diseased and horrific COVID-19 pandemic' to the 'terror of 9/11' and 'the ongoing wars in Syria, Sudan, Gaza and the Ukraine' (p. 1). Horton compellingly shows how we have arrived where we find ourselves, and how a specifically British-focused study is still relevant within an increasingly global field. Where Horton's book struggles a little is in the overall structure; whereas there are some chapters with more obvious links that Horton builds upon, such as the pseudo-monstrous chimerism found in 'Pandemic Gothic' and again into 'Wet Gothic', Horton could have gone further in pulling a more coherent narrative thread throughout the entirety of the work. Nevertheless, *21st-Century British Gothic* is a compelling and varied examination of contemporary Gothic works, 'defined by apocalyptic moments of extreme and excessive emotion, by damaged and infested landscapes, and by uncanny and abject encounters with illness and death' (p. 1).

BIOGRAPHY

Han O'Flanagan is a final-year PhD candidate at Lancaster University, where their thesis focuses on asexual identities and experiences at the *fin-de-siecle*, examined through the lens of supernatural short fiction. Their research seeks to establish new readings of nineteenth-century sexology inclusive of non-heteronormative and non-sexual identities.

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Louis Bayman and K. J. Donnelly (eds.),
Folk Horror on Film: Return of the British Repressed
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023)

Conor Hannon

Folk Horror on Film: Return of the British Repressed (2023) is an ambitious and expansive collection of works that seek to carve out a space for British folk horror cinema within the emergent conversation about the genre. From the outset, this book makes it clear that folk horror's 'looseness' (p. 3) is as integral to the genre's definition as it is obfuscatory. Defining the genre requires an exploration of its characteristic 'indefinable unease', and *Folk Horror on Film* enters the conversation with a keen awareness and respect for these slippery, hazy boundaries.

The book comprises three sections with three distinct topics. The first of these, 'Debating *The Wicker Man*' (pp. 38-88), is a collection of three chapters that serves as a thorough exploration of how a film which 'typifies' the genre perhaps more than any other (p. 40) relates to the core notion of the British repressed. The first chapter, 'The Context of *The Wicker Man*' by Ronald Hutton, walks us through the Roman and Celtic cultural origins of the film and how these touchstones reflect a contemporary fear of a long-repressed pagan Otherness usurping the tentative Christian order. Laurel Zwissler's 'A Deeply Religious People: *The Wicker Man*, Contemporary Paganism and Dracula Reversed' discusses the salient racial tension to the film's rural/urban and religious conflicts, the way that the film sits as an inversion of traditional gothic horror (p. 46), and how these elements lend an element of the celebratory to the film's depiction of paganism. Mikel J. Koven's 'Folk Horror: A Discursive Approach, with Application to Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* and Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves*' rounds off the section by applying folk horror's discursive elements of 'the Pagan, the Rural, and the Folklore' (p. 72) to both *The Wicker Man* (1973) and *The Company of Wolves* (1984), asserting that the intersection of these elements is what constitutes the folk horror genre. Together, all three chapters return repeatedly to the complicated notion of the rural and its place within both gothic and folk horror, encouraging a deeper understanding of both social and physical landscape and the way that the genre becomes truly 'meaningful' (p. 60) through this lens of discursive intersection.

Part II, 'Return of the British Repressed' (pp. 75-159) directs our attention to all the repressed somethings within the British psyche that fuel folk horror's horror through six chapters which take us from the communities that house the folk of folk horror in Derek Johnson's 'The Folk of Folk Horror', to the spectre of environmental wastage that inhabits and defines the genre's relationship with landscape in Dawn Keetley's '*Doomwatch*: Sacrifice Zones and Folk Horror' to ancient tensions of national identity in Beth Carrol's 'Anglo Creep and Celtic Resistance in *Apostle*'. Standouts from this section include the aforementioned chapter from Keetley as well as Paul Newland's 'My Ancestors Died Here: *Requiem for a Village* and the Rural English Horror of Modernity and Socio-Cultural Change'. Keetley centres post-industrial environmental devastation, the oil and chemical spill, as components of 'sacrifice zones' (p. 90)—the 'absence' (p. 100) of ritual caused by these practices brings us into a firmly Gothic dimension of something uncomfortably encroaching into the eerie isolated landscape. Newland, meanwhile, illuminates the tensions surrounding rapid modernisation and urban development (p. 107). The encroaching of the suburban into the rural is spearheaded by 'faceless, gigantic mechanical leviathans' (p. 109), the urban/rural tension redefined through the hulking uncaring mass of the capitalist system which threatens to supplant, and subsequently suppress, the long-standing legacy of the rural. The repressed is a rich, fundamental area of interest that serves both folk horror and ecoGothic perspectives, and this section of the book deftly uses its varied array of perspectives to get in close to all that squirms beneath the proverbial earth.

The third and final part, 'Folk Horror's Cultural Landscapes' (pp. 163-232), rounds off the book with a dedicated focus on the various types of environments that underpin folk horror cinema. Told across five chapters that centre the role of soundscape ('Ritualistic Rhythms: Exploring the Sensory Affect of Drums in British Folk Horror Cinema' by Lyndsay Townsend), the tentative position of the human perspective ('"Nature Came Before Man": Human as Subject and Object within the Folk Horror Anti-Landscape' by David Evans-Powell) and the psychosocial landscape ('Albion Unearthed: Social, Political and Cultural Influences on British Folk Horror, Urban Wyrd and Backwoods Cinema' by Andy Paciorek), Part III examines the nature of landscape with deep understanding and keen detail. David Evans-Powell is a particular standout for those interested in an ecoGothic reading of the genre. His illuminating chapter walks us through the 'notions of the demarcation, ownership and control of the landscape' (p. 178) and folk horror's interrogative

relation to the anthropocentric idea of 'the human ability to comprehend nature through reason' (p. 181) through the image of the 'anti-landscape'. The resulting chapter is an evocative, intelligent reframing of the position and power that the human wields within folk horror landscapes and evolves our understanding of folk horror from an anthropocentric relationship with the natural to something much larger and much deeper.

Folk Horror on Film returns throughout its chapters to the importance of landscape to the folk horror genre. The space that folk horror inhabits is defined by social, cultural, and ecological elements that define both its historical and contemporary contexts—the manifold discourses key to understanding the urban/rural tension, the repressed horrors inflicted on community and natural landscapes alike buried within the genre's DNA, the anti-landscape defining and redefining the human perspective—and this book does a thorough job of exploring this. There is plenty in here for the ecoGothic perspective, but to leave it there would be a drastic underselling of the value of this book. *Folk Horror on Film* is a grand work that promises lasting relevance in the study of folk horror and will no doubt become a key cornerstone for critical perspectives on the genre.

BIOGRAPHY

Conor Hannon is a writer and researcher based in North Yorkshire. He is currently undertaking a practice-based PhD at York St John University, and is interested most in the material and immaterial ghosts abiding within our world, uncertain and outside perspectives, folk horror and the hauntological, questions of identity and existence, the tangled mire that is the culture war, and making fiction that speaks to all of the above.

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Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety

(New York: Fordham University Press, 2023)

Henry Bartholomew

A monkey's paw, a tell-tale heart, a giant helmet—'things' abound in Gothic fiction. Indeed, certain objects—mirrors, gravestones, portraits, body parts—seem to hum with Gothic potential. At the same time, one of the genre's chief affective strengths is its ability to turn seemingly mundane items into objects of terror—a letter, a saucepan, a balloon. The very intimacy of things, as the theorist Steven Shaviro (2014) has noted, is 'always discomforting and uncanny; it can easily seem obscene and directly menacing' (p. 59). In this sense, the Gothic has always capitalised on what the ghost story author M.R. James (2011) once called 'the malice of inanimate objects', and with the ripples of uncanniness that accompany indeterminacies between the animate and the in-animate (p. 397).

Taking up this theme, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety* (2023) doubles down on the Gothic's obsession with 'things' and, in parallel fashion, on several 'thing' theories' own enmeshments with the Gothic. The book makes a number of arguments, but the key ones can be stated clearly. First, the Gothic is concerned, at a fundamental level, with objects, or, more precisely, with subject-object inversions—with 'what happens when things acquire uncanny animacy, what happens when humans are numbered as things among other things, and how the human relates to the nonhuman' (p. 13); this is, for Weinstock, the 'master narrative of the Gothic genre' (p. 4). Second, the Gothic enacts thing theory *avant la lettre*. As Weinstock puts it, 'the Gothic […] has been making the claims of New Materialists, Speculative Realists, and Object-Oriented Ontologists for them since its inception' (viii), and should thus be thought of as the 'uncanny doppelgänger of twenty-first-century critical and cultural theory' (viii). Jane Bennett's notion of 'thing-power'—the vitalist thrum that powers her version of New Materialism—is singled out for special attention but given a Goth makeover. No longer the joyous vibrancy of the more-than-human, 'thing-power' becomes a terror to flee from, an uncanny, nightmarish threat to the autonomy of the bounded human subject.

Correspondingly, New Materialism becomes ‘Gothic materialism’ (p. 2), a mode of enquiry interested in the functions, manifestations, and affective resonances of ‘ominous matter’ (p. 4).

Finally, adding an Anthropocene twist to this discourse, Weinstock contends that, unlike contemporary ‘thing theories’, which are typically characterised by a hopeful, emancipatory outlook, Gothic materialism adopts ‘a different affective valence: one that substitutes horror for hope’ (p. 4). Gothic materialism exposes the repressed underbelly of the nonhuman turn’s call for a more just, vibrant, or capacious relationship between the human and the nonhuman. The Gothic, it is supposed, can therefore teach ‘thing theories’ about the pitfalls of objectification and the perils of its ‘dark enchantment’ (p. 43) over the imagination, providing object lessons on the dangers of turning the world (and particularly people) into things.

After several introductory sections, the book disambiguates ‘three broad categories’ of material objects in the Gothic: ‘cursed things’, ‘conduits’, and ‘inspirited things’ (p. 45).[1] The following four chapters then focus on particular kinds of ‘privileged’ (p. 44) objects: ‘bodies’, ‘books’, and ‘buildings’ (with ‘bodies’ split into two chapters: Body-as-Thing and Thing-as-Body). Readers of the *Gothic Nature* journal will note that there is no dedicated section on nonhuman ‘natural’ things, by which one might mean trees, rivers, animals, landscapes, the weather, etc. Such ‘things’ do, in fact, appear at various points throughout the book, however; it is simply that, taking its cue from the theories under discussion, the book employs a broad view of ‘Nature’, one that, *à la* Timothy Morton, largely dispenses with the notion entirely.[2] Both the Gothic and ‘thing theories’, Weinstock shows, are concerned with the tensions between subjects and objects, the human and the nonhuman. As such, the book is interested in ‘Gothic Nature’ to the extent that the ‘thing theories’ the book works with are, as it were, Anthropocene theories, and are thus underpinned by the conceptual *ur*-tropes of the contemporary moment: spectrality, monstrosity, and apocalypse (p. 20), each of which have their own ecocritical (and ecoGothic) valences.

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[1] A subsequent section analysing *Twin Peaks* also introduces four supplementary categories of matter to the already-mentioned ‘ominous matter’, namely, ‘displaced matter’, inspirited matter’ (presumably a synonym for ‘inspirited things’), ‘fragmented or multiplied matter’, and ‘objectified matter’ (p. 58). Confusingly, however, these categories are not used again.

[2] Morton, T. (2007) *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics.* London: Harvard University Press.

Gothic Things is, overall, an exciting, conceptually rich book, alive with suggestive insights and analyses. For this reviewer, however, the book also features a number of tensions and omissions that subtract from its overall success and are worth unpacking in more detail. First, though, and returning to Weinstock's (second) tripartite division of 'things' (bodies, books, and buildings), it is noteworthy that, while these categories may appear somewhat arbitrary, Weinstock explores an impressive range of objects—butchered bodies, masks, zombies, portraits, photographs, living dolls, found manuscripts, grimoires, portals, haunted houses and more—across an exceptionally diverse range of texts, from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to *The Babadook* (2014). In doing so, Weinstock admirably showcases the sheer glut of sinister 'things' that emerge from, indeed *constitute*, the Gothic—and it is a whirlwind of things, dizzying in their accretion. In fact, in the final analysis, '*any* object can function as a Gothic thing' (p. 44).

As democratic as this may be—in line with the flat ontologies proposed by the New Realisms—it does, however, pose a problem for a book of this kind, namely, that without well-defined selection criteria for how a 'thing' becomes a 'Gothic thing', the rationale for why the book analyses *these* particular texts and objects and not others becomes increasingly hazy. The book does note that it attends to objects that 'evoke negative affect' (p. 15), but after this promising start no further methodology emerges. Do different authors or different historical moments create object-affects in different ways? Are all Gothic things equally Gothic or, indeed, equally 'things'? Could one replace all of the texts and objects in the book with completely different ones without altering any of the book's larger claims? And, if so, would this in fact attest to the strength of the book's arguments? It is not clear. One wonders, too, where the myriad immaterial things in Gothic fiction fit into Weinstock's materialist schema—the spectral, phantom, shadowy things that are 'ominous' precisely because they break with the material order.

Nevertheless, the book's guiding thesis—that 'the Gothic [is] contemporary Thing Theory's shadowy doppelgänger' (p. 19)—is a powerful one, and Weinstock presents enough evidence to make it both compelling and persuasive. Surprisingly, however, the book does not situate this claim within any of the long-running debates concerning the entanglements between the Gothic and theory. As Nick Groom writes in *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (2012)—

a book cited on page one of *Gothic Things*—'much contemporary critical theory is effectively Gothic writing' (xiv). It is not simply that one could also argue that the Gothic is the 'shadowy doppelgänger' of, say, psychoanalysis or poststructuralism, but that these arguments have already been made so often and with such force that the 'gothic-theory conversation', as Jerrold E. Hogle (2019) terms it, is now an organising feature of the field. Still, if Weinstock does not mention this debate, he at least brings the argument firmly into the 21st Century.

A further tension at play in *Gothic Things* is the way in which the many theories it works with are blended together into what is referred to, at the close of the book, as the 'New Materialist/Speculative Realist/OOO discourse' (p. 172), to which the book also adds Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory and, very briefly, Bill Brown's Thing Theory. While it could be argued that these theories all fall under the aegis of the 'nonhuman turn'—and Weinstock does a good job of doing so—homogenizing them in this fashion papers over a non-trivial array of internecine conflicts, to say nothing of the conceptual, methodological, and philosophical differences between them. Brown, for example, positions his Thing Theory as an extension of historical materialism and is thus de facto at odds with Bennett's vibrant materialism.[3] Likewise, while OOO's scholarch, Graham Harman (2010), has referred to Bennett as a 'fellow traveller' in OOO, he has no truck at all with materialism, new or old, describing it, in no uncertain terms, as 'the hereditary enemy of any object-oriented philosophy' (p. 13).[4]

In a sense, however, such nuances and distinctions between the theories are of little interest to *Gothic Things*. It is, rather, the inherent Gothicisms of these theories—considered interchangeably—along with the ways in which Gothic texts have pre-empted their claims that preoccupy Weinstock, and not the distinct frameworks these theories offer for interpreting 'things'. The result is a book with sometimes contradictory impulses. On the one hand, *Gothic Things* is clear that it is not a work of 'thing theory', and 'does not defend the truth claims of New Materialism, OOO, and other variants of Thing Theory' (p. 16); on the other hand, many of the book's best readings draw on these theories for their interpretative force.

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[3] Indeed, one might quibble Weinstock's use of the term 'thing theory' throughout; as far as this reviewer is aware, none of the New Materialisms or Speculative Realisms have described their respective positions as 'thing theory'.
[4] For a discussion of Bennett as a 'fellow traveller', see Harman, G. (2018) *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Pelican, chapter 6.

Furthermore, in papering over the distinctions between these theories, Weinstock's third thesis—as outlined above—becomes distinctly less convincing. For while it may be true that the New Materialisms adopt an essentially hopeful, anti-Gothic outlook (though this could be contested),[5] Speculative Realism, by contrast, is well-known for its Gothic, weird, and nihilistic tendencies. This phenomenon has been commented on in articles by Fred Botting, Rebekah Sheldon, and myself, as well as in Mark Olivier's *Household Horror: Cinematic Fear and the Secret Life of Everyday Objects* (2020)—a book of immediate bearing on *Gothic Things*.[6] This is to say that, at times, *Gothic Things* seems disconnected from the existing literature on the topic. Indeed, despite mounting a bracing OOO-inflected reading of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Berenice' (1835), Weinstock does not engage with Harman's own essay on Poe—surely a missed opportunity.[7]

Still, despite the misgivings raised here, *Gothic Things* charts exciting territory for Gothic studies. As the first monograph in an emerging field, it establishes a well-stocked base camp for scholars in this area that will no doubt be returned to often in the course of future expeditions. Weinstock is a generous guide and writes with admirable clarity and dexterity, and the book is packed with readily quotable lines. Those looking for an entry-point into the world of Gothic things will find plenty to sink their teeth into, and as an introduction to the topic it will serve such readers well.

BIOGRAPHY

Henry Bartholomew is a Lecturer in Academic Skills at the Global Banking School. He has previously held lectureships at the University of Plymouth and Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, and has published variously on the Gothic, the weird, and Speculative Realism. He is

[5] See Sencindiver, S.Y. (2018) '"It's Alive!" New Materialism and Literary Horror' in *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature,* edited by K. Corstorphine & L.R. Kremmel. London: Palgrave, pp.483-497.
[6] Botting, F. (2012) 'More Things: Horror, Materialism and Speculative Weirdism', *Horror Studies,* 3:2, pp. 281-303, and 'Dark Materialism: Gothic Objects, Commodities and Things' (2019) in *The Gothic and Theory,* edited by J.E. Hogle and R. Miles. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp.240-259; Sheldon, R. (2016) 'Dark Correlationism: Mysticism, Magic, and the New Realisms', *Symploke,* 24, 1:2, pp.137-153; Bartholomew, H.G. (2019) 'Enstranged Strangers: OOO, the Uncanny, and the Gothic', *Open Philosophy*, 2:1, pp. 357-383.
[7] Harman, G. 'Poe's Black Cat', in *Romanticism and Speculative Realism,* edited by C. Washington and A. C. McCarthy. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 217-136.

the editor of three anthologies of supernatural fiction: *Dangerous Dimensions: Mind-bending Tales of the Mathematical Weird* (British Library, 2021), *The Unknown: Weird Writings by Algernon Blackwood, 1900-1937* (Handheld Press, 2023), and *The Living Stone: Stories of Uncanny Sculpture,* 1858-1943 (Handheld Press, 2023).

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Gothic Nature

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Andrew Michael Hurley, *Barrowbeck*
(London: John Murray Publishers, 2024)

Christelle Avery-Earl

Considerations of the ancestry of place have long been a feature of fiction, in equal measure fascinating and disturbing. What happens to a place when time passes? Does a place remain the same, even when humans and animals have altered both the anthropic and natural cultures that inhabit it? Andrew Michael Hurley's story-cycle, *Barrowbeck* (2024), uses the same-titled location as the fictional frame upon which to hang a series of ecoGothic stories about one place's haunted lineage, spanning two millennia.

Hurley has written two short story collections to date: *Cages and Other Stories* (2006) and *The Unusual Death of Julie Christie and Other Stories* (2008), as well as novels *The Loney* (2014), *Devil's Day* (2017), and *Starve Acre* (2019). *Barrowbeck* began life as a series of audio-tales written for Radio 4 entitled 'Voices in the Valley', and Hurley threads these stand-alone stories neatly together with an eerie ecoGothic rope.

In 'First Footing' Hurley introduces readers to the locale of Barrowbeck, where we encounter grief-stricken settlers fleeing a blood-soaked raid on their own village. Through the characters Magblas and Dewin, we learn that the search for a physical space of sanctuary is a necessity, but a contradiction of their own philosophical understandings of themselves as 'egg[s] being passed among the gods' (p. 10): the ideas of time, transcendence and fate occur throughout the book as a means of upsetting concrete notions of how horror occurs. At last Dewin expounds that 'All this would be theirs…', a claim of ownership that is counterbalanced by his awareness that, at the same time, they will be 'Servants… Though in what way he did not know' (p. 28). So begins a series of ecoGothic stories about exploiting, rather than *serving* the land: from ploughing 'obstinate clay' (p. 30), to harvesting 'cabbage' babies (p. 118) and quarrying the natural stone so neighbouring villages might be conquered and turned to civility (p. 156). It seems 'service' is gravely forgotten throughout the span of time, and the results of persistent disservice present as Gothic tropes that haunt each story: animals become 'demented' (p. 29), people are 'murdered' in

Fitch Wood (p. 66), quarry dust turns to ‘relentless grey sludge’ (p. 239), and finally a submerged Barrowbeck can only be accessed ‘by boat’ (p. 277); the great culmination of the cycle of inhabitation.

The idea of the ravages of time on place and person occurs throughout *Barrowbeck*. In ‘Natural Remedies—1938’, babies are harvested like cabbage patch dolls from the valley midwife’s greenhouse, birthed by peeling back the leaves of the plant and snapping ‘off the stalk growing into the navel’ (p. 121). These babies die young, their green eyes literally turning brown as a sign of approaching death. The land services the childless, but the cost is a shorter life—establishing a metaphor for the perils of overpopulation. In ‘Sisters—2002’, Hurley writes that ‘time was not unfolding moment by moment but existed as a whole and as such every event had already occurred’ (p. 185). The inevitability of doom implied by such remarks is borne out throughout the collection: the book is always working towards inevitable (and catastrophic) conclusions, as in ‘Covenant—2029’, when an eccentric man predicts the great flood that will submerge the valley by the end of the book. What adds to the menace of these stories is the familiarity Hurley throws at us: Barrowbeck could be any place. He offers little of the fantastical when describing the setting itself. Reading the stories is an uncanny experience, articulating a horrible mantra in the mind as we go forth: we are living in a deteriorating space and each snapshot Gothicises the journey to a foregone conclusion. For example, the character of Joyce in ‘Sisters—2002’ enjoys the hemmed in nature of the ‘decaying ferns’ (p. 186) and lack of sky, the ‘winters no doubt long and grim’ (p. 191). She submits to the reality of the environment outside, and joins the ‘sisters’ of the title curled up into a steaming, ‘tightly wound’ nest of straw (p. 207); hibernating for the winter. In order to stay in Barrowbeck out of choice, one must literally hide from its reality like an animal.

Barrowbeck follows a litany of such lonely or displaced characters as Joyce, who are ‘carried in on the wind’ (p. 185) or come to seek something from the fens, waterfalls, hills and rivers: sanctuary from violence, ‘respite’ from the hellish Other of the cities (p. 129). But its wild appeal is constantly questioned: ‘there was nothing worth coveting about the place at all’ (p. 130), ‘fells were as good as walls’, ‘Trapped in a state of shabbiness’ (p. 156). It is described as ‘a hard place to live. And a hard place to leave too’ (p. 224), a thoroughly Gothic tension of fear and

desire. There is a beautiful description in 'Covenant – 2029' where 'the bite the quarry has taken out of the fell was immeasurably ugly' (p. 239), as though humans have literally gorged on Barrowbeck's natural resources. Throughout there is a pervasive thread of *backwardness*, poverty, claustrophobia and overabundance. Barrowbeck, with fells so high they block the daylight, and floods of Biblical proportions, is extreme. The reader is at turns enchanted by the idea of the place, and simultaneously depressed.

By writing each story as a microcosm of a larger whole, we are reading one version of multiplicities of Barrowbeck. This point is made very effectively in the penultimate story, 'A Valediction' where two women of different generations—old guard Kay and newcomer Natalie—visit the 'flood-zone' (p. 272) of Barrowbeck; it is under water and, we are told, 'no one would ever *live* here again' (p. 288). Kay can remember the time before the 'Thirty-One Flood'—'the flood of floods' (p. 281)—when the place was inhabited, and Natalie is young enough only to have studied at University; a reminder of how time alters consumption. Hurley sums up the total of his works when he writes that Natalie will suffer 'death by drowning' (p. 288), the legacy of all that have come before her. For Natalie—the physical lens of the future generations—'History was when people behaved like children, demanding what they knew they should not have—two cars and new roads and flights to the sun—and now they sobbed over what they'd ruined because of it' (p. 289). Hurley seeks to devastate his readers by concluding his collection this way. The reader has been taken on an ecoGothic journey through time and been given a forbidding glimpse of what lies ahead, as we neglect to adequately service our planet. Indeed, at the heart of this story cycle might be said to be the tragic vision of futurity.

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Christelle Avery-Earl holds a Masters in English Literature from the Open University and is currently studying for a PhD in Creative Writing. Her PhD thesis is tentatively titled: '*Gold Rush*: A new framework for constructing character in the contemporary ecoGothic novel'.

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Reviews

FILM, TV, & GAME REVIEWS

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Decolonising the PetroGothic?: A Review of *The Black Demon*

(USA: Amazon Prime, 2023)

Carter Soles

I approached *The Black Demon* (2023) expecting it to be a work of petrohorror/petroGothic cinema, which shows its viewers the horrors of fossil fuel dependence, often via grotesque oil-as-blood imagery and monstrous depictions of oil-consuming/oil-producing machinery like motor vehicles (including boats) and oil rigs. *The Black Demon* takes place on an oil rig, is centrally about payback for extractive oil-drilling practices and involves corporate malfeasance by Big Oil (the fictional Nixon Petroleum) and its White male protagonist representative, Paul Sturges (Josh Lucas). It also features a monstrous petroleum avatar, but unlike, say *Duel* (1971), which deploys a tanker truck as its monster, or *Slash/Back* (2022), in which shapeshifting alien invaders are the oil monsters, *The Black Demon* uses a de-extinct megalodon shark as its central antagonist. Yet the film does not feature many conventional petrohorrific images; aside from two big explosions at the end—one when Paul blows up the shark and himself, followed by one when the entire oil rig explodes and falls into the sea—there are few directly oil-related deaths. This might be the film's strength, however.

Like *The Last Winter* (2005), frankly a more cohesive and compelling film than this one, *The Black Demon* interweaves local superstition and Mexican folklore—that is, folk horror—into its animal horror aspects and rundown oil rig setting. This setting is perhaps the best element of *The Black Demon*: the oil rig *El Diamante* is old, rusted, and spooky, a ruin waiting to be decommissioned and a superb PetroGothic locale. For while the film and its shark-dominated poster suggest that it will draw heavily upon animal-attack film tropes, the shark's attacks on the rig are mostly heard, not seen, and the oil company's misdeeds are mainly unveiled to emphasise Paul's negligence—he falsified reports that kept regulators away from the unsafe rig—thereby setting him up as the morally appropriate sacrifice at the film's climax. That is, the film is more interested in the human drama that unfolds aboard the rig than it is in its megalodon or its (sparing and somewhat unfocused) oil-as-blood imagery. Ultimately, the film's denouement all comes back to the sacrifice demanded by the Aztec god Tlaloc, as the film's second lead, Mexican oil rig

worker Chato (Julio Cesar Cedillo), repeatedly tells Paul and his family. What *The Black Demon* lacks in straight-ahead visual linkages between the megalodon and the extractive practices taking place on the oil rig, it makes up for in its sustained engagement with folk horror motifs: centring the point of view and plight of the Mexican locals whose livelihoods have been ruined by Nixon Petroleum's unsustainable actions. The film uses its splitting of the difference between folk horror and the petroGothic to accomplish its greatest achievement: recruiting folk-horror elements to de-centre the White, male perspective common to much petroGothic and petrohorror cinema, offering instead a spiritual solution seen through the eyes of a Mexican oil rig worker and a Mexican-American boy.

Despite a few onscreen shark attacks, the megalodon is talked about more than it is seen; the shark appears whenever the sacrifice-for-Tlaloc plot needs it to be there. Dawn Keetley (2023) (writing for *Horror Homeroom*) correctly identifies the narrative that unfolds aboard the *El Diamante* as 'a *folk-horror narrative* as much as straight horror, action, or disaster'. In her penetrating analysis of the film, Keetley argues that 'the interest emerges from the way in which the shark is framed' within that folk-horror narrative, i.e., as a supernatural demon in the service of Tlaloc. I agree. The status of the megalodon as simply a 'demon—framed within the folkloric traditions of the local villagers' somewhat contrasts with, or at least complicates, the usual thrust of megalodon-centered narratives which, according to Jennifer Schell (2022), exhibit strong 'reactionary capacities' and tend to reinforce masculinist, imperialist tropes of mastery over nature and its nonhuman denizens as White men defeat such prehistoric sharks (p. 65).

The Black Demon places so much emphasis on its folk horror elements that the animal horror and petroGothic elements get a little lost. For while the Mexican characters constantly rant against extraction economics and U.S. petro-colonialism in general, the connection between the shark and the oil is left *visually* unclear. The film's best petroGothic move is to use oil, found abundantly in the seawater surrounding the rig, as a stand-in for blood, as in the 'blood on your hands' variety. For example, Paul's daughter Audrey (Venus Ariel) gets her hand coated in oil when she dips her hand in the water, and Paul's wife Ines' (Fernanda Urrejola) face is oil-splattered when she accuses Paul of the corporate malfeasance of which he is in fact guilty. But the megalodon, the Black Demon itself, could be more strongly visually associated with that 'oil in

the water' motif—it could, at least, be black, more of an oil-creature, perhaps a literal black demon. I do not care if the creature is scientifically or rationally explained; I salute the film for sticking to the locals' interpretation of the creature as a malevolent nature spirit, yet even as a supernatural creature it could appear more oil-like or at least oil-coated, taking advantage of the creature's supposed supernaturalness to keep its connection to petroleum extraction more persistently in the visual frame. This would bring the Black Demon into line with other well-known petro-monsters such as the deadly tanker truck in *Duel* (1971), which drips oil after it is 'killed' at the film's end, or Hexxus, the giant personified oil monster that attacks the forest in *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992). Even the recent *Slash/Back* (2022) uses the blood-as-oil trope more cleverly, making the black substance emitted by the aliens sticky and difficult to remove—and attractive to the alien monsters themselves, thereby putting those stained with it in danger of being found and attacked. That said, perhaps the more diffuse representation of oil in *The Black Demon* better expresses the subtlety of petroculture, the 'oil goggles' that make it hard to see what is right in front of us (Scott, 2018: p. 178).

The film's commitment to the locals' point of view is admirable and fresh—not because we have never before seen local informants acting as harbingers of a White protagonist's fate, but because of the sheer amount of screen time and dialogue given over to their articulating the (film's version of the) Tlaloc myth. In real life, Tlaloc remains an important deity and cultural figure in Mexican culture, though he is associated with water, rain, and fertility more so than with the 'revenge for the exploitation of nature' motif attached to him here. Early on, the film bears at least some similarity to other Mexican-set eco-thrillers like *The Shallows* (2016) in its depiction of Mexicans, particularly the gang on the beach who harass and chase Paul's wife and kids to the dock.[1] However, once Paul and his family board *El Diamante*, Chato and his coworkers are given substantial, complex, even heroic roles. And even El Rey (Raúl Méndez), a local villager who initially seems sinister and hostile toward the family onshore, smiles at the family when he picks them up via rescue boat in the film's denouement.

[1] See my chapter in *Fear and Nature* (2021), 'Naturalizing White Supremacy in *The Shallows*'.

Despite taking the villagers' side, *The Black Demon* affords little sympathy for its titular giant shark; like every human protagonist in every shark attack movie, *Demon*'s Paul destroys the shark, and even his son Tommy (Carlos Solórzano), who starts believing in Tlaloc, agrees that this megashark has got to go. The film encourages respect for the cultural concept of shark-as-avenging-nature-god but has no regard for the living animal that is Tlaloc's fleshly (cartilaginous?) avatar. As Schell argues in her analysis of the *The Meg* novels (1997-), the megalodon must be portrayed as irredeemably monstrous so to make the white, male, human protagonist's 'extreme violence' against it 'seem both necessary and heroic' (p. 75). Yet unlike in *The Meg* novels, Paul does not survive the violence he uses to bring down the shark; he perishes with it, satisfying Tlaloc's need for a human sacrifice. This is the film's most important innovation.

In sum, though visually weak, the film's connection of the folkloric demon-shark with oil is fascinating. Oil is a hallmark of the damage humans have done during the Anthropocene and perhaps could be seen as metonymic for the worst human attributes: greed, pollution, capitalism, colonialism, etc. As such, insofar as the megalodon is connected to the oil—and surely it is there to destroy that oil rig and force Paul (the White oil company man) to sacrifice himself—then it becomes a monster of our own making, a hybrid of nature spirit and human settler colonialism. Indeed, the shark-demon's seeming focus on avenging itself upon Paul and his family specifically supports this interpretation: that it is White, settler-colonial extractors who must beware the wrath of this Mexican demon. It is noteworthy that Paul's mixed-race son is our main point-of-view figure at the film's end—he makes peace with Tlaloc and the necessity of his own father having been sacrificed to make things right.

BIOGRAPHY

Carter Soles is Associate Professor of Film Studies in the English Department at SUNY Brockport. He has written on the cannibalistic hillbilly in 1970s 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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Mark Mylod, *The Menu*

(Savannah: Fox Searchlight, 2022)

Andrew McMurry

One of humans' primal fears—maybe the chief one—is ending up in someone else's stomach. We spent a good part of our evolutionary history singularly focused on avoiding that fate. In fact, some of our best features—bipedalism, binocular vision—probably emerged as selective advantages that made us harder to catch. It should not come as a surprise, then, that there has been a lot of filmic horror designed to remind audiences of some of the ways they would prefer not to be eaten: chewed by shark (*Jaws,* 1975), swallowed by snake (*Anaconda*, 1997), ground into sausage (*Motel Hell*, 1980), served up with fava beans and a nice chianti (*The Silence of the Lambs*, 1991), carved into rump roast (*Fresh*, 2022), grubbed on by zombies (*Night of the Living Dead*, 1968)—you get the picture. Our profound aversion to becoming dinner has a name: vorarephobia.

Mark Mylod's *The Menu* (2022) departs from that predictable plot driver. This ecoGothic film features no scenes of predation, cannibalism, or folks turned into exotic dishes (if you don't count the human s'mores that are lit up in *The Menu's* fiery *denouement*). Instead, the gastro-horror inheres in the perverse relationship between privileged eaters and those bound to serve them. The deep-pocketed diners in this film are not flesh-eating ghouls, but they are insatiable, and, of course, they are also metaphors. As the sensitive but sanguinary head chef Julian Slowik (Ralph Fiennes) puts it to his exclusive customers, 'over the next few hours you will ingest fat, salt, sugar, protein, bacteria, fungi, various plants and animals, and, at times, entire ecosystems'. It sounds like we are dealing with a certain class of humans all right: the gluttonous ruling one that is currently grabbing up and gobbling *everything* as they sit in their highchairs atop the planet.

It is a promising premise. But what is somewhat disappointing about this fine horror film is that its eco-chops, so to speak, are not earned in the film's diegesis itself, for *The Menu* only tangentially touches on our current ecological moment. Climate change does not come up; ecological collapse is not a thing. Overconsumption is an appetiser, to be sure, but the film's main course is not our anthropocentrism but our figurative anthropophagy. In other words, 'man's inhumanity to man' is, as usual, what's for dinner.

The film begins with Slowik's patrons heading off by boat to Hawthorn (the name of the island and Slowik's restaurant upon it). The outdoor shooting locations in Savannah and nearby Tybee Island help establish the understated Southern Gothic mood. This mood is further augmented by a cast of suitably decadent, morally-stained characters: a celebrity food critic and her toady; a has-been movie star and his personal assistant; three assholish finance guys; a bored-looking Boomer couple; and a food-nerd, Tyler, with his paid escort Margot (Nicholas Hoult and Anya Taylor-Joy, terrific English actors who unlike Fiennes sustain throughout impeccable American accents). They are met by host Elsa (played with chilling warmth by Hong Chau), who takes them on a preprandial tour of the island's remnant wild bits. These scenes consist of by-now compulsory drone shots, tangles of grey driftwood, scurrying crabs, a mussel burrowing into the sand. So much for nature in the raw; it is on to the pastoral: beehives, vegetable gardens, meat smokehouse, and Chef Slowik's off-limits cottage, a steep-roofed Carpenter Gothic moldering in the forest like a rustic charnel house (which it will become before the film ends). Despite Elsa's heavy locavore ethos, these visitors don't really give a damn how the sausage gets made: 'I do like the sense of it being a sort of biome of culinary ideas', says the food critic. 'Right', says her sycophant, 'it functions as an epicurean salon'. 'No I like biome better I think'.

The restaurant itself is a postmodern chateau with a panoramic ocean view on one side and a view into the kitchen on the other. It is a fantastic, minimalist set that establishes where everyone is seated, where the (locked) exits are, and where the malevolence will be coming from. Immediately one feels a sense of entrapment and spatial dread: murder has entered the building and there is no way out. Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1842) is a conspicuous intertext. The well-choreographed frights unfold slowly and inexorably. The direction here is flawless, not one false move. When the food courses start arriving, so do carefully planned violent side dishes: a shooting, a finger chopping, a hanging, a couple of stabbings, and a drowning. Dessert is of course the aforementioned Grand Guignol.

Thematically, it is not *ecocidal madness* but *gastronomic excess* that is under scrutiny in *The Menu*, i.e., profligacy and pretension on both sides of the kitchen door. While the odious diners exemplify a range of offences that earn them their destruction, according to Slowik he and his murderous crew have also committed a mortal sin: they believed cookery was an art worth dying

for. It wasn't—though they do. Expiation of this sin will be accomplished via culinary-themed ritual suicides. Slowik asks Jeremy, a disillusioned sous-chef, 'Do you like this life? This life that you dreamed about?' 'No, chef'. What follows is the evening's fourth course: Jeremy's 'The Mess', which opens with Jeremy putting a gun in his mouth and splattering his brains everywhere followed by pressure-cooked vegetables, roasted fillet, potato confit, beef jus and bone marrow.

We are meant to understand *The Menu* as an allegory of class warfare. Well, maybe not an allegory—I mean, the warfare is right there on the screen. Like *Triangle of Sadness* (2022), the film shows us the excesses of the rich followed by their executions. That part is quite cathartic. And, as with another film that treads some of the same territory, *The Square* (2017), *The Menu* wants to remind us that, sadly, integrity in art cannot withstand the vulgarity of the marketplace. However, the governing binaries do not work quite as intended. The 'eat the rich' moment never properly arrives, and there are no winners in this class struggle: it's not revolution but total annihilation. That is because the cult leader, Slowik, cannot stand as the embodiment of proletarian ressentiment. Though he came from nothing and still thinks of himself as a member of the underclass, he is clearly not. He has risen well beyond his station. He has actually seized the brass ring, made good on the promise of upward mobility. He is living his dream. The revenge in *The Menu* may be delivered cold, but it is not the revenge of the masses. To get a sense of Slowik's false self-conception, imagine Gordon Ramsay, doyen of food porn, in a paroxysm of class rage finally blowing the gasket that is always threatening to blow, and setting fire to himself and the Master Chef set, along with his producers, contestants, audience members. It is hard to imagine, isn't it? Slowik, like Ramsay, sold out long ago, so it is a stretch to believe a working-class consciousness is authoring this gruesome menu.

No, it is plain old pridefulness that has been eating away at him. The 1% have never appreciated his genius. Slowik petulantly asks a repeat customer if he can remember a single dish he had eaten in his eleven previous meals at Hawthorn. The old codger finally ventures, 'cod?' Slowik replies, 'it wasn't cod, you donkey. It was halibut. Rare, fucking spotted halibut'. 'What does it matter?' asks his wife. Slowik says,

> 'It matters to the halibut, Mrs. Leibrandt, and to the artist whose work turns to shit inside your gut. I've allowed my work to reach the price point where only the class of people inside this room can access it. And I've been fooled into trying to satisfy people who could never be satisfied […]. But that's our culture, isn't it? And my restaurant is part of the problem'.

That rare, fucking spotted halibut reveals to us what we should *not* mistake *The Menu* as an allegory of: the ecologically destructive eating habits of humans and the horrific consequences of their industrial food systems. Though the film glances in that direction, it never quite comes together as that kind of film. 'But that's our culture, isn't it?': in *The Menu* 'our culture' refers to the echo chamber of *human* voices demanding we attend to *human* vanities. The self-immolating chef and his underlings do not, to paraphrase Henry David Thoreau (1862), speak a word for nature, not even in Slowik's moving biocentric meditation (which literally brings tears to one diner's eyes):

> 'The island and the nutrients it provides exist in their most perfect state without us gathering them, or manipulating them, or digesting them. What happens inside this room is meaningless, compared to what happens outside in nature, in the soil, in the water, in the air. We are but a frightened nanosecond. Nature is timeless'.

The scattered paeons to rare fishes, biomes, ecosystems, or the impermanence of humankind are simply part of the argot of Hawthorn, scripted platitudes Slowik serves to the gourmands along with their meals. They speak to the 'price point' of this 'epicurean salon'; they are the secret semiotic sauce that Slowik dishes to pretentious clients. *The Menu* is a critique of anthropocentrism only to the extent that it inadvertently traces out the basic plot line of the ongoing human creep-show, in which ravenous humans ingest the whole planet—externalising nature, if you will, by gluttonously internalising it, then shitting it out.

The sole survivor, call girl Margot, escapes the final bloodbath by persuading Slowik to make her a cheeseburger to go. She correctly surmises her request will put him in mind of his roots as a fast-food burger slinger, that springtime of his life when providing customers with food that

merely nourished and satisfied was reward enough. In the last scene, with Margot now safely on the boat while everyone else explodes into the night, the unintended message of the film is underlined. As she hungrily tucks into Slowik's homage to better days—a double-decker stack of ground beef gooey with melted American cheese—the little stabs of self-disgust you have felt when watching this film crystallise into something like a moral: we're all of us devourers of the world, and even the simplest fare comes at enormous cost. Of all the courses served on this island of the damned, it is Margot's salvational cheeseburger that perfectly epitomises the paradox of our unsustainable foodways. If we believe the humble cheeseburger has any part in saving the planet, we are almost certainly doomed.

BIOGRAPHY

Andrew McMurry is a Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Waterloo. He has published widely on ecocriticism and environmental communication. His books are *Environmental Renaissance: Emerson, Thoreau and the System of Nature* (2003) and *Entertaining Futility: Despair and Hope in the Time of Climate Change* (2018).

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(Spiders: Focus Entertainment, 2019)

Rachael Robertson

Spiders' action role-play adventure *GreedFall* (2019) is a game at odds with itself. Stepping into the jaunty boots and tri-cornered hat of De Sardet, an aristocrat, diplomat and newly minted Legate, the player must travel to a 'newly discovered' island, Teer Fradee. The Gothic natural spaces of this island are relentlessly haunted by the imprisoning structures of colonialism. Here, the wilderness is at once exploratory playground for the colonisers, and contested site of rebellion for the native islanders. Sharply delineated 'others' who can exist in that uncertain liminality between human and *not-human*, the islanders share connections with the land and the *nadaig* creatures they bond with, sometimes becoming part of them. However, as much as the game attempts a critique of the colonial system, as much as the player is nudged to refute the expectations of settlement—and even, potentially, attempt dismantling it—this critique does not quite stick its own landing. Instead, the writing's ambition is undermined in particular by a reliance on the simplistic archetypes trotted out for the islanders, by an uncertainty around the way the game uses its ecoGothic monsters, and by a lack of engagement with its own hybrid subject player character.

Once on Teer Fradee's soil, the game quickly slips from slightly piratical period adventure into the Gothic. Away from the knowable politicking of settlements and the governor's palace, De Sardet must venture into the wilds, rocky coasts and deep, dark forests that are replete with secrets and potentiality. Visually, the game gives over a great deal of space and design thought into monstrous ecoGothic figures. Here, the *nadaig* are creatures that are part flesh and part plant, vines and bone in the same creature, monsters to the colonisers and bonded allies to the colonised. Occupying a similarly uncanny, temporally unstable space at the heart of the island is *en on mil frichtimen*, a sort of conglomerate of the island's memory, a mostly living tree with a thousand faces, slipping through time. This is an entity that sits alongside the notion of the forest-as-other, the forest—or, perhaps, thing of the forest that is *also* the forest—as antecedent to 'the human world' (Parker, 2018: p. 278).

In many ways, the game *wants* to be a postcolonial Gothic text. It wants, to borrow Sarah Ilott's (2019) framing, to take hold of the trappings of imperial Gothic and reconfigure them, instead 'centralising those who were once marginalised and made monstrous' (p. 20). Again and again, the game accentuates the ravaging impact of colonisation and holds to account the devastating potential of enforced conversion by the Inquisitors. Undeniably, the 'good' ending the player may pursue involves severing Prince Constantin's stolen connection with *en on mil frichtamen* and returning the majority of the island to its people. The *malichor* is the poison sprung from the well of past violent cultural eradication, a response from the violated land itself in a most Gothic form of curse. The bluntly on-the-nose title, even, calls to mind the economic emphasis underlining much colonial expansion. Furthermore, as the player undertakes quests and uncovers secrets, the binary between coloniser and colonised is troubled when the player discovers that De Sardet is in fact an orphan of the island.

Frustratingly however, the game's writing falls short. Most strikingly, the islanders lack nuance; they are tokenistic in too many ways, often acting as cyphers of simple 'kinship with nature' representation. Reflecting a hodge-podge of influences, their design draws on motifs that seem Icelandic and Native American, among others—they are indistinct enough that they become flatly neutral compared to the other factions of the game's thinly reclothed eighteenth century. Similarly, the depiction of the islander-*nadaig* bond is incorporated unevenly. The *nadaig* are the retaliatory response of the island in answer to the imperial consumption of the island's resources and allow the islanders to inhabit the liminal space between human and plant/animal/other when bonded. Although, this remains frustratingly unexplored beyond a general sense of ecological mysticism; these bonded islanders are depicted as caught in metamorphosis, poised between the forest and the human, often sprouting branches from their heads. The *nadaig* act as perfectly serviceable game monsters, but their reduction to *only* combat fodder, save for the occasional cutscene that allows the characters to interact with one or more of them more specifically, erodes their apparent importance to the game's attempt at a postcolonial narrative.

Moreover, where a more considered approach may have invited moments for De Sardet to step back, to offer support but not take away voice, the plot frequently falls prey to a more simplistic mode. De Sardet is our hero, and the player's avatar, and therefore, they must always

remain in the spotlight. *They* must call for the new king, *they* must work their way through the islanders' rituals of pilgrimage, and perhaps crucially, they are *not* offered much in the way of learning about their heritage, and nor is this revelation given breathing room amid the vast swathes of dialogue that comprise the game. Indeed, with De Sardet a diplomat first and foremost, the game frequently prioritises conversation over action. In this sense, the writing side-steps any thorough discussion of De Sardet as a hybrid subject, and however much they are unknowing, dislocated, and at odds with the 'colonial apparatus' (Mukherjee 2017: p. 54), they are also part of it. Their own connection, concomitantly, to the tree entity *en on mil frichtimen* is also bewilderingly undercooked, particularly in the frantic final acts of the game, where it all clumsily falls victim to the ludo-narrative dissonance. As a sentient tree (of sorts), and revealed as both monstrous and holy, *en on mil frichtimen* is the Gothic being that haunts the narrative. It is temporally indistinct, and cannot be comfortably categorised, and is disappointingly abandoned for the abruptly generic ending that is instead handed to the player.

BIOGRAPHY

Rachael Robertson lectures and tutors in literature at the Melbourne campus of the Australian Catholic University, as well as teaching at Trinity College, the University of Melbourne. While the Gothic has always been a perennial favourite, her current research interests include digital humanities and game writing.

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Gothic Nature

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Valdimar Jóhannsson, *Lamb*

(Reykjavík, Iceland: A24, 2021)

Raul Martin IV

Valdimar Jóhannsson's *Lamb* (2021) follows two Icelandic sheep farmers, Maria (Noomi Rapace) and Ingvar (Hilmir Snær Guðnason), who adopt an amalgamated offspring, born with a sheep's head and a human body. Maria and Ingvar name the being Ada (voiced by Lára Björk Hall). The couple finds comfort in taking Ada as their own. Within their secluded cottage home, the scenario seems amicable among the newly formed family until Ada's biological parents—a female sheep and a human father with a sheep's head—intervene. Although Ada's father maintains an off-screen presence for most of the film, his violent actions onscreen characterise the natural forces outside of human control. A facile viewing may conclude that Ada's adoption symbolises a gesture to domesticate nature. However, the film's violent plot complicates such a superficial viewing and overlooks the deeper problem of human aggressors taking from an already wounded nature. The Icelandic couple's ideals and the violent return to nature dramatise Ada's blended identity between human and non. Landscape transitions, still shots of nature, contrast Ada's free-movement and interject her blended identity with nature's permanent indifference. When viewed through an ecoGothic lens, *Lamb*'s use of landscape transitions, fragmentation, and violence demonstrates a common through-line for both the animal and human where the natural world continually recedes from the human, indicating both nature's callousness toward human endeavour as well as our irreparable separation from the more-than-human.

Landscape transitions are scenes in which the viewer faces nature at a scale that dwarves Ada and combats the division between human and non as well as presenting brief elegies to the cycle of violence between natural forces and human desires. The film opens and closes with a white, snowy haze—a visual mentioned in the introduction of Andrew Smith and William Hughes' edited collection, *Ecogothic* (2013). The blanket of snow demonstrates a 'crisis of representation' and an 'ecological dead zone' where 'nature fails to signify as anything other than a type of blankness' (Smith and Hughes, 2013: p. 2). Smith and Hughes' 'crisis of representation' reinforces an interpretation of landscapes in *Lamb* as elegies because such interpretations render nature indifferent in covering-up the consequences of human ideals but still offer lament through its

depiction of an unresponsive beauty. Smith and Hughes (2014) add to this line of thinking when they argue ‘nature becomes an emerging force—or, even more monstrous, an alien entity utterly indifferent to the fate of humanity’ (p. 11). With a blank canvas created by the whiteness of snow and haze, the drama unfolds and evokes the Gothic, setting the viewer inside an ‘ecological dead zone’. Since the film centres on Maria and Ingvar’s struggle to keep Ada, these landscape transitions remind the viewer of nature’s inability to care for the human drama unfolding. Moreover, Ingvar and Maria relation to the silent landscape elegies go uncaptioned, reduced to terminable transitions woven into the human drama.

Lamb depicts a nature that continually recedes from the human while also reinforcing the idea that these divisions do not exist in nature. To start, Ada proves that the division between human and non-human exists only for the human mind when she escapes from her adopted parents’ human environment. With Ada’s escape, a need to flee the couple’s imposed division between human and non becomes clear and indicates failure to gain mastery over nature. In contrast to the motionless landscape elegies offered to the viewer, Ada retreats to the outside where she may define her blended identity. Since Ingvar and Maria prioritise checking the home and barn first, it is simple to conclude they believe Ada belongs inside. To extend their belief a bit further, perhaps they want Ada to see the division as they do. Ada’s escape scene confirms the implications of one such relation to the natural world. As the silent landscapes ignore human divisions, Ada’s biological mother—sheep #3115—tugs at Ada’s flayed and fragmented upbringing, calling her back, away from the human divisions that confine her.

The Icelandic couple imposes a distinctively gothic fragmentation onto Ada—that is, a coming apart or lack of being whole—because they deny the nonhuman aspects of her being, and prevent Ada from owning her own blended identity. First, Ada’s mother, Sheep #3115, bleats outside Ada’s window after Maria and Ingvar take her from the barn house. Sheep #3115’s verbal grief may sadden the viewer but for Maria and Ingvar, each utterance annoys and haunts them. Eventually, Ada’s mother torments Maria’s dreams. Ada is never given a chance to respond to her mother’s call in-kind because Maria shoots Sheep #3115. The human couple blatantly refuse Ada’s maternal connection to the nonhuman. Maria responds to grief with violence. A second example to herding Ada away from her connection to nonhuman tendencies is when Pétur (Björn Hlynur

Haraldsson), Ingvar's brother, feeds Ada grass picked from the side of the barn house. Ingvar sees this and forcefully pulls Ada away. These two events suggest Maria and Ingvar deny Ada is blended—they do all they can to silence her nonhuman side because doing so satisfies their ideal of wholeness and happiness. To this end, the Icelandic couple give Ada, and the more-than-human world, reason to turn away.

It is simple to connect the unsettling repetition of Sheep #3115's cries and Ada's nonhuman tendencies to ecoGothic tenets like fragmentation and a receding nature; however, the film's violence reinforces the ecoGothic theme. When Maria takes matters into her own hands after one of her dream sequences, the blank canvas is painted red with violence. This scene foreshadows the natural world's response when Ada's father, also an assemblage of human and lamb, shoots Ingvar with the same rifle. When Ada witnesses her father shoot Ingvar, she actually earns freedom from her human captors. The ecoGothic scholar may see this doubled violence as an embittered equilibrium across the human-animal divide, but Ada's freedom paired with Nature's ablomb agency illustrates justice. Such doubling adds yet another layer to the film's ecoGothic theme because it suggests that nature, as agent, closes the loop and isolates Maria from the natural world, receding back in the white haze that set the drama in motion.

Much in the same way seminal folk tales use metaphors to deconstruct and discuss concerns of their time, *Lamb* upholds recent environmental concerns through a dialectic on how we treat the more than human world. When *Lamb* opens with an on-screen blizzard and group of horses, the viewer must re-consider their gaze as the subjects in focus turn away. The blankness and 'crisis of representation' call humanity's tendency towards gaining mastery over nature into question. Maria is permanently severed from Ingvar and Ada because the violence she put out was reciprocated. The snowstorm in the final scene abandons viewers too. Such images—nature retreating from the human gaze—repeat throughout the film: the first being the horses, the second when Maria takes Ada into their home away from her birth mother, and when the family dog dies off-screen. In the final scenes, Ada retreats holding her father's hand passed the viewer and Maria's gaze. *Lamb* portrays the ecoGothic by placing natural forces level to human desires, depicting nature's justice on-screen, and telling the tale through Ada's perspective. Illustrating the natural

world continually receding from the human, the film ultimately unveils nature's callousness toward human endeavour, as well as our irreparable separation from the more-than-human.

BIOGRAPHY

Raul Martin IV is a first-year PhD student at the University of Miami. His area of particular interest is the representation of nonhuman animals in contemporary literature and media. Martin presented a paper at Congress 2023 in Toronto, Ontario, titled 'The (Un)natural Animal Mirror in Jeff VanderMeer's Annihilation'. He is currently working on a chapter for a major publisher that extends the animal mirror theme to VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy.

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Gothic Nature

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Hanna Bergholm, *Hatching*

(Finland: Silva Mysterium Oy, 2022)

Christy Tidwell

Hybrid creatures are a recurring element of ecohorror, one form of ecohorror's drive to not only represent environmental harms but to 'blur human/non-human distinctions more broadly' (Rust & Soles, 2014: pp. 509-510). This type of ecohorror, as I have argued elsewhere, asks the audience to 'imagine what might happen if we were not to insist so vehemently upon such divisions' (Tidwell, 2018: p. 117). What might happen without this insistence upon such divisions varies, however, and ecohorror or ecoGothic narratives tend to point in two opposing directions. In some instances, bringing together the human and nonhuman is straightforwardly frightening—even disgusting—as in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986). The transformation of Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) to Brundlefly over the course of the movie is nothing less than horrifying, not only in Brundle's loss of humanity and eventual death but also in the stomach-churning details of his fingernails coming off, his hair loss, his oozing skin, etc. In others, however, human-nonhuman hybridity is more hopeful, as in *Sweet Tooth* (2021), which M. E. Boothby (2023) in another issue of *Gothic Nature* reads as a narrative of 'hopeful apocalypse' (p. 226). Instead of representing only loss and aversion, Boothby argues, the hybrid children of *Sweet Tooth* represent 'collaborative ecological practice' (p. 227) and 'a more-than-human humanity', pointing to a future marked by possibility rather than destruction (p. 228).

Hanna Bergholm's film *Hatching* (2022) is a fascinating contribution to this conversation about hybridity within ecohorror. It combines an emphasis on fear and disgust with the possibility of a more positive connection, leaving the viewer with some uncertainty about how to respond to its hybrid human-nonhuman creature.

Hatching is a story of a girl, 12-year-old Tinja (Siiri Solalinna), and an egg; it is a story about mothers and daughters; it is a story about our response to Otherness. As the film begins, Tinja's life is shaped by her mother's desire for the appearance of perfection. Her mother (Sophia Heikkilä), a lifestyle vlogger who posts videos about their perfect family life, demands perfection in a variety of ways. Their home is spotless, decorated in light colours and glass; her family is

expected to behave—on camera—in ways that show they are happy and harmonious; and she pushes Tinja to not only compete as a gymnast but to practice so long and hard that she injures herself. This performance of perfection is of course shallow, represented not only by Tinja's mother's willingness to see Tinja hurt but also by the fact that she is having an affair with another man and conspiring with Tinja to keep it secret (a betrayal both of her marriage and of her responsibility to be a parent to her daughter).

Crucially, when this performance of perfection is interrupted, Tinja's mother reacts violently. While filming at home, just after the telling comment 'I hope your everyday life is as lovely as ours', a bird crashes into their window, enters the house, and breaks many of the glass pieces on display. Tinja captures the bird and cradles it, but her mother asks her to bring it to her and then breaks its neck, to Tinja's visible horror. This dark intruder into their perfect, light home must be punished, it seems, and this scene connects *Hatching* to a larger tradition of maternal horror in which 'maternal power is figured as violent, destructive, and detrimental to the child' (Arnold, 2013: p. 11). Tinja's mother harms the bird directly, suggesting, as Erin Harrington (2018) argues many horror films do, 'that there is something utterly and inescapably horrific about the psychological, emotional and cultural demands of motherhood that compels women in these narratives towards monstrosity and acts of evil' (p. 184). She also hurts Tinja, taking something away from her and showing her—yet again—that surface-level perfection matters more than feelings.

Up to this point, the movie is a straightforward narrative of maternal failure, no hybridity in sight. But the death of the bird points to a conflict between Tinja and her mother about how to respond to other creatures, a conflict that opens the door to something other-than-human. After the bird's death, Tinja follows the sound of cawing into the forest later and finds an egg, which she takes home to care for, even whispering promises to it and sleeping with it. Ultimately, the egg grows large and, following an emotional conversation with her mother, Tinja hugs it while crying, at which point it absorbs her tears and begins to crack, hatching a monstrous creature that makes a dinosaur-like noise and then jumps out of the window. The comfort of the static egg is now replaced by the threat of something large and active.

At this point, the film takes a turn toward a fear- and disgust- based animal horror narrative, especially given the bird-creature's appearance. Upon hatching, it is a dark, oily, screeching, human-sized bird-monster, taking some elements of real hatchlings and enlarging them—as animal horror films often do with their creatures. *Hatching* takes the avian horror of *The Birds* (1963) and channels it into one overgrown creature. There are no scenes here of flocks of birds gathering, watching, attacking; rather than developing a Hitchcockian sense of dread or terror, this film gets straight to what is non-mammalian and Other about birds. Tinja and the bird-creature's initial interactions involve fear, injury, and vomiting, and the creature is genuinely disgusting at times. This is done intentionally. Bergholm has talked about seeking out 'the best animatronic designer in the world' so that it could be done with practical, visceral effects instead of CGI. She says, 'I didn't want my creature to be too smooth. I wanted to have some roughness and ugliness'. This was effective enough that apparently Siiri Solalinna (playing Tinja) was actively disgusted by it. Bergholm says, 'At first, she said it was very disgusting, the puppet. And its slime dripping on her face, I think that just kept on being disgusting always for her, even though it was the kind of slime you can actually eat' (Robinson, 2022: n.p.).

Despite the fear and disgust associated with the bird-creature, however, Tinja grows to love it—her. Tinja gives the creature a name, Alli, and takes care of her in the ways that a mother would care for a young child. She bathes her, and during the bath Alli makes happy sounds and bubbles in the water; she clothes her, sharing her own wardrobe so that Alli looks less monstrous and more human, more like Tinja; and she sleeps alongside her. These acts of care connect Tinja and Alli, and their closeness is reflected in Alli's changing appearance. She grows blond hairs, like Tinja's, her shape becomes more girl-like than bird-like, and she eventually looks so much like Tinja that others can not immediately distinguish between them. Late in the film, harm to one affects the other physically, too, further literalising their emotional connection.

The strength of their connection is a rejection of hybridity as merely horrific. Alli is embraced, defended as Tinja's family. In a climactic scene, when Alli is under threat, Tinja steps in to defend her, exclaiming, 'I hatched it'. This is a meaningful claim of connection and obligation to Alli, and Tinja's defence of her hatchling presents a striking contrast to her own mother's failure

to protect her. At the same time, Alli is not easily adopted or embraced—she remains dangerous. The question is, however, who is she a danger to? Tinja? Or those who threaten Tinja?

Alli posits a third, more complicated response to hybridity within ecohorror, and the tension in *Hatchling* between fear and disgust at her hybridity and moments of connection between human and nonhuman makes this movie particularly interesting. The human-nonhuman hybrid of ecohorror is, in this movie, neither a monster to be rejected in order to embrace and defend our distinct humanity nor a portent of a brighter posthuman future. As we see, Tinja's mother is in the wrong for attacking Alli and rejecting her difference, but Alli is simultaneously not without risk. Instead, the human-nonhuman hybridity she represents is an acknowledgment of the strong ties we might feel to beings other than ourselves and a reminder of the dangers inherent both in embracing that otherness and in embracing sameness.

BIOGRAPHY

Christy Tidwell, professor of English at South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, has published in *ISLE*, *Extrapolation*, and multiple edited collections. She co-edited *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* (2019), *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene* (2021), and a *Science Fiction Film & Television* issue (2021) on creature features and environment.

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Mark Jenkin, *Enys Men*[1]

(Cornwall: Film 4, 2023)

Kern Robinson

In 'Haunted Geologies: Spirits, Stones, and the Necropolitics of the Anthropocene', Nils Bubandt (2017) writes about the relationship between ghosts, the landscape, and political resistance to climate change with reference to the Lusi mud volcano in East Java, Indonesia. He writes that 'both indigenous spirits and the spirits of the new geological idea of the Anthropocene ask us to notice the magic of the forces, human and non-human that shape the atmosphere' (p. 137). While *Enys Men* (2023) is set in Cornwall, a massively different landscape from the Indonesian mudflats, it too presents us with a spectral politics of noticing a landscape—something that Bubandt calls 'symbiopolitics'. From its Cornish language title and film poster to its West Penwyth filming location, *Enys Men* is inextricably connected to the landscape, histories, and ghosts of Cornwall. This connection is a conscious and productive focus upon the local through the eyes of the nonhuman.

Written and directed by Cornish filmmaker Mark Jenkin, *Enys Men* follows The Volunteer (Mary Woodvine) as she documents changes to a flower specimen on a small rocky island off the coast of Cornwall. Before long, The Volunteer begins to hear pickaxes beneath the earth and sees smoke rising from long-abandoned chimneys. Eerie mayday calls drift from her FM radio and the standing stone outside her door starts to move. Unafraid, The Volunteer seems to relish the opportunity to focus on her local space, exploring the natural and supernatural island with an unshakeable curiosity. Further, there is little distinction between the natural and supernatural on the island. It is here that the ecoGothic reading is most helpful to us. As Tom J. Hillard (2019) writes in his essay 'Deep Into That Darkness Peering: An Essay on Gothic Nature', '[s]ince the Gothic inevitably finds its source in cultural contradictions, where Gothic nature exists so too can be found competing perceptions of what that "nature" signifies'(p. 694). As the film progresses,

[1] *Enys Men* has already been reviewed in Issue IV of *Gothic Nature* by Amelia Crowther (2023). Crowther's review is a fantastic piece that dives deeply into the plot of the film and argues that Jenkin is 'speaking urgently and profoundly to a culture in which there is a dangerous loss of touch between humanity and the natural world' (p. 217). As a result, this review will focus less on the plot of the film and attempt to argue against Crowther, finding instead that *Enys Men* presents a radical 'being-with' a landscape by flattening the human/nonhuman binary.

the rigid boundaries that separate what can and what cannot be called 'nature' begin to blur—the local becomes the personal and the body becomes landscape. Once The Volunteer has become haunted by the ghosts of the island, she notices lichen growing on the flower specimen that she is surveying. She reaches out to the flower and, as though magnetised, it reaches out to her too. She runs in panic, and while undressing for bed, finds the same lichen growing from an old scar on her stomach. These too are the ghosts of the ecoGothic: not only children singing a May Day song, fishermen drowned at sea, or miners who lost their lives hollowing the landscape, but also the nature of the place. The landscape creeps into The Volunteer's body and, as Parker and Poland (2019) write in the very first issue of *Gothic Nature,* it is presented as 'supernaturally powerful, and, perhaps most disturbingly, alive. It importantly threatens our very definitions of "humanness"' (p.1).

The ghosts that haunt the island offer a spectral connection to the landscape—a way of being for The Volunteer beyond the confines of her humanity. Rather than fear them, The Volunteer sings with the ghost of a vicar and she dances with spectral children in a May Day celebration; it is worth noting that in their specificity of place, the ghosts in this film appear to be more a part of the landscape than people who once lived on it. The film concludes with The Volunteer becoming stone, the boundaries between the human and the non-human—the self and the other, the past and the present—completely collapsing. In her earlier review of this film in *Gothic Nature,* Amelia Crowther (2023) discusses Stacy Alaimo's post-humanist theory of 'trans-corporeality', in which, Alaimo explains (2010), 'the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world' (p. 2) in a mutual process of informing. For Crowther, the trans-corporeality of *Enys Men* 'provokes anxiety' by showing the human to be inseparable from the world around it. I would argue that it instead is an argument for what Bubandt calls 'symbiopolitics': 'a common front between indigenous spirits and the emergent sciences of the Anthropocene, one that grows from a shared recognition of the magic of being-with' (p. 137). Jenkin's use of trans-corporeality to weave The Volunteer with the natural material of the landscape explores both its beauty and violent extractive histories. It is therefore not just a provocation of fear or anxiety, but a radical political act: a 'being-with' that threatens the very definitions of humanness, but also allows for a more meaningful engagement with the politics of landscape.

Enys Men presents us with a transcendence of the binary between human and more-than-human, achieved through the symbiopolitics of being-with an environment. To know a place, *Enys Men* teaches us, we must pay close attention to its nature, we must invite it into our homes, and we must see the dead living within its landscape.

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Kern Robinson is a PhD student studying Folk Horror film at Falmouth University. He is currently living and working in South-East London.

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Lee Haven Jones, *The Feast*

(London, UK: Great Point Media, 2021)

Sara L. Crosby

The Feast (*Gwledd* in Welsh, the language in which it was filmed) makes me think of Jaime Frederick. On a glaringly bright January day in 2012, in the midst of Ohio's fracking boom, Frederick stood behind a podium on the Statehouse steps and explained what happened to her when her absentee neighbour leased his mineral rights to an oil and gas company. The wind lashed dark hair across her face, and her voice shook and creaked as she told the gathered protesters about the poisoned water and caustic air, the hours she spent sobbing in agony on the bathroom tile ('throwing up until the blood vessels in my eyes and cheeks burst'), and the toxic internal lesions that finally ate away her gallbladder and potential motherhood. And yet, she did not blame the old man, her neighbour. Instead, she felt that 'he was taken advantage of by BoCor Gas', who convinced him to sign while he was drunk (Frederick, 2012).

If I had been in her place, I do not know if I would have been so forgiving. And, judging by his latest film, Lee Haven Jones certainly would not be. In *The Feast* (2021), Jones interrogates the 'externalization of costs' that so afflicted Frederick and that are endemic to modern modes of extraction. He indicts the abstractions that enable this abuse and offers a wonderfully horrifying solution: Drawing on both folk horror and nature-strikes-back ecohorror, *The Feast* resurrects an ancient nature goddess who reasserts nature's rights by insisting on the primacy of material reality and human embodiment—a re-mattering of the world that re-internalises costs and so comes with bloody consequences for would-be extractors.

For such extractors, 'externalization of costs' is a feature of their business. They profit by literally spewing destruction onto the land and bodies of helpless neighbours while denying or abstracting away this irremediable suffering as sustainable 'costs'. It is a legal crime, 'slow violence' in Rob Nixon's terminology, plotted and planned through conspiracy and stealth in kitchens and living rooms, as well as boardrooms (Nixon, 2011). *The Feast* brings us into one of these rooms, a dining room, where an externalisation of costs is being arranged, but asks, what if

someone else was there—a watcher, standing by like a server at a dinner party? And what if that silent body represented nonhuman nature, the larger biotic community that older pre-modern 'folk' had lived in covenant with, a contract that was being broken? How would that excluded and wronged being respond—if it were re-invested with agency? Who would it blame? Who would it punish?

The plot, if not its delivery, is straightforward. A drilling operation in rural Wales wakes an ancient goddess who reanimates the corpse of a local waitress, Cadi (Annes Elwy), so that she can infiltrate the landowners' dinner party. The couple, Gwyn (a corrupt MP, played by Julian Lewis Jones) and his wife Glenda (the craven scion of the family land, played by Nia Roberts), are throwing the tastefully intimate 'feast' so they can pressure the neighbouring farmer, Mair (Lisa Palfrey), into leasing her mineral rights. They are accompanied by their disgraced adult sons, Gweirydd (Sion Alun Davies) and Guto (Steffan Cennydd), unwillingly home because of multiple rape allegations and substance abuse issues respectively. Gwyn and Glenda's shady corporate partner, the aptly named Euros (Rhodri Meilir), bloviates to Mair that his company will mine her land in a 'responsible, sustainable way', but she is not buying it. Unlike Frederick's neighbour, she sips only water and quietly pushes back: 'We need the land. It's our livelihood'. And, when Mair discovers where exactly they have been drilling on Gwyn and Glenda's old farmstead, she is horrified: 'That's where she's resting […] She shouldn't be awakened'. But it is too late to ameliorate this peculiar externality, and 'She' in the waifish body of Cadi quietly murders the entire party (with the exception of Mair who rejects the 'sustainable' offer and walks out before the bloodbath). More accurately, 'She' facilitates the diners' own violence by accessing and amplifying each character's particular disordered consumption until they turn it on themselves. The externalised becomes internalised.

This synopsis exposes nakedly what is gradually discovered or only murkily adumbrated in the film and so fails to do justice to how gorgeous, eerie, and strangely meditative and insightful *The Feast* is. The philosophical tension that keeps the narrative taut pulls not just between the old, so-called traditional relationship to nature and the new modern, extractive relationship to nature—a trope that would be familiar to followers of most folk horror—but rather the film delves further into a deeper tension between the diverging moral implications of the chosen realities that

accompany these paradigms; that is, capitalist extraction insists upon rarefying the material world, denying matter so that it can construct a 'reality' of numbers in a bank account and dismiss the suffering it imposes upon organisms and ecosystems as unreal and unproven. Cadi/'She', by contrast, reintroduces the fact of living 'vibrant matter' and so tears away the dinner party's pale and corrupt illusions of capitalist abstraction (Bennett, 2012). Played with pathos and menace by Elwy, the goddess smears Gwyn and Glenda's cold modern 'retreat from the world'—its abstract landscape painting, its cell-like luxury bath—with smooches of loam and then reminds the dinner party that if they consume, it is as bodies that can also suffer: if they devour food, it is with teeth that can shatter; if they imbibe music, it is with eardrums that split; if they rape women, it is with members that can be lacerated; and if they spurn their land ('hiraeth') for a selfish wanderlust ('fernweh'), they stumble on a leg that will rot. When I saw Gwyn, not Jaime Frederick, curled up and screaming on bathroom tiles slicked with blood, I realised that such re-mattering necessarily internalised the externalities of resource extraction.

Yet, in spite of the pouring blood and the raw screams, *The Feast* points us to a nonhuman nature that interlaces this abjection with textures of incredible beauty, a beauty that welcomes us back to the 'real' world that remains once extractors have been held to account. This idea is underlined in the film's last act, which is titled 'After you've taken everything, what will be left?' Glenda whispers that line, the script's last, as she shoves a shotgun barrel past the mining rep's teeth and into his throat. Euros had no answer before she pulled the trigger, but the subsequent and final scene of *The Feast* does suggest a possibility. Haven Jones claims that his film was sparked by the Welsh legend of Blodeuwedd, an 'embodiment of nature' crafted 'out of flowers', and 'She' is as luminous as she is terrible, an enraged monster but also an efflorescent goddess (Harper, 2022). The final scene shows us this goddess and what might be left after and because of that gunshot as 'She' walks slowly into a meadow drifting with wildflowers and glowing mist, the now-silenced drill out of focus behind her—no more deafening clatter, no more poisonous fumes, no more unremedied pain. Instead, voices rise in song and she smiles up into the soughing air and then turns to look at us—as if to ask if we too are finally ready to come home.

BIOGRAPHY

Sara L. Crosby is Professor of English at the Ohio State University at Marion and author of two books about poisonous women in nineteenth-century American literature and multiple ecocritical essays, such as 'Gothic in an Age of Environmental Crisis' (Cambridge's *History of the Gothic*, 2021) and 'Beyond Ecophilia: Edgar Allan Poe and the American Tradition of Ecohorror' (*ISLE*, 2014). Her current book project investigates the disastrous interplay between extractive interests and American popular culture's ecohorror/ecoGothic representation of South Louisiana.

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Jordan Peele, *Nope*

(Los Angeles, USA: Monkey Paw, 2022)

Amy Bride

The dark ecology of Jordan Peele's *Nope* (2022) is entangled in a mass of contradiction, subterfuge, and irony from which both the action of the narrative and the film's wider cultural traction draw their energy. Not only is Jean-Jacket, the central creature of the film, entirely and purposefully unknowable, and variously positioned as machine, monster, and meteorological phenomenon throughout the course of the narrative, but the film itself has been variously interpreted as a treatise on spectacle, a critique of contemporary and historical racism, a commentary on film-making and industry, a Spielbergian parody, a denouncement of capitalism, and an interrogation of religious symbolism and faith. The proposed coexistence of these multidirectional readings within a narrative that ultimately evades true meaning through its intentional ineffability speaks to the critical richness of Peele's work as well as the very human need to find understanding and knowledge within the mysterious, the otherworldly, and the sublime. It is through its connection with this need that the ecoGothic implications of *Nope* are initially revealed: the question of 'what is Jean-Jacket?', 'where does Jean-Jacket come from?', and 'what does Jean-Jacket signify?' form the core rationale of this review. Whilst it is almost certainly beyond the scope of a review to provide concrete answers to these questions—particularly in respect of such an intentionally illusive film—the avenues of inquiry suggested here will no doubt offer a starting point for further investigations into *Nope*'s ecoGothic leanings and the ways in which the unknowable and otherworldly can suggest, if not confirm, a greater understanding of our own planet, environment, and ecological crises.

Nope focuses on Otis Jr 'OJ' (Daniel Kaluuya) and Emerald 'Em' Haywood (Keke Palmer), sibling horse ranchers who provide animal actors for Hollywood films. After a number of disturbances on the ranch, during which their power supply goes haywire and the ranch horses become distressed, the Haywood siblings determine that they are being visited by an alien spacecraft. They identify one particular cloud in the sky that never moves position—later revealed to be Jean-Jacket—as the culprit, and make numerous attempts to capture Jean-Jacket on film, to

no avail. A number of dimly-lit, half-glimpsed shots of Jean-Jacket allow the audience to piece together a saucer-shaped form which is later revealed in full view during a crucial chase scene, only to be then deconstructed as Jean-Jacket breaks away from his saucer form to become a larger, multi-limbed, fluctuating entity that flies across the sky in the film's final fight scene. Otis' observations of Jean-Jacket, as well as Jean-Jacket's eating and digesting of a number of horses and people from a neighbouring amusement park, reveal that Jean-Jacket is in fact a being, rather than a spaceship, with Otis' insistence on avoiding eye-contact with the creature in order to break his will demonstrating the sensual and cognitive capacities of Jean-Jacket even when the specificities of what Jean-Jacket is, or where he came from, remain undetermined.

Jean-Jacket is thus, first and foremost, an ineffable monster reminiscent of the Weird.[1] Indeed, the inexplicable nature of Jean-Jacket—his unknown origin, his shape-shifting form, his largely imperceptible presence—is distinctly Lovecraftian in its disruption of Anthropocenic worldviews.[2] Fan theories regarding Jean-Jacket's embodiment of Biblical angelic forms—which, far from the mainstream image of beautiful winged humanoids, are described as frighteningly hybrid bodies with multiple eyes, faces, limbs and wheels—position Jean-Jacket as not only one of a number of hidden creatures potentially lying in wait across the globe, but also part of a species that has existed on Earth for millennia. Much like the Old Ones of Lovecraft's Cosmic Horror mythos, recognition of Jean-Jacket's angelic tendencies displaces any sense of humanist hierarchy in favour of a world order in which human beings are the largely insignificant snacks of a being who defies all current knowledge and understanding about the natural world and its inhabitants.

Despite this overarching unknowability, Peele does provide some potential indications of how Jean-Jacket might connect with his wider environment, albeit through reference to fictional, as well as natural, embodiments of monstrosity. In an earlier article, I propose reading Jean-Jacket

[1] In *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), Mark Fisher defines the Weird as 'constituted by a presence—the presence of that *which does not belong*. In some cases of the weird (those with which Lovecraft was obsessed) the weird is marked by an exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it' (p. 61). Elsewhere, H. P. Lovecraft (1973) argued that, in the Weird Tale, 'a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat for those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space' (p. 15).
[2] A number of classic Weird Tales by H. P. Lovecraft refer to the 'Old Ones', ancient gods that are prophesised to both pre-date and outlive humanity by several millennia. See *The Complete Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft* (2014).

as an example of the monster octopus found within classical myth, early nautical travelogues, science fiction, and political cartoon. Part of this proposition rests on an analysis of the physicality of Jean-Jacket's form; not only is his unfurled state strikingly cephalopodic, but the smoothness of Jean-Jacket's body resembles the skin of a number of underwater mammals, with his use of the same sphincter-like orifice to both eat and secrete likening him to a starfish. The presence of Jean-Jacket as a massive sea creature literally out of water in the Auga Dulce valley could then be interpreted as a product of environmental crisis, with his monstrous size and 'sudden' emergence potentially and variously explained as the product of natural selection, genetic mutation, and ancient archaeological resurfacing. Whether forced in-land due to rising sea temperatures, desecration of coral reefs, or mass pollution, Jean-Jacket as a monstrous sea being inflicts violence against humanity in an act of revenge that sees him consume human matter and then pollute this matter across human living spaces. In one particularly memorable scene, Jean-Jackets expels a waterfall of blood and flesh over the Haywoods' ranch house; from an ecoGothic perspective, Jean-Jacket's dumping of waste over the Haywood home reads as horrific retribution for crimes committed against the environment and sees a natural being reclaiming its territory in distinctly grotesque fashion.

Moreover, the fact that Jean-Jacket ejects indigestible, inorganic matter—namely, the contents of the pockets of his human victims, largely in the form of coins—provides room for an economic critique of environmental destruction alongside the clear moral and material arguments of the ecoGothic genre. Throughout *Nope*, OJ is seen selling a number of the ranch's horses to a neighbouring amusement park in order to counteract ongoing financial issues. These horses are then used as bait by Ricky 'Jupe' Park, the amusement park's owner, in order to lure Jean-Jacket into a performance ring for the benefit of a number of paying—and subsequently, fatally doomed—spectators. The monetisation and implied potential captivity of Jean-Jacket immediately recalls a number of ongoing scandals surrounding zoos, so-called 'wildlife sanctuaries', and sea life parks, as well as the human containment and restraint of a number of classic and contemporary fictional monsters, including Frankenstein's Creature, King Kong, and the unnamed amphibian being of Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017).[3] Beyond this, Jean-Jacket's feasting on

[3] See Holly Bancroft (2022), 'UK's "worst zoo" where 486 animals died and keeper was mauled to death "failed to meet basic standards"'. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/south-lakes-safari-zoo-

ranch horses—themselves a valuable commodity as well as subjective living creatures—and spitting out coins creates a damaging cycle in which natural assets are irrevocably destroyed for profit with no care for either the welfare of the horses themselves or the sustainability of using them as bait. The fact that OJ and Em's father is killed by one of the coins expelled by Jean-Jacket—which falls unexpectedly from the sky and becomes lodged in Otis Sr's skull—thus stands as a stark warning against the dangers of irresponsible and unsustainable profiteering from the environment. Not only then does *Nope* portray a violent and vengeful ecology in which creatures fight back against sins inflicted upon their bodies and habitats, but Peele's film also highlights how humanity's actions are simultaneously self-damaging, with the pursuit of profit ultimately leading to death and devastation.

As such, the ecoGothic potential of *Nope* is as multifaceted as the film itself, with numerous interpretations connecting, overlapping, and competing against each other without any clear sense of finite conclusion, certainty, or security. In many ways, this actually works to enhance the symbolic power of *Nope* as a tool for ecocritical discussion, with Peele's film offering allegorical flexibility and interpretive autonomy packaged as Hollywood blockbuster and thereby creating a gateway through which popular audiences can access any number of ecoGothic readings. The lack of concrete narrative conclusion and the potential for sequels inherent in *Nope*'s plot reflects the ongoing nature of environmental crisis at the same time that it invites the audience to imagine a solution, even when the root cause of Jean-Jacket's emergence and destruction remains ultimately unclear. Whilst further ecoGothic criticism of *Nope* is undoubtedly both possible and welcome, the film's multiplicity dictates that these interpretations will be strongest when interdisciplinary; indeed, my own initial interpretation of *Nope* was financially-informed, and yet this has subsequently led to my recognition and appreciation of the ecocritical aspects of Peele's narrative. Perhaps, then, *Nope* is best appreciated from various angles, something that Jean-Jacket's fractal form, along with Peele's staging of the monster's insides as well as his outsides, allows for in grotesquely abundant measure.

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Creative Corner

Gothic Nature

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A Selection of Poems

Arthur Seefahrt

'The sense of storm is everywhere'.

Cats

The arcade is shut,
The Ferris wheel howls
Softly in the off-season wind
And houses along the strand are bolted,
Winterised.
The sea,
Frothing and angry,
Flings itself up toward the dunes shamefaced
In a grey rage at having been so loved
Then abandoned again to its dotage.

The sense of storm is everywhere,
Just past
And yet approaching.
We pace the silvered
Bleached-wood boardwalk,
Paled,
Thumbprint textured
As the scalloped sands.
Dune grasses raise faded
Tufts,
Rag-edged pennants hissing through the storm-
Surge and lull,
Bracing for the next tantrum

Of air when scattered meerschaums' rabid froth
Spits in the face of the shuttered island.

The summer is gone.
                October arrives
To find silence,
          A single shop-light
Hawking dross to remnant tourists,
           Desperate
To jettison before battening-
Down for winter's cruel hollow returning.

Sodium lamps clatter on in pinkish snappings
And we head off toward our parked car.

In the lee of the dunes,
                                        Under the boards

There are cats.
          Dozens of eyes glint silent
In idleness,
                  A hierarchy of

Preying collonied in the forgotten.

This is what the world is.

Hyena

Her half-mane, like a grand dame's silk pashmina, sweeps
Round her lolling head as the luff off scaffold sashes hung
From the tomb of the forsaken seaside high-rise carpark.

Stoled in tattered catafalque, she is little mother of the wrack-line,
Baring her ass as a 'come-hither fuck-you', muttering and cackling at the seas' endless
    thieving;
All the missing things for which she takes the blame.

Protuberant ribs and knees speak a need,
Hunger.
The sway in her hips belies a sharing, the hunger spread
To pin-toothed whelping's helplessness. The off-shore gale
Is an effect of greater machinations, continuous,
Indifferent as a coastline, observant as god.

Grey pups whine their seal-cries as broken mermaids
Howling fishily high-pitched keens. Little mother saunters amidst
Their frenzied hobbling flight. Snaps a silencing.

And tonight her own cubs, garlanded in carnage
Will grow in their sleep, while the wind blows on.

Hippopotamus

The hippo is a stone of violence.
A pork stone cut of leviathan.
A spite against the river's thrust, frothing eddies.

His bulk abides no nearness.
To him an arm is a profane gesture, that must be
Torn from shoulder socket to bloody his river's See

Defending his little archipelagos of force.
Adam's outstretched hand finds not the finger of god
But a gape-toothed cataract mauve with rage.

His is a primal antipathy, for afloat
His great bulk remembers weightless heaven —
Further, the casting down, the fire, the gaol of mass.

The hippo's rounded hulking, a scale on the river's surface
Cast-off from Ur in the battle birthing time.
His fiefdom now reduced to the murky crescent of river lagoons —

In the dry season, to writhing
Mud-sink quagmire, desiccation, filth, and throng.
His mind-nut remote in a prison of envy.

Pity not the hippo, his hunger and his gravity.
Up upon the welkin from his buoyant trap
Forever gazes his yellow eye.

BIOGRAPHY

Arthur Seefahrt's work has appeared in *God's Cruel Joke, The Honest Ulsterman, floorplan journal*, *Bodega Magazine, Strangeways Magazine*, and *College Green,* as well as in translation in the Leipzig based *Fettliebe*. His debut collection *Decay Studies* is available for purchase in the US and is forthcoming on Wallop! Press in Ireland and the EU. More of his works and contact details can be found at arthurseefahrt.net.

Gothic Nature

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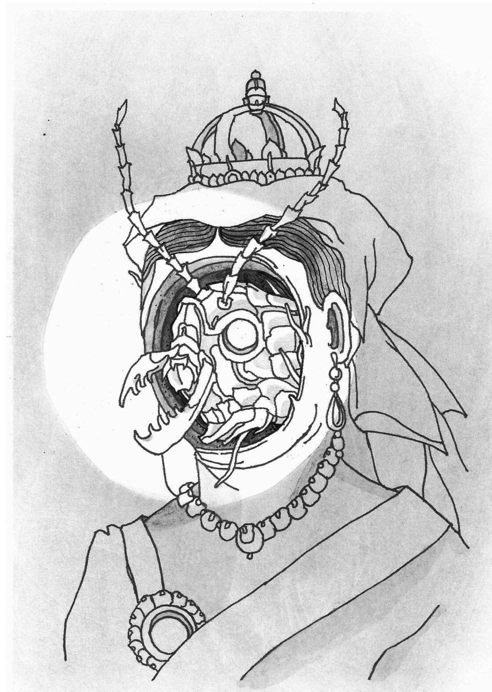
Subverted Dominion: Insects & Empire

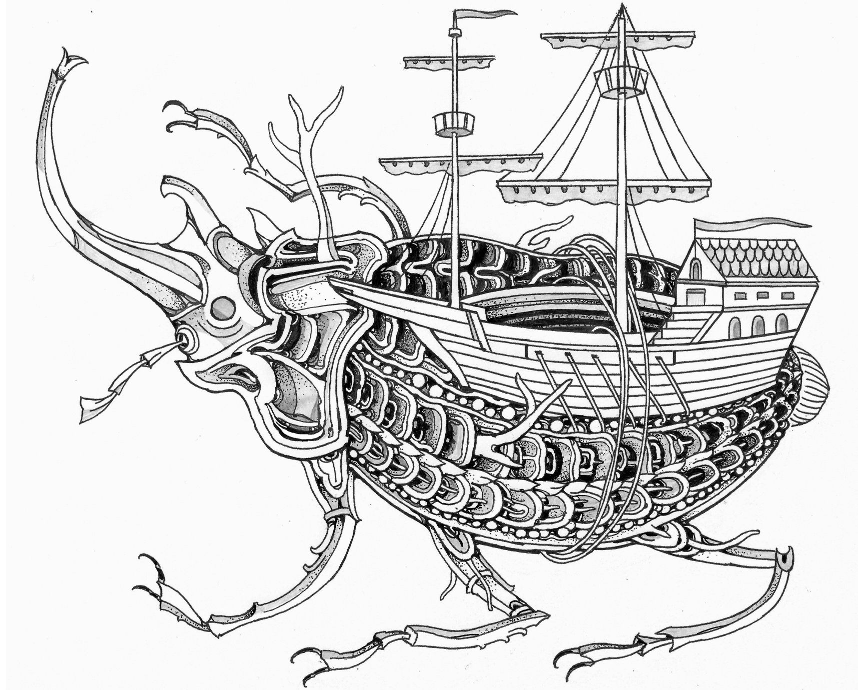
Nicolas Moore

Title: *Exoskeletal Horrors and Interior Colonial Portals* (2024) Mixed media

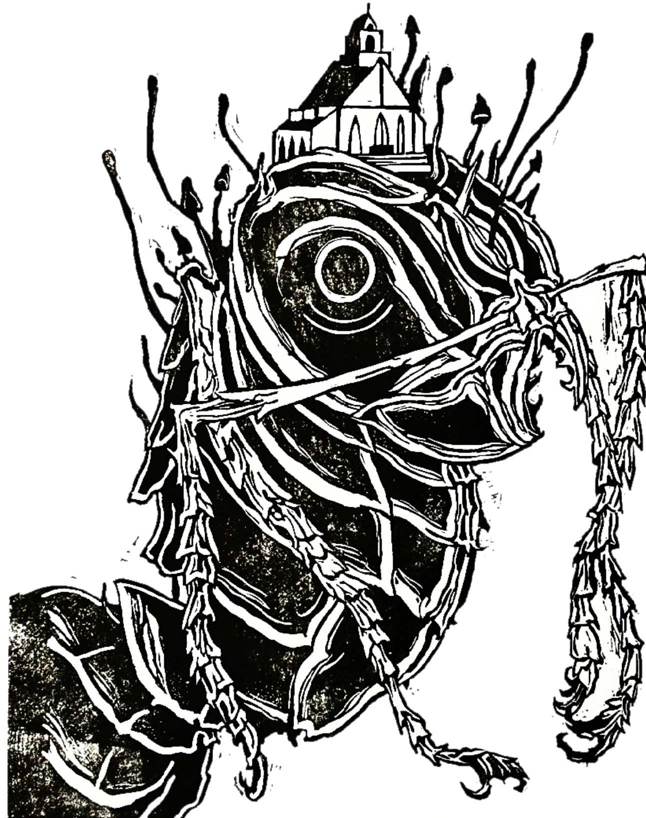
Title: *No Warm Terrain* (2024) Mixed media



Title*: Carefully Repurposed Chitin from Flat Anterior Capsules* (2024) Mixed media on paper



Title: *The Poison of the Beetles* (2024) Mixed Media



Title: *Cathedral of Decomposition* (2024) Linoleum block print

Title: *Frigate of Decomposition* (2024) Charcoal pencil—digital

Title: *Colonial Figure with Mutations and Decomposers* (2024) Linoleum block print

BIOGRAPHY

Nicholas Moore is a visual artist, writer, and musician pursuing an MFA in Interdisciplinary Media Arts at Lindenwood University. He received a BFA in Illustration from The School of Visual Arts in 2003. His work explores the concepts of ecohorror and decolonialization through their relationship to genre fiction and visual art.
@nicholasrobertmoore

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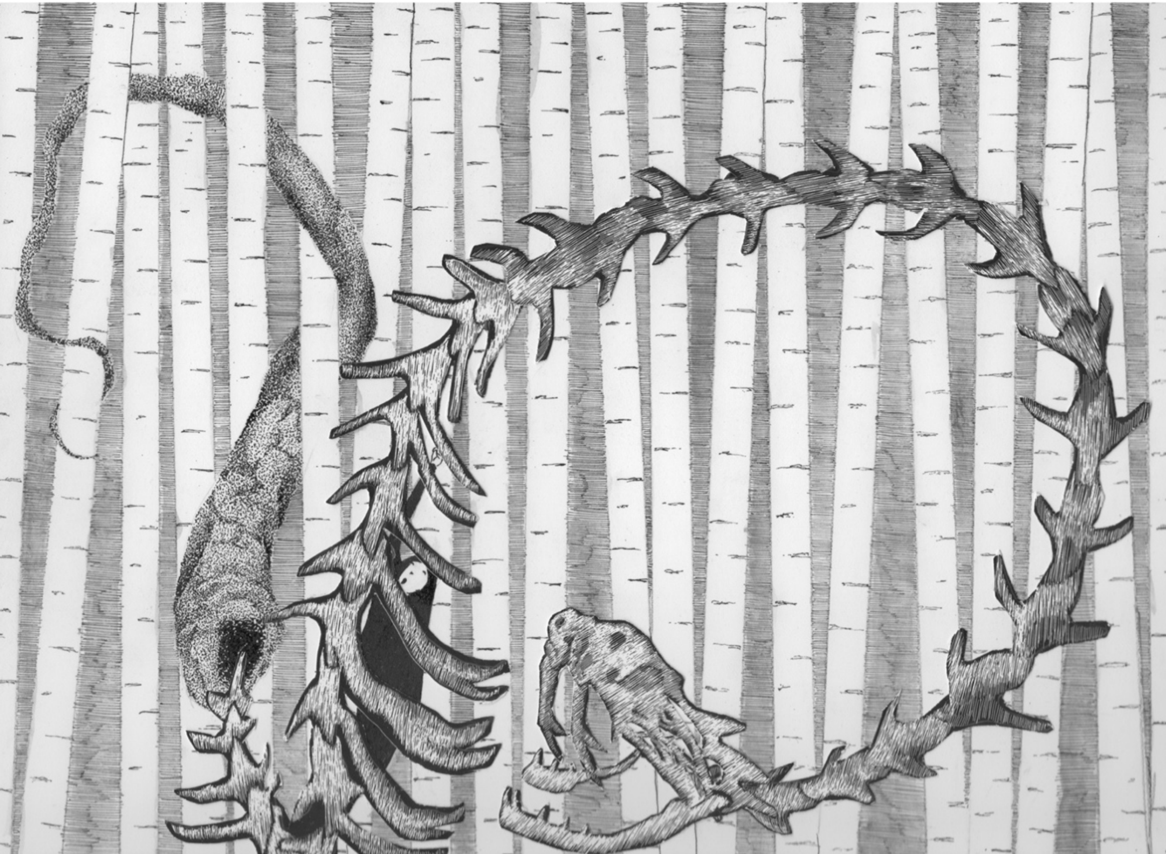
Chimera Incognita

Jason Wallin

Chimera Incognita. 2022-2024. Watercolour and pen and ink on paper. 21.6 X 27.9 cm.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Chimera Incognita attempts to re-envision the medieval *danse macabre* or 'dance of death'. As readers of *Gothic Nature* will know, the *danse macabre* functioned as an illustrative allegory for our enchainment to death and the vanity of worldly excess, giving expression to the Latin metaphysical edict, *memento mori* or 'remember death'. This series imagines our fate, but in its alliance with the mutative body of the earth through which we are remade facing away from our ourselves. Today, the *danse macabre* has renewed salience as an analogue of our dark relations with a changing planet and the secretive aberrations that founder therein.



BIOGRAPHY

Jason Wallin is Professor of Media Studies and Youth Culture in Curriculum at the University of Alberta, Canada. He is the author of *A Deleuzian Approach to Curriculum* (Palgrave MacMillan), *Arts-based Inquiry: A Critique and Proposal* (Sense Publishers) and co-producer of the extreme music documentary *BLEKKMETAL* (Grimposium, Uneasy Sleeper). Jason was raised by wolves in the hinterlands of British Columbia.

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The Glasshouse

Ali Cargill

'I will give this tender ivy home within myself'.

'Sit you up, dearest', says my John. 'Would you like Ada to lay a fire for you?'

'No, no fire', I say, for already I burn from within. John lays a hand upon my forehead. Doctor Rowbotham has diagnosed inflammation, a fever of the brain. I raise myself, and the room swirls afresh.

John re-arranges my pillows. 'Thank you my dear', I manage, as he brings a tray.

'Herbal tea', he says. 'and salad of fresh leaves. Ada was quite put out that I prepared luncheon for you myself, but we must have you better'.

I raise the cup to my lips, take a sip, swill the horrid liquid around my gums. The mixture is bitter. 'John, it is so—'

'Now, Gaia, let us have the cup drained, your leaves eaten. Only then will I know you to have the right sustenance to reduce your fever'. He stands like a sentry while I do as I am bid. 'Rest, my dear', says he, though he remains, pulling at his whiskers.

'There is some problem?' My lids are heavy; sleep approaches.

'A treatment intended to assist in lowering the body temperature. Doctor Rowbotham advises it'.

'For what purpose are the scissors?'

‘We must cut off your hair, Gaia, to master the fever’.

I would flee my bed, indeed wrestle my own husband, but my limbs are devoid of sensation. John clips; dark curls fall to the counterpane. He sweeps them away with his hands.

‘There’, he says. You have been excessively emotional, my dear. Rest, allow the body to cool’.

I subside, closing my eyes—let him think me straight to sleep. He drops a small kiss upon my forehead. The door closes. I turn into the pillow; my tears run into this new, thinned cap of fuzz I wear, until all is damp beneath my cheek. John is right: the air about my head feels cooler.

He is right, also, in that I have been in a state of emotional arousal. But is this not of his making? For he intends to invest heavily in the expansion of railways, and does not consider it an abomination that the green fields of England will be scarred by the carving out of new routes. When last he spoke of this, I was, for many minutes, in a state of extreme discomfiture, for it is *my* fortune he intends to invest. And, I said also, was not coal a most polluting substance? Surely he was aware of the increase in fogs in the streets of our metropolis? But John declared with zeal that the future is one fuelled by coal.

‘Oh, the greed of men!’ I exclaimed.

‘Come, Gaia’, John said. ‘It is a most wonderful expansion’.

‘It is’, I said, ‘a scheme which intends the destruction of Nature for profit’. This declared with spirit, he, red of face.

My eyes open. Sunshine through the window; the drapes have been pulled aside. Walls, green-patterned with ivy that climbs with spreading, heart-shaped leaves. Pictures upon the walls. In one, a woman walks with umbrella.

The cramps have returned. I reach for the pail; I will vomit. The quantity now is smaller; yellow-green splashes into the base of the pail. What is the black there, I wonder, as I wait for the convulsions to subside.

I lie down. What is it that constricts my throat so? I wait, but the trembling refuses to subside, and so I lay, and shake.

I am dreaming, I know it. I wander in my glasshouse, trail my fingers among plants that thrive in its sunny aspect: the fig tree, its leathery leaves as large as, larger than, John's hands; my turntable with its earthenware pots filled with geraniums, their pinks and reds soon ready for planting out. Here, my passion flower. The white and violet faces of its blooms turn to me like smiles.

John is there. How he fills the space. 'Unnecessary expense!' he says. 'Think of the glass tax, Gaia!'

'I do not care', I say, and watch his eyes become narrow. Countless times during this, the first year of our marriage, he has advised me to exercise financial prudence, while planning all manner of ruinous schemes.

'My plants must flourish', I say, and then John is not there, and I see a small ivy, beginning to inhabit one corner. Its leaves are heart-shaped darlings, and I catch them up, feel along tender stems. I find it, a root establishing itself. 'You cannot remain here', I whisper, 'yet you must have a place, as must all of Nature's creations'. The solution is simple: I will give this tender ivy home within myself. I pluck the plant from its rooted shade, place a leaf inside my mouth. The taste is bitter, but I will find good in it. Swallow, then the next. Lastly, the root, its tiny protuberances, which purpose of each is to cling. They tickle as might a centipede's miniscule feet, and I chuckle.

I wake again, and find myself in the darkening. The pictures hang still upon their rail; the woman with umbrella walks; the walls patterned with their twirling stems of heart-shaped leaves—I gasp, would sit up. But my limbs are now without any feeling or strength. My head will still turn, however. Many stems and leaves there are; the wall writhes beneath them. How splendid, I think,

as I feel the first stirrings. Ah, the tendrils attach! Below the surface of the concave cradle of my belly writhes new growth, just as vigorous growth now covers all these walls around me. As without, so there is within, I think, and would laugh at this if my throat could but utter sound. Nothing now can pass it.

In these last moments, my mind is lucid. I recall the bitterness of the tea, the leaves fed to me these many days, and the sickness. I recall also that John means to invest my fortune in a scheme ruinous of Nature yet advantageous to men who would exploit much in this world to satisfy their greed. I have been loud in my protestations; too loud. Buried, I will silenced be.

He comes to check upon me. My eyes remain open. All is stilled. I see him straighten: he is satisfied.

Within my belly, ivy inhabits my corners.

Awake once more, this time to complete dark. The smell is of earth, and earth. Unfamiliar fabric against my limbs: a garment, winding about my legs. My razed head is covered in ribboned cap. My hands explore this finery of shroud. With renewed energy, I kick out: it is wood, rather than lead. I am not buried according to my wealth, then. 'Unnecessary expense!' John will have declared.

Around one wrist, rope scratches: the bell pull. If I could reach through these six feet of earth weighted above me, I will find the bell—shall I alert all to my re-awakening? I smile. There is no time, and there is all time.

In the passing of some time, then, I become aware of movement. My chilled mouth opens, and, reaching as if to put my finger to my lips to quieten the world, I feel the first heart-shaped leaf. It whispers across my skin, gentle silk. Open, throat, for here are more tendrils, here comes root. Out from belly oh I will grow it, this darling ivy, for I have damp, and earth, and nourishment from my leaking flesh. We have need of sunlight to do our growing, however, so must reach up, and up.

What need of sight? Here is all sensation, in crumbs of soil, scuttle of insect, moisture which seeps into my tendrils which are my eyes. Up, up, for the pull of light is strong. My buds poke, my stems thicken, push. How this rich earth feeds me!

In the passing of time, my growth reaches the surface, where there is warmth, and light, and my fronds uncurl into air. Let me now ring the bell, summon him to my grave side!

He comes, he comes! I wave, heart-shaped greeting, and he sees me not. Upon hearing the small bell's voice singing, he crouches.

'Small movement of the hand, caused by settlement in the corpse', he says. To whom does he speak, I wonder. As he pulls himself to standing, a woman approaches—ah, you have taken another wife, John. How does your business, I wonder. Have your coal-guzzling monsters crossed all the land, belching their fumes as you predicted? How does your new wife's fortune?

The woman leaves; her skirts drag upon the grass of the burial ground; and John—

I heave, and the earth opens, and now he sees me. He would leave also—yes indeed he would run—but I have him about the ankle. My stems curl, up limb, around chest, covering eyes, ears—my darling, heart-shaped leaves kiss his face, tickle his whiskers. Would you call out, John? Your mouth is stoppered, is it not, under my caress. Come, let me haul you from this rotten world to my own, more wholesome, earth-bound rotting. Do not thrash, so! Mind not the decayed wood of our bed. Will you be alarmed at my crept, leathery features? No matter. Feed me, John, as you did once with the most bitter of leaves.

In our cave of dark, I drop a small kiss upon his forehead.

'Thank you my dear', I whisper, as all movement is stilled, save for his tears, which seep.

BIOGRAPHY

Ali Cargill published a novel for young adults and a study guide on ecocritical theory before completing her doctorate in creative writing in 2023. In her thesis novel, *Wyrd Magic*, she uses the strident voice of a witch-figure narrator to articulate the personal pain of grief. She has published a number of creative pieces in journals and is currently reworking *Wyrd Magic* towards publication. Ali's research interests include folk horror and other fiction where the natural world is turned Gothic. *The Glasshouse* is from Ali's current work in progress, a collection of Victorian Gothic short stories.

Gothic Nature

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The Reclaimed Conservatory

Simon Schothans

'I stood face to face with that awful place'.

'Whatever you do, do *not* go in', said Mr Silvian. In all the years I had worked under the sanguine forester, I had never held it possible for him to be stern. It was unsettling to see him prove me wrong. What I had thought were laugh lines, now revealed themselves to be trenches; remnants of a war against reality. He was a different person without his smile. A weathered old man, whom I did not recognise. In a last-ditch attempt to preserve his image as I knew it, I awkwardly forced a laugh.

'I'm serious, kid. Promise me'.

'All right, all right', I said. 'I promise'.

Mr Silvian answered my affirmation with a solemn nod before sinking into a contemplative silence. But it was not quiet. In the forest, it never is. Outside, the wind howled through the rattling branches and their rustling coats, orchestrating a tempestuous symphony to the beat of the window-shaking rainfall. Together, they serenaded the log cabin, using its feeble panes as an instrument. Among the cacophony, however, it was his silence that I could not bear.

'Why can't I go in, sir?' I boldly asked.

'Because'.

'Because what?'

'Because it is structurally unsound, and all'.

There was a particular reluctance in the old man’s voice; a hesitant cadence that he immediately chalked up to a sore throat. He coughed right after, as if to prove his point. Naturally, I was not convinced. Mr Silvian could have just told me not to enter the old conservatory; why make me promise? And why the hesitance to give me a reason? Something did not add up. Still, I had no reason not to trust him.

‘I should know’, he quickly added. ‘After all, I was the head botanist there before they condemned the place’.

This sudden revelation took me by surprise. Generally, the man had been an open book, and I had, perhaps somewhat arrogantly, assumed that he must have told me everything about himself by now.

‘You were a botanist?’

‘My late wife and I both were’, he sighed, turning to her picture on the wall. As he did, a wave of melancholy washed over him, colouring his demeanour. Instinctively, I glanced over at the picture, too. I had always thought there was something unwholesome about her. Her eyes, in particular, I found uncannily distinct. They were mesmerising, but subtly sinister, though even my best attempts at describing them won’t do them justice. To Mr Silvian, they must have been torturously tantalising. I could read it in his posture.

‘Well then’, he started after some ten minutes. ‘I think I’ve told you everything you need to know, haven’t I?’

‘I think you have’, I sighed.

‘No more questions?’

‘None, sir. You go enjoy your retirement, now. You’ve earned it’.

And that was that. Mr Silvian shook my hand, gathered his belongings, and left the cabin. As his friend, I was saddened to see him go; but as his successor, I was excited to take over. Through the soaking windows, I watched him start his car, and drive off. Little did I know that I would not see the man for well over three years, when a most curious set of circumstances forced the crossing of our paths.

Because it had originally been constructed in a natural clearing, I often found myself in the vicinity of the old botanical conservatory. I was, after all, occupationally bound to the forest that enveloped it. Nevertheless, I had managed to steer clear of the abandoned site, and would have if it had not been for an unexpected turn of events. In broad daylight, while peacefully tending to my business, I was disturbed by a series of gunshots, followed by a blood-curdling screech. Instinctively, and naively, I darted through the coniferous expanse of the forest, zigzagging between the moss-covered firs, pines, and spruces and leaping over jutting roots and soggy ditches, until I reached the entrance to the conservatory grounds. For the first time, I stood face to face with that awful place.

The conservatory's central, dome-shaped building was made entirely out of ornately chiselled limestone, and adorned with floral-themed bas-reliefs and statues. From it, two great semi-circular glass greenhouses stretched out in opposite directions, resting on similarly decorated limestone foundations. When it first opened, the conservatory had advertised itself as *a triumph of man over nature*, and, at the time, it must have rang true. To facilitate its presence, all of the clearing's original flora had been crushed to death under a sea of thick, oppressive asphalt that settled on their corpses. No plants had survived the invasion, save those confined to the greenhouses.

Since its abandonment, however, the tide had turned. Indeed, I found myself in a world reclaimed by nature. Trees had employed their roots to break through the weathered asphalt, whose body had already begun to crumble under the tenacity of thriving weeds and grasses. The conservatory, itself, was under new management, as well. From what I saw through the fogged-up greenhouse panes, I could only conclude that the plants had done all right for themselves. Moss had somehow settled on the roof, and so had a plethora of vines and hanging grasses that must

have freed themselves from their former prison. Floras, native and foreign, had built a flourishing new world amidst a history of repression.

Recognising the only car on the compound, I shuddered at the sound of five more gunshots, and a sixth shortly after. Without thinking, I entered the conservatory and sped down its muddy, overgrown halls. I had broken my promise. Lianas and strangler figs tried to keep me out, while other floras begged me not to proceed with stinging effluvia. I didn't listen. Instead, I followed the weak scent of gunpowder, and clambered through a particularly dense obstruction—the final barrier to my destination. Within seconds, my worst fears were confirmed. Mr Silvian was dead. A handful of benevolent ferns had concealed him with their leaves, hoping to protect me from the horrid image I made them reveal. An empty revolver was still smoking right next to his mangled body. Although he was riddled with puncture wounds and cuts, and covered in green smudges, his tears were distinctly those of melancholy. His countenance coloured them so.

I descended into a state of panic. Who had done this? And were they still around? My eyes frantically scoured their lush surroundings, desperately hoping to give the all clear. Sadly, they could not. Peering into the abyss at the bottom of the basement stairs, something met my gaze. Something unnatural. For the most part, it had submerged itself in a pool of eutrophied wastewater; but seeing as little as half of the inextricable amalgamation of flora and fauna was enough for me to cry out in excruciating terror. In response, the creature reached out for me with its tendrilous appendages, which I could only narrowly evade as I fled the conservatory, never to return. Still, it was not the creature's monstrous anatomy that aged me ten years that day. It was the fact that it bore the distinctive eyes of the late Mrs Silvian.

BIOGRAPHY

Simon Schothans is a Dutch author and gothicist whose writing tends to confront the darker aspects of existence. He approaches these themes in a distinct style that amalgamates philosophical writing, literary fiction, and realism haunted by the spectral mode of the Gothic. The latter likewise informs the research he conducts as a bifold graduate student of Literary Studies, focussing on structures of fear in anglophone literature. For more information, please visit simonschothans.com.

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Gothic Nature

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Verdant Macabre

Brian Sago

ARTIST STATEMENT

These images were created as illustrations for the role-playing game, *Trophy*. Given the theme of the game, each image is meant to illustrate a moment where the protagonist is at odds with the nature surrounding them.

Title: ***Darkness and Light***

There is more than one way to light a path. The image is inspired by pigeons greeting the sunrise over an old movie theatre and subterranean light in a parking garage. Both views were from an apartment where I once lived.

Title: ***Homunculus***

The act of creation crosses all cultures. This image blends several different inspirations: the multi-cultural creation of figurines in clay, the flensing of flesh, Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, and the Valladolid debate of 1550-51. In that debate Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda argued that Indigenous American populations were '*homunculi*', animate beings lacking souls, and Bartolomé de las Casas countered that Indigenous Americans are, despite traditions different from the Spanish colonisers, humans with souls.

Title: ***Lizard Queen***

With the crystal ball as a metaphor for communicating understanding, this image is meant to convey a sense of communication between species. (In its role as an illustration for *Trophy*, this was titled '*Medium:* surface thoughts of nearby creatures enter and overwhelm another'.)

Title: ***Nightwalk***

Sometimes it is difficult to walk from one realm to another. Sometimes it is as simple as crossing the street. (This image is the view from my porch, combining a view at sunset, and a walk a few hours later.)

Title: ***Sight and Smell***

A rookery in the Argentinian *pampas* is the dwelling of a non-avian being, visible on the horizon. This is meant to evoke a number of questions: Has this being intruded on the home of the birds and displaced them? Has the figure in the foreground intruded on the home of this being? When the residents of a dwelling are displaced, how long until the new resident is considered local? Put another way: what does it take to become native to a place?

(In its role as an illustration for *Trophy*, this was titled '*Mask:* cover your face to remove yourself from others' senses')

Title: ***Crèche***

An egg outside the crèche. Why would anyone remove the unhatched egg? Why would anyone attempt to enter?

Title: ***The Entrance***

A web blocks passage between massive columns. Yet the columns in this image are drawn from the base of a 1928 birdbath that is outside the classroom where I teach. Every winter the snow covers the birdbath. Every summer the ivy grows and covers the birdbath. There are two seasonal windows where you can see it, the birds use it as intended, and below the bath, the spiders go wild decorating. Watching this ebb and flow is a delight.

BIOGRAPHY

Brian Sago is a writer, artist and teacher. Some days he tries to do all three and forgets to go for a walk. His art leans medieval, typically made using 600-year-old methods with 120-year-old tools. His writing looks into modern cultural horrors, like corporate training manuals, Santa Claus, and butter-themed royalty pageants.

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The Future He Was Promised?

Michael Victor Bowman

'The monster drags his feet forward through the mud of his own making'.

58 lines / 285 words

Where the pale monster walks
white flowers once bloomed.
In his youth, they covered the hillsides
but he lived to see those hills flattened.
Landscapes reshaped.
The earth smoothed out
for the convenience of others.

His youth is dimly remembered:
he mostly remembers suffering.
His pale fingers once plucked the flowers
in rare moments of ease, brief relief
from long days of hard graft;
moments to dream of an easier life
which never seemed to come, because nothing
was ever enough. He always needed more.

Now others overtake him,
fast-moving, rapid-talking,
twisting familiar words and phrases.
Climate *crisis*. *Renewable* energy.
Soft hybrid. Strong hybrid.
Rapid charging point.

Plastic *footprint*.
He looks down at his pale feet.
Climate *denier*.
Damn them all!
He worked hard for what he had!
He *earned* it. Maybe they should learn
that word, instead!

Now, they want to take it all away.
Leave him with nothing. Not even
shoes on his pale feet. The monster
drags his feet forward
through the mud of his own making;
estuarine slurry covering
what was once a car park,
the rusting shapes still squatting in neat rows.

He can fight back.
He can find his own words.
He can resist!
Fake news.
Vaccine *hoax.*
Crisis actors.
Woke. *Libtard*.
Main Stream Media.

Do your research.

His voice echoes
from the mold-green walls
of the abandoned supermarket.

We can take it back!

He remembers
when it was a field on a hillside
where white flowers bloomed, and
his pale fingers plucked them
as he dreamed of the big house
he would live in, and the big car
he would drive, and all the holidays
he would fly to, and return
a bronzer shade of pale.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Victor Bowman is a biology graduate, was a bathroom salesman and is now a PhD candidate studying truth and lies in the AI era. The most exciting seven seconds of his academic life so far were being chased by an angry hippo in Tanzania. When not writing he can be found hiking with his dog. *Gothic Nature* is only his second poetry publication: his first can be found in an upcoming issue of Star*Line. If you like his work, leave a comment or find him on social media because, as Charles Buxton said, silence is the severest criticism: <http://michaelvictorbowman.com>.

www.gothicnaturejournal.com

Gothic Nature

Gothic Nature V

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Hillmouth
Samantha Miles

'Do you know how long it takes to go mad alone in the dark?'

(To be spoken by a woman, skittish and fast. Something speaks back.)

There.

There.
Right there.
There are cracks in the rock (yes there are cracks it's a cave) but these ones are.

wrong.
Something echoes around them bounces around them like a melody like music like singing from a. Mouth. Every now and then. I might be mad. Maybe I've really gone mad.
Do you know how long it takes to go mad alone in the dark? Three days. Yes. Three days. Really not that long is it? A fun surprise. Three days since they chased me out of the village and forced me to hide in this crevice and I can I can I can hear them out there I can hear them looking for me. Hang me set me on fire shout some really rather questionable words at me witchwitchwitchwitch throw my charred remains in an unmarked grave and for what? For fear? They don't understand what they don't understand what they don't –
There. Again.

Again.
Listen.

Anyway it's not like I'll miss the dirty looks it's not like I'll miss the gossip the rumours the.

whispers?
Again.

Please stop I'm trying to recount how horrible my life is.

Thanks thank you.
My hands vibrate with anger. They're humming with the pain of judgment or maybe it's the thumbscrews or maybe it's the ice-cold bite of aggressive iron deficiency but I swear I could flatten a cathedral. I will. Flatten your cathedral. These palms will turn their face to the destruction of Him and there shall be no relief so you'll just have to deal with the sores in your mouth with the warts on your thighs you'll just have to lose the arm lose the plot cut it off all rotted away with maggots you'll just have to suffer the pain in your tooth the ringing in your ears the drumming in your drumming in your drumming in your head head head drumming in your head what is –
what is – what is – what is –
WHAT IS THAT SOUND?

what is what is what is

WHAT IS THAT SOUND
THAT SOUND
THAT SOUND

Please?
What is that sound?
The devil?

I'M NOT SCARED OF YOU DEVIL!

Can always hear better in the dark.
What a curse.
Perhaps this is where I belong. Curled up underneath a rock in the pitch wet black counting the days until my body becomes a home for something that isn't me. They'll find me here. The shadow of my spirit burnt into the rock hope it burns when they touch it.
And I can still hear them out there pitchforks and fire. Maybe I should crawl up further into the rock to die like a dog looking for privacy as if I'm not already alone.

DEVIL
DEVIL
DEVIL

Am I.

alone?
Touching the rocks grabbing the rocks petting the rocks trying to feel for something anything that isn't rock but all it is is rock rock rock stone dirt mud hell.
What's in the dark who's in the dark human
spirit?
Am I alone **AM I ALONE?**

ARE YOU ALONE?

I'm.

I'm dangerous. They said so.
I'll hurt you (they said so).
I'll turn you into a frog burn your skin off take your children poison your milk twist your guts murder your cattle conjure up a storm raise hellfire they said so they said so.

There.

Theretherethere.

*frogburnskinchildrenpoisonmilktwistgutsca ttleconjurehellfirefrogburnskinchildrenpois onmilk****twistgutscattleconjurehellfirefrog burnskinchildrenpoisonmilktwistgutsc attleconjurehellfirefrogburnskinchildre npoisonmilktwistgutscattleconjurehellf iretheysaidsotheysaidsotheysaids otheysaidsoTHEYSAIDSO***

AAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH H

AAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

An echo come to life.
(What did I say it takes three days to go mad in the dark.)
Well I didn't realise this property was taken and you know you really could have said sooner.

I can't leave here.
You understand I can't leave here they're searching for me out there and I'll hang if I leave so I guess we'll just be.

room.
mates?

AAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

Okay.
Alright okay alright alright okay.
Okay alright.
Prehistoric beast.
I'll just.
Die. Then.
Only. I can't find my way out it's so dark I can't see a thing and I don't remember where the entrance is I've been writhing around between the rocks like a trapped worm for three days I think so if you could just.
Help?
Me?

Now you're silent. Now you've nothing to say. You wouldn't be saying anything without me. What use does an echo have for an empty cave? Don't you want a voice a coherent thought a purpose?
You know what purpose is?
You have a purpose?
Of course you don't have purpose you're a collection of dying vibrations bouncing about a **DYING ROCK**.

echoechoechoemptycaveechovoicecavevoicecoherentcavecoherentpurposecavepurposeemptypurposeemptythoughtechoechoecho ***dyingvibrationsdyingvibrationsdyingrockdyingrockDYINGDYINGDYINGDYINGROCK***

I'm sorry.

i'm sorry

Apology accepted.

apology accepted

Truce?

truce

I'll live here then. With you. Inside your belly.
A guest in your endless shadow.
If that's alright.

if
that's alright

I'll starve before you anyway. Ancient god.

ancient
devil

Did you say something?
I suppose you're glad for the company tucked away by yourself for all these years and when was the last time you spoke anyway?

ancient

The last person who spoke to me tried to set me on fire.
Do you remember who you last spoke to?

devil

Right. Well.
Wish I hadn't asked.

how does it feel to be angry

Like breathing.
It feels like nothing.

What are you?

feels like nothing
nothing
nothing

Does it hurt to have me upright in your belly?

nothing

Is this even your belly have you swallowed me whole?
Are you holding me delicately in your mouth?

Echo?
Cave?

Nothing.
Nothing.

Listen. There?

Nothing.

Noth.

ing.

Alone.

ALONE!

There.
Theretherethere it's.

Oh.

A glow.

It's fire. It's them. At the opening.

Heard me. Found me.

Perhaps I'd better.

There's not really anything I can.

It's been wonderful speaking with you.
Archaic entity.

Bye.

sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss
ssssssssssssss sss sssssssss sssss
ssssssssssssssssssss

wwwww pppppppp

wond wond wond wonderful

wonderful pre his tor ic beast ancient
dev il
archai c entity me me me
heard me
found me wonderful wonderful wonderful

BIOGRAPHY

Samantha Miles is a playwright and PhD student based in Lincolnshire. Her practice-based research focuses on authorial agency in contemporary gothic playwriting with particular reference to feminist theatre theory and ethnodrama. Alongside her research, she has lead creative writing workshops focusing on ritualism in theatre and has presented various papers on both the process of autoethnographic playwriting and the consideration of play texts as abject pieces of dramatic literature. She has had her creative work performed across the UK, is a previous winner of the Sunday Times Playwriting Award, and has previously been shortlisted for the Verity Bargate Award. To learn more about her work, you can find her on Instagram @gothscripts where she routinely posts about her research projects and creative writing.

GOTHIC NATURE

GOTHIC NATURE V

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Disturbing the Peace

A. J. Dalton

'–Witch! they named me'.

Ecohorror 155 words / 30 lines

I am fled to this place
of ordinary ordure and gory gloom
boggy bristles and fetid fronds festooned
buzzing clicks and slurping swamp–
nothing firm
of purpose
save in its determination to waylay, sink and drown
rude incomers and prey
–certainly the iron-cruel knights of the Church
of Civilisation will want none of it
if pursuing me here
their heavy-forged, ground-ripped armour
sucking them down to their deaths
then to feed this flora and fauna
their panicky prayers to their He-god
in vain
a final curse and accusation
of me in their minds
for bringing unholy influence
upon their children with my natural remedies
and cures, my old stories and midwifery
a forbidding wisdom

that they came to declare forbidden
–Witch! they named me
yet now I have this refuge
and those who seek it out
to take my lonely life
will end up only as victims
of themselves
and I will cackle with glee.

Edenic 101 words / 15 lines

We were saved – some miracle from above –
when the last starhopper brought spores
which ran riot even in our thin soil
giving us bulbous, sinuous but voluminous
results to swell bellies pregnantly contentedly
changing us so that we too released spores
from breathy ears and orifices wetly bursting
populating the earth anew richly abundantly
and we were more connected than ever
by mental image-words like sense-poems
that had more meaning than the old grammars
and languages so we were freed
of our previous limits and demand-strictures
offering up now in a way disturbingly selfless
but liberating as if transcending at last.

Phasic 87 words / 17 lines

As a moth grows out of and outgrows a pupa
and a plant bursts its seed
to become a giant
like a snake sheds its skin
to emerge larger, or a winged serpent
breaks its containing eggshell
to uncoil out and up
eclipsing with its vastness
the ruins of the small past,
so we were always going to move beyond
our own bodies and pained limits
eventually
outstripping millennia at last in a sudden
slippery slide
to swim free into the sea
returning
from whence we came.

Technomancer 90 words / 23 lines

The mind-wizards murmur
and thought-witches tattle and cackle
–their static crackles!
I try to keep myself
from them
But they have my signature now

I'm hunted
through the cyberlands
down digi-gorges, up virtual mountains
across electric planes, into neon-dark
of tattooed transport, instant issue
nerve-stretched nirvanas and neverworlds.
Yet I scrabble together ingredients–
toe of new route, and eye of electrode
into my encrypted cauldron
for one great broadcasting
of a conjured spell-familiar
to sniff-detect them out
of their reality-remote lairs
into the spell-bright highlight sun
and then
Then!
Hahahaha.

BIOGRAPHY

A. J. Dalton (www.ajdalton.eu) is a UK-based writer. He has published the Empire of the Saviours trilogy with Gollancz Orion, the *Darks Woods Rising* and *Digital Desires* poetry collections, and other bits and bobs. He lives with his monstrously oppressive cat named Cleopatra.

Gothic Nature

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Aillwee Mountain

Frank Webster

Title: *Aillwee Mountain* (2023) Watercolour & graphite on handmade paper
22" x 30"

DESCRIPTION OF WORKING METHOD

It was overcast, drizzle turning to a gentle rain in the later part of my walk. There were lovely vistas of the surrounding mountains and the variegated terrain. Much of the path crossed through low copses of trees following narrow roads that faded in and out of cow lanes. The diversity and lushness of the greens was extraordinary—all wet and glistening. The blackberries were plump and virtually everywhere covering or revealing distinctive stone walls or long abandoned dwellings—damp limestone piles green with moss and lichen. Cattle wandered with me along the trail, curious about my presence. Black winged birds of prey patrolled the skies as I made my way along the looming mountainside. Finding a spot to set up, I began a small watercolour study of Aillwee Mountain. ('Aillwee' means 'yellow cliffs'—an apt description of the site).

ARTIST STATEMENT

Frank Webster's work—ranging from small, ethereal watercolours to monumental paintings—depicts both the nuanced allure of the natural world and humanity's interdependent relationship to it. His formal exploration of this tenuous coexistence in our ecosystem is apparent in all his work. Grounded in reality, his work recalls both the historical romanticism of landscape painting and contemporary technological advances in image-making. It references, abstracts, and transcends the ordinary. Regardless of the geographic location referenced, Webster persistently investigates the subjectivity of perception by illuminating often overlooked details and cohesion in the natural world. His meticulous rendering of space with often desaturated colour imbues these paintings with a melancholic and ethereal beauty. At first glance, the work recalls notions of the sublime or even Grand Tour travel paintings, but upon further examination reveals a wistfulness permeated by a sense of urgency emblematic of our era of global environmental change.

BIOGRAPHY

Frank Webster is a painter who lives in Queens, NY. Webster received his BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and his MFA from the Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University. He also attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Webster is the recipient of numerous awards including the NYFA Fellowship in Painting and the Pollock Krasner Award. He has shown in solo and group exhibitions domestically and abroad. Webster has been awarded residencies at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Space Program and the Arctic Circle Residency among others. In October of 2022, he was a resident artist at the Burren College of Art in County Clare, Ireland.

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