SPECIAL ISSUE

CONVERSATIONS ON
THE GOTHIC IN POPULAR CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

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In the spring of 2021, when academic work was still mostly virtual due to COVID-19 pandemic measures, we celebrated the foundation of PopMeC—an academic association dedicated to US popular culture studies—organizing a virtual conference on the Gothic and its widespread presence in contemporary popular culture. With the idea of bringing a fresh approach to online events and the traditional keynote format, the *50+ Shades of Gothic: The Gothic Across Genre and Media in US Popular Culture* conference involved a series of interviews with renowned scholars working in the field of Gothic studies, who discussed various aspects of contemporary expressions and functions of the Gothic in popular culture texts. The interviews were carried out between February and April 2021, and the original recordings can be found on YouTube.[1] Given the kind availability of our keynotes, we decided to compile the transcripts—edited by the interviewees and interviewers themselves in order to give them a publishing shape—in this special issue. This collection follows the publication of *REDEN* vol. 3, no. 1 (2021), which contained a special dossier exploring the presence and different expressions of gothic modes in contemporary US popular culture.

The fifteen interviews included in this special issue *Conversations on the Gothic in Popular Culture* cover various archetypes, paradigms, and expressions of the genre, including zombies, vampires, nature, and haunted house tropes. Furthermore, they consider the importance of horror and gothic modes in tackling specific contemporary sociopolitical concerns, such as racial and ethnic issues, family and domestic spaces, and gender representation, all mediated by processes of Othering and different portrayals of monstrosity. And, finally, they showcase contemporary scholarship on the Gothic, concerned with understanding the evolution of the genre and its presence in different mediums including films, TV shows, comics, and videogames. Above all, these discussions highlight how the Gothic continues to be alive and well

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[1] PopMeC Research "50+ Shades of Gothic | Keynotes." *YouTube*, playlist. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUpjS5dcmuVkVFWf_Mj-gwK0S4BH0wnWl.

in popular culture texts, as well as in the realm of academic research. Each of the interviews includes a Q&A session that was carried out with the audience members attending the interview virtual sessions. We have deemed important to include the public's interventions as they elicit new lines of thought that undoubtedly add to the discussion. Furthermore, the edited interviews are also accompanied by individual bibliography, which includes texts mentioned throughout each session.

This special issue opens with an introductory interview with Jeffrey A. Weinstock, focusing on the Gothic, as well as the relevance of popular culture and its suitability as a worthy object of academic inquiry. The following interviews are coupled according to macro themes they referred to: cyber gothic and posthumanism (Xavier Aldana Reyes and Anya Heise-von der Lippe), haunted houses and domestic spaces (Evert Jan van Leeuwen and Kevin Corstorphine), the Gothic in children's literature and comics (Michael Howarth and Julia Round), nature, science fiction, and the ecoGothic (Christy Tidwell and Michelle Poland & Elizabeth Parker), zombie and vampire narratives (Kyle William Bishop and Sorcha Ní Fhlainn), ethnic bodies and boundaries (Maisha Wester and Enrique Ajuria Ibarra), and the relation between the Gothic and the Anthropocene (Justin Edwards). As a conclusion, Gothic scholar David Punter discusses the nature of the Gothic, the workings of horror, and the particularities of the American Gothic tradition.
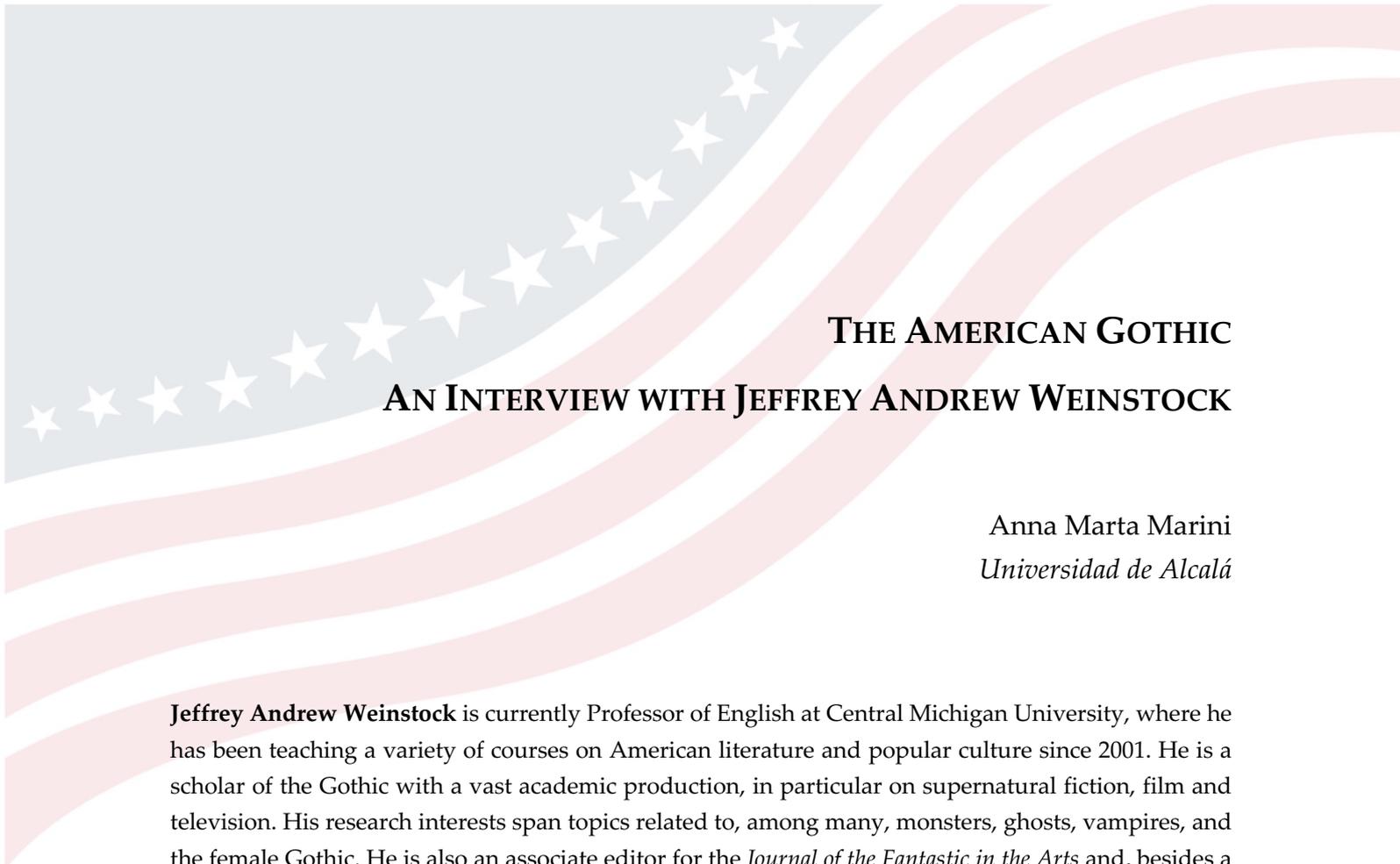
THE AMERICAN GOTHIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEFFREY ANDREW WEINSTOCK

Anna Marta Marini
Universidad de Alcalá

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock is currently Professor of English at Central Michigan University, where he has been teaching a variety of courses on American literature and popular culture since 2001. He is a scholar of the Gothic with a vast academic production, in particular on supernatural fiction, film and television. His research interests span topics related to, among many, monsters, ghosts, vampires, and the female Gothic. He is also an associate editor for the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* and, besides a long list of published essays, he edited three collections of tales by H.P. Lovecraft and has published over 20 books, among which *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (2004), *The Vampire Film: Undead* (2012), and *The Monster Theory Reader* (2020). He was as well the editor of the *Cambridge Companion to the American Gothic* in 2018.

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Anna Marta Marini: This is our introductory interview and I'm thankful to have Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock for it. Your work evidently spans across different disciplines and subjects and yet, most of it to some extent revolves around the Gothic and the ways gothic texts tackle old and new anxieties. But how was your interest in the Gothic born and how has it developed? And why do you think it is worth exploring the Gothic from an academic standpoint?

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock: As far as my developing interest in the Gothic, it was an early predilection for ghost stories that I increasingly channeled into an academic pursuit. I place a lot of the blame on the doorstep of Disney. I was obsessed with the Disney's Haunted Mansion at Disneyworld, which I went to when I was around eight or nine years old. It was the ride I kept wanting to go back on again and again. At about the same time, there was a Sunday night weekly program called *The Wonderful World of Disney*, and I remember vividly a story about the ghost of a little Creole girl called *Child of Glass*. I remember to this day being mesmerized

by the story of a ghostly little girl who needed the help of a living boy to recover a lost sachet of diamonds to avoid being doomed for eternity.

Also, around the same time, I found in my elementary school library a collection of stories called *Alfred Hitchcock's Haunted Houseful*. It was a collection of ghost stories, and I checked it out so many times that I almost memorized those stories. Somewhat later, Toby Hooper's *Poltergeist* in 1983 then sealed the deal for me, because it was one of the first horror movies that I saw in the theater, and I remember being on the edge of my seat for that. From there, it was a gradual process of exploring the Gothic and horror stories. I recall the lurid covers done by artist Michael Whalen for the H.P. Lovecraft Del Rey editions, that you could see when they used to have bookstores in malls. I would stare at the covers until I actually started to read H.P. Lovecraft. From there, my interests developed further. I got into literary ghost stories, so Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen King at some point, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). So, it was a natural fit then in graduate school that the focus of my doctoral dissertation became ghost stories and the hauntedness—or the ghostly qualities—of language. The linchpin that I used was the idea of the dead letter, the letter from the living that goes astray but also the letter from the dead that reaches its destination. For that, I was looking at Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James, and it went all the way up to Tony Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

Out of the dissertation came my first monograph, which is a book called *Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women*. In the process of researching for the doctoral dissertation, I discovered hundreds of ghost stories published by women in the 19th century in the American periodical press. It became clear to me that in many cases they were using the ghost strategically as a kind of metaphor for the displaced or disempowered situation of women in 19th century America—who were essentially the ghosts in the room, not seen, recognized, appreciated fully. The case that I make in that first book is there has been an unacknowledged feminist tradition of supernatural writing in American fiction. I was also working at that point on the *Spectral America* collection, which was an edited collection of essays, and I've graduated outwards from ghost stories, as you mentioned, to focusing on vampires, and then monsters in general. But I do think my first love remains the ghost story. I keep coming back to ghosts and ghost stories.

As for why I think the Gothic is worth exploring: it is to me this dense site of the cultural imaginary where very specific anxieties and desires come together: what we fear and what we hope for. Sometimes it wears its politics on its sleeve, other times you have to dig more deeply to excavate what's underlying there. But Gothic tales, I would argue, always tell us a lot about ourselves. In our present moment, there's definitely been a mainstreaming of speculative fiction in general and the Gothic in particular, and it's interesting to consider what kinds of cultural forces might be propelling its center stage.

AMM: As you say, the Gothic is culturally charged and you have worked mostly on the American Gothic. What do you think characterizes it? What are its peculiarities that you find strictly related to the American context?

JAW: I should start by saying that I'm a little wary of speaking in generalities about the American Gothic. Sometimes, it's more productive to think in terms of regional character as well as different temporal moments. That said, in the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to the American Gothic*, I included a rudimentary Venn diagram showing four locations or emphases of the American Gothic: religion, geography, otherness, and rationality. For religion, I was making the case that it's hard to think about the American Gothic without going back to the Puritan roots of the American experience, and there is an intensely Gothic quality to Puritan writings of the 16th to 17th and the 18th centuries in which you have a stern and angry god, who causes things to happen in the world for inscrutable reasons.
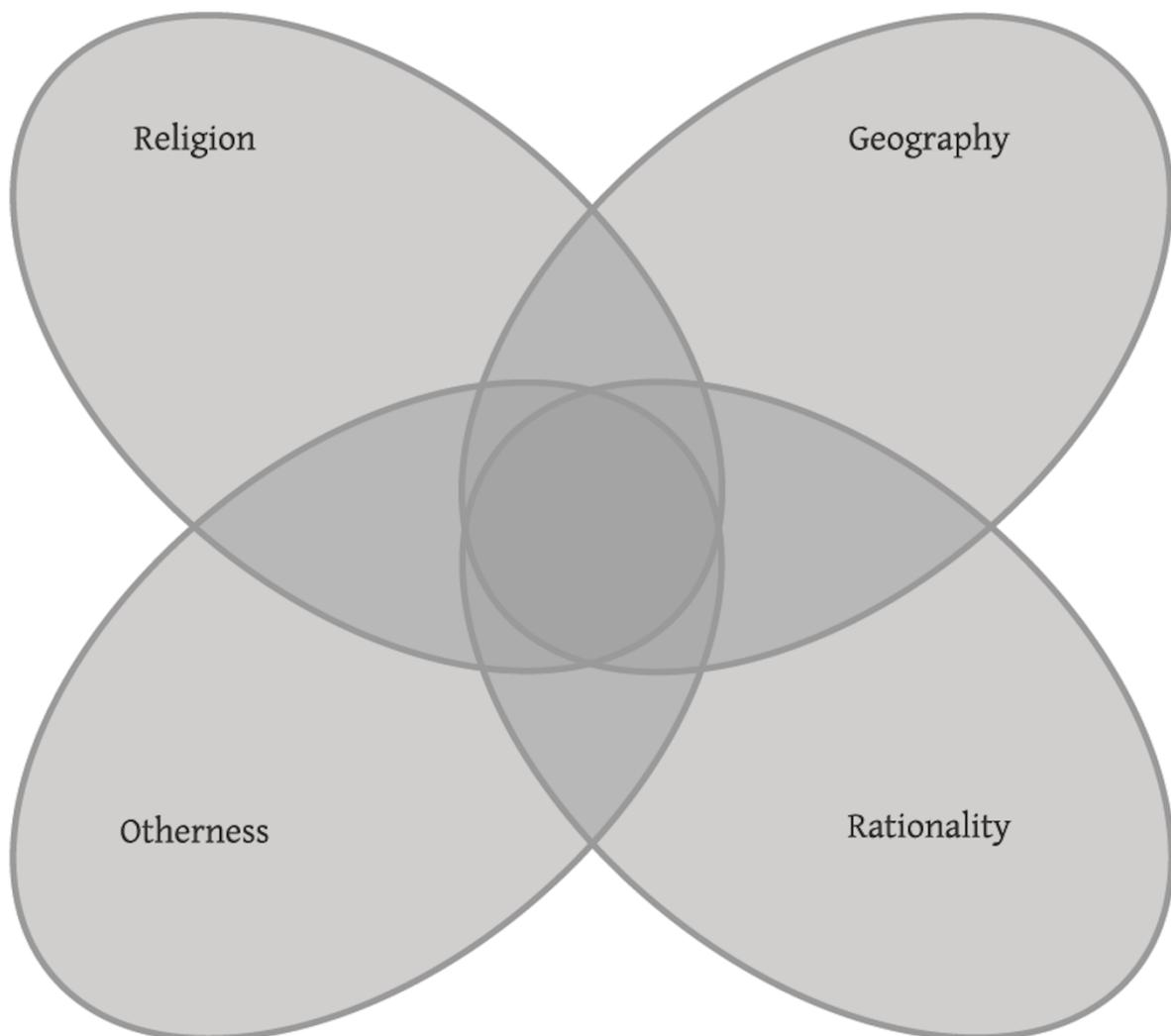

Figure 1 Themes of the American Gothic (Weinstock *Companion* 7).

I argue there the roots of the American Gothic can be traced back to this Puritan religious imaginary, which then dovetails quite closely with the role of the frontier in developing the American Gothic. You see that, in Puritan writings and into the 19th century, the wilderness is the place where one leaves behind civilization and encounters danger. So, when in Charles Brockden Brown—who is an American Gothic author who wrote at the very end of the 18th century and in the early part of the 19th century—or in James Fenimore Cooper it's about going off into the forest. In Herman Melville, it's about going out onto the ocean. It's always about leaving behind the domestic circle and going off on these adventures into some kind of uncharted territory. Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) falls into that category as well. You leave behind all the trappings of civilization and confront that dark side, the dangerous side of existence. This then segues quickly into the idea of the American Gothic as preoccupied with the encounter with the other, notably the Native American presence that resides within the wilderness or slavery and its legacy.

The fourth quadrant of that Venn diagram has to do with rationality—the concern that the Enlightenment principles upon which the United States of America was founded do not in fact hold true or consistently, that, in fact, human beings are not fundamentally rational or able to govern themselves, but instead are compelled or motivated by other forces. You see a lot of that in the movement from the 18th century to the 19th century, and authors like Poe and Charles Brockden Brown—who give us characters compelled by unconscious forces, madness that results in atrocious acts, or acting in ways which the characters are not consciously aware of. So, those are the four poles of the American Gothic. I might add now to the category of "rationality"—which I didn't do in the *Cambridge Companion to the American Gothic*—something about the rapaciousness of capitalist exploitation.

AMM: Gothic modes have been used in cross genre popular culture products. They have become ubiquitous, sometimes just as little hints but, still, they are there. Thinking of the production of pop culture in recent years—let's say from the turn of the century up to the present—what do you think has been the relationship between the Gothic and popular culture? Can you trace these elements you described in popular culture products?

JAW: I would say that, from the late 18th and early 19th century up through the present, the Gothic has always been very firmly entrenched within the sphere of the popular. From penny dreadfuls and shilling shockers to the horror pulp magazines of the 1930s and the 1940s, up to the present with horror games and podcasts, novels, films, fan fiction, creepypasta, and so forth. The Gothic has been aligned more fully with popular culture than elite or high culture.

I think there are a number of reasons for that. Some of it has to do with the sensationalistic aspect of the Gothic, its transgressions of decorum, its eliciting of a bodily response. All of this is antithetical to conventional notions of good taste and elite culture. I think the bodily nature of the Gothic here is particularly important. Linda Williams has written that there are three categories of literature, or of media, that fall into the category of body genre: horror,

melodrama, and pornography. And it isn't just a coincidence that all three of those are ones that traditional academic appraisal has kept at arm's length. Anything that targets the body has been seen as less worthy of analysis than those that seem to be more intensely cerebral.

I would also add that I think there has been a populist orientation to the Gothic from its beginnings, which disdains a corrupt aristocracy and a debased self-serving clergy. It's there in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Anne Radcliffe's predatory aristocrats. It's there in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), when Brown questions his faith and the goodness of the people of his town. You see it really clearly in something like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) in which a woman is being controlled by her husband, who is simultaneously her doctor. She's doubly disempowered and the gothic mode is used as a way to express the fact that no one is listening to her, no one is hearing her. This voice of critique travels all the way up to something like Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* (2017), which calls into question the idea that the United States is some kind of post-racial society, making clear that it is anything but.

So, I would respond to the question by just suggesting that the Gothic has always been closely aligned with popular culture, because all of its emphases are antithetical to conventional notions of good taste and decorum and elite culture and so on. It's Fred Botting who refers to the Gothic as being the literature of transgression. It is an interesting question as to whether most Gothic narratives end up as being conservative retrenchments of the status quo or whether there's something actually radical about them. Because what happens in most Gothic narratives is that you have the messy middle part, in which things get thrown into disarray, but in most cases everything is conveniently put back in place at the end. I tend to think of the ending as a kind of alibi that allows us to enjoy the messy middle part.

AMM: Speaking of popular culture, you worked on a book was published in October 2021, *Pop Culture for Beginners*. It is meant to be, and I quote: "an introductory textbook for undergraduate course adoption, introducing students to the history of the study of popular culture, outlining various theoretical approaches." Besides writing about it, you have been teaching courses on both the Gothic and popular culture. According to you, what are the challenges and benefits of teaching and learning about these topics?

JAW: Thank you for mentioning the book, it's my second foray into doing a textbook. I start it with what I call the "pop culture paradox": the idea that our popular culture pursuits are at the same time incredibly important to us, but also meaningless. I'm fascinated with the tendency to disavow the importance or the complexity or the meaningfulness of things that we actually love—which is the kind of resistance that I typically see when I start to teach a popular culture course.

I think there are a lot of reasons for this knee-jerk dismissal of the value and the complexity of the things that we do for enjoyment. Part of it clusters around the ideas of labor and utility. We tend to associate value with things that are difficult, the harder something is to

master the more its mastery seems to matter. You can think of James Joyce versus Harry Potter, or Joyce versus Stephen King. Joyce is slow going while Rowling or King read quickly, and our tendency is to equate work with value and to dismiss as less meaningful or important the thing that lots of people can access and enjoy. However, you could reasonably turn that on its head. Which one is more valuable or important: the book that's been read by millions, or the book that you need a semester-long college class to appreciate?

I also think there's a tendency to mistake the familiar for the simple. Because something is familiar to us, because we have frameworks in place to make sense of it, we don't even realize we're engaged in a process of interpretation. Thus, we think that there isn't much there to interpret. The irony at the core of the book is that there seems to be an inverse correlation between enjoyment and perception of value. The more we enjoy it, the less it seems like work, the less important or meaningful we perceive it as being.

What I do with the textbook then is to ask students to bracket off those value judgments, and to consider how meaning is created and conveyed in different media. The framework that I privilege for the book is therefore a semiotic approach to popular culture. We look at different forms of popular culture as rule-governed systems of communication. We start by asking "okay, so what is this thing?" and how is it constructed, what kinds of associations attach itself to it, and where we end up is always with the question of ideology: how does this object or practice reinforce or challenge particular understandings of the world?

The classroom itself is a great space literally to explore those issues. Consider how the conventional classroom is oriented: you have these little desks where students have to sit, the instructor has the privilege of moving about and standing up. It's usually a relatively sterile space without much decoration to it, all of which is intended to convey particular understandings about what education is and how it takes place. And the traditional model is that students sit passively while the instructor unscrews their head and pours in knowledge, and shakes them up and asks them to regurgitate it. There's a whole world view that we can extrapolate from just the classroom space itself!

Back to the Gothic. Inasmuch as I consider the Gothic to fall under the umbrella of popular culture, we can employ the same approach. I would say we can start by saying "okay, so what is this thing?" and what does it say, how does it say it, what cultural work does it do in terms of reinforcing or undermining established understandings of the world. And ultimately, is this a progressive challenge to conventional wisdom? Is it a conservative reaffirmation of existing power structures? This goes back to what we were talking about a minute ago—usually the status quo ante is restored at the end of the Gothic work. This is particularly true of monster movies. The monster is this eruption of chaos that needs to be dealt with and then we watch as the protagonists try to figure out "okay, what is this thing? How do we address it?" and, typically, at the end, the threat is resolved and things more or less go back to normal. Of course, we know now, in the era of the franchise, that the monster is never totally gone. It

will always be back in the sequel. But, for a moment, things have returned to the way that they were, which may well be the alibi that lets us enjoy the mayhem of the middle.

AMM: Do you think this dismissive approach could have something to do with how academia—perhaps the academic status quo or the academic notion that the epistemic authority needs to focus on "serious stuff," topics that are deemed "respectable" and thus more worthy of research?

JAW: The range of responses is really interesting. I do think there's a tendency to make a division between things that are fun and things that matter or are important, and the popular culture activities that they pursue tend to fall on the side of fun—so students dismiss them as not being as meaningful as the things that they have to work hard in order to master or to achieve. I try to point out that some of the reasons that the pop culture pursuits seem simple is that—because they're so well versed in it and understand how it functions—they don't consider themselves as engaged in a process of interpretation.

There's also the strange sense that to interpret something is to dispel its magic—that if we look at it too carefully and consider how it works, it won't function in the same way for them as an escape or a form of enjoyment. In some cases when you start to look at the politics of the thing that may well be the case. You look at the gender politics of a particular horror film in the way that sex equals death in the slasher films of the 1980s, and they start to see that there are these messages there. It's true in some cases that if you look closely, you may see something you don't like! So, the concern that looking too closely may spoil something has some merit, although remaining willfully blind to the pernicious politics of something is problematic. I also try to point out to them that if you truly esteem something, then scrutinizing it carefully is an active homage. If you value the thing enough to consider how it works, you're demonstrating that you really do have affection for this thing. This is often the way I think we, as academics, tend to function, right? We focus our scholarship often on things that we enjoy. This is Henry Jenkins's idea of the "aca" academic or acafan, who takes as the focus of their research things that they enjoy in general.

Some students do also resist what they presume to be "over reading" or over-interpretation of something. There's a comic or meme that circulates in which someone is interpreting the blue color of the drapes in the room in a book as reflecting the melancholy of the protagonist, and the author says "no, they're just blue curtains." But unconscious elements can find their way in. There's also the inherent ambiguity of language itself, which is always subject to multiple—and sometimes competing—interpretations. Authorial intent does not necessarily control the interpretation that a reader arrives at. I tell my students that if you can support the interpretation that you're making by showing moments in the text, there's nothing to say it's wrong—even if the author should say "no, I just meant the drapes to be blue."

AMM: I know that in 2016 you published a book, *Goth Music: From Sound to Subculture*, co-authored with musicologist Isabella van Elferen. Goth music and its scene have been a long-lasting part of your life and you've been dj'ing goth music for 20 years. Can you tell us something about the goth subculture itself and your own experience with it?

JAW: I have had a long affiliation with goth music—and alternative music in general—going back to new wave music of the 1980s, which is really what I grew up with. That was my moment, so it was a kind of slippery slope for me from bands like Depeche Mode and Gary Newman and New Order, to bands like The Mission UK and Siouxsie & the Banshees, and Bauhaus on the one hand, and then bands like Ministry and Skinny Puppy and Front 242 on the other.

I had the privilege in college in the late 1980s and early 1990s of working in the first music store in Philadelphia that was dedicated entirely to compact discs, which were still quite new at the time. It was on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania and was definitely a great place to work, very relaxed, and we would play whatever we wanted when we were working in the store, so we had the opportunity to explore various different bands or styles that weren't necessarily getting play on the radio.

I made the jump to actually dj'ing in graduate school, in Washington DC, and I've held a number of club residencies as a dj. There was a goth industrial fetish event in DC called Bound, and I became a resident dj for it around 1996. When I moved to Hartford in 1999, my wife and I ran a goth night there ourselves, while I also had a DJ residency for an event in New York City called Contempt. It took place in in the most goth industrial space that you could possibly imagine: a permanently moored, rusting hulk of a boat in the Chelsea Piers area of New York that had been converted into a club space, and you were kind of in the bowels of this rusting boat... it was crazy!

Around this time I was teaching as a visiting assistant professor at the University of Connecticut, which has its own community radio station. I began to do a radio show called Dark Nation Radio because I was looking for an opportunity to play tracks beyond what would be acceptable for dance floor play—and there's lots of material that's not suitable for the dance floor! When we relocated to Michigan in 2001, I continued the radio show on the Central Michigan University student station and then migrated it online. Currently, I do Dark Nation Radio—now in its 22nd year—live once a week on Sundays and then make shows available on my mixcloud page (mixcloud.com/cypheractive).

So, I've had a long association with goth and industrial music. Where the Goth Music book is concerned, Isabella van Elferen and I used to attend the same conference annually—the International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts in Florida—and we naturally began talking about our shared affection for goth music. One of the interesting things that we focused on was how goth has a very distinct aesthetic, but in terms of the music it's a very broad umbrella that accommodates a range of different musical styles, from down tempo mopey music to much harsher electronic material. If you attend a goth event, you're likely to hear everything from Bauhaus or The Sisters of Mercy or Christian Death to something like the

electronic music that's associated with Front 242 or even something that's much more abrasive like Combichrist for example, with distorted vocals and a very harsh sound. What we were trying to investigate with the book was how it is that goth music functions as an umbrella category, bringing together different subgenres that are quite distinct. How can one event accommodate all of these different styles? We wanted to go beyond thinking about goth as merely an aesthetic—or, where music is concerned, just focusing on or privileging lyrics—and to focus instead on the qualities of the music itself, which is where it was really helpful to be working with the musicologist!

One of the things that I quickly discovered starting to think about music is that there's a very specialized vocabulary for the conversation about music, which at that point I lacked, so I had to educate myself about how you actually talk about the distinctive qualities of timbre for example, or duration, and so on. Our approach in the book was to bring in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his notion of the chronotope—time spaces that literature constructs that give the characteristic flavor to different types of novels—and we were trying to use that as a way to think about different time spaces, if you will, for the types of music that get played at goth clubs. The kinds of narratives of the heroic past or the future that are developed through a combination of the qualities of the sound and through lyrical content. It was a departure for me in terms of the research I had done before, but it remained close to my heart because this was music I was so familiar with and it was quite enjoyable to go in that direction.

It's just as we were saying: when you get to analyze in detail and examine something that you really love or something that you really enjoy, it should be an enjoyable process. It doesn't spoil it. In my case, I got to know the music and the culture that is related to it even better.

Open Q&A session

Laura Álvarez Trigo: My question traces back to your very first answer, when you mentioned that your interest in the Gothic began with watching Disney movies. How do you think the Gothic is present in children's fiction? And I'm thinking specifically about cartoons and television shows, how is it—if it is—different from the way the Gothic manifests in fiction that's directed to adults? Do you think there's been an evolution in the way that the Gothic is present in children's products, from several decades ago to how it is now in mainstream cartoons? I am thinking specifically about shows such as *Gravity Falls* and *Over the Garden Wall*, which are two shows that I really like and both of them are wonderful.

JAW: Actually, my first thought while you were asking the question had to do with fairy tales and the fact that if you were to read Grimm's fairy tales—or fairy tales from the 18th and the 19th century—they're far more violent and much darker than the more sanitized version of fairy tales that children receive today. This seems to me to suggest a significant change in the way that we think about childhood, and the necessity of protecting children from darker messages or imagery. On the one hand, I think it's interesting to consider those shifts and forms

of representation from the 19th century to the 21st, in the way that fairy tales have been altered so that they're far less disturbing than something like *Struwwelpeter* for example.

On the other hand, with your reference points—*Gravity Falls* and *Over the Garden Wall*—we need to think carefully about audience, because one of the evolutions in the production of animation is the attempt to broaden the audience to include both adult and children. So, I think both of them—and particularly *Over the Garden Wall*—are attempting to walk a kind of fine line where the story is not too scary for children but at the same time is appealing for adults. The films of Pixar are even a better example of that, where you can find nods and winks towards the adults who are viewing at the same time that the narrative can be consumed by children—who don't get all the allusions or the reference points.

Beyond this, the big shift that I see in cartoons—I have two boys who are ages six and ten, so we do a lot of cartoon watching—and what has been so amazing to me is the emphasis on diversity and inclusion in children's media that from my perspective seems astounding and wonderful, while from my kids' perspective is just normal. It's part of a kind of general inversion of Gothic narratives where the traditional monster isn't the monster: those who pursue the monster are the monster. Those who demonize difference are the true monsters. So, I would say that there's an inversion of conventional ideas of monstrosity, where looking different or being different is not a marker of monstrosity; it's those who insult or demean those who look or act differently. Do you know *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*? It's about getting rid of "mutants" so that the world goes back to the way that it once was. In terms of the Gothic, the storyline has been turned on its head, where it's no longer about the eruption of strangeness or monstrosity that needs to be tamped down. Instead, it's about appreciating difference, and those who attempt to constrain people to specific courses are, in fact, the true monsters of children's narrative.

Sofía Martinicorena: In 2016 you co-edited a volume, *Return to Twin Peaks*, where you sort of assess *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) as gothic due to its weird, uncanny, defamiliarized presentation of matter and objects. Thinking of the film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), do you think that it somehow intensifies this gothic system that we find in the TV show? Or does it feed on the country's fears drawing on other genres, like slasher or thriller?

JAW: *Twin Peaks* is something that's near and dear to my heart, so I appreciate the question very much! That said, I'm trying to remember the specific details of the film, which I haven't seen in a long time. What I mainly have is in my brain—and I think this is from the film—is just the incredibly horrific vision in the train car, right? My tendency is to consider the film in the way you put it: as a kind of intensification of the series. I don't see it veering into the slasher category particularly. In keeping with David Lynch's work in general, there's a kind of absurdist element that he interweaves throughout that sometimes is there to evoke humor, but often is just to raise questions or to ask us to think more deeply. My answer therefore is that I see it as just being *Twin Peaks* but more so.

Did you see *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017)? It's an 18-hour movie experience of *Twin Peaks* in which he really refuses to gratify the viewer, who is the fan of *Twin Peaks*, for almost the entire thing. All of us are waiting for Kyle MacLachlan's Agent Cooper to return in *The Return*. We don't get that until near the very end and then everything is called into question. He pulls the rug out from beneath your feet when Cooper says, "what year is this?" and then we get the scream again that was Sheryl Lee's scream from the original *Twin Peaks* and then it ends. But back to the movie: it feels more bleak, more violent, more horrible in every possible way—and many people rejected it when it came out. I think it was even booed at Cannes and so, yeah, to me it feels as you say: more of *Twin Peaks*, an intensification of *Twin Peaks*.

I would note in relation to our earlier discussion that *Twin Peaks* offers an example the role of the frontier in the American Gothic. The woods are haunted. And, in place of Puritanism is a kind of displaced religiosity, with the white lodge and the black lodge, and the spirit world that seems to coexist with the material world and occasionally interact with it in various ways—which to me is a hallmark of the Gothic. What the Gothic insists is that the world of our senses—that we can see, feel, and touch—is only a small part of some larger experience of reality, that includes these other kinds of powers and forces in the universe.

Trang Dang: My question touches on your mention of how kind of the Gothic portrays something that is beyond us, and portrays the unconscious, the madness, and the horrors, the monsters that we don't know about. That reminds me of the genre of the new weird as well, or just the weird in general. Do you think that the Gothic—and by extension the new weird or the weird in general—is a better way of portraying accurately the ecological reality in which we live today? More accurately than the realist fiction, for example.

JAW: I think your supposition is a good one. I'm inclined to think that part of the mainstreaming of Gothic today, as well as the new weird, is a response to the challenges of our contemporary moment. The weird famously is associated with Lovecraft, who is problematic in a lot of ways, but who developed the notion of cosmic dread or what he calls "indifferentism," cosmic indifferentism, in which he depicts a vision of the universe in which human beings are not the center. And we're not even close to the center; we're somewhere on the periphery in this vision of the universe. We're not special; there are powers and forces that exist in the universe that outstrip our capacity to contend with and even to understand them, and we're always in a precarious position of being effaced. In some of Lovecraft's fiction, he even presents the idea that all civilizations naturally rise and fall; human beings will be displaced by something after us. We find ourselves in a situation in the 21st century confronting things like climate change—things Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects—that are so extended in scale and scope that it becomes very difficult for us to comprehend them, much less to grapple with them. So that notion of the weird, of human beings as being very tiny when compared with the sort of the spans of deep time, interstellar distance, and so on, seems to be finding its

expression. Our situation—climate change and pandemics and nuclear weapons and so on—finds its corollary in weird fiction, which has a gothic edge to it, I would say.

The difference between the new weird and the conventional Gothic is in the religious roots of the American Gothic: a stern and angry god who can cause things to happen for reasons that human beings can't figure out necessarily, but nevertheless is singling us out. In the new weird, we don't matter enough to even be singled out. There's a kind of self-aggrandizement that comes with thinking that you matter enough for god to actually kill your cow, or something like that. But where the new weird is concerned, it's just human beings existing in a mechanical universe of cold, impersonal forces, without anybody really caring about us too much or who would even mourn us if we weren't here. I think part of what we're confronting is a decentering of humanist pretentions that we really matter. We like to think that we do, and we spend all this time creating great works of architecture and art, and discussing them, but I think weird fiction at its heart asks "how much does any of that really matter?"

Mónica Fernández Jiménez: My question is about the fact that the Gothic is not always transgressive, but at times it is reaffirming the status quo. As a scholar of the Gothic, do you make any difference between aesthetics and politics when categorizing certain works as gothic? How do you feel about the classic debate around aesthetics versus politics, concerning the Gothic?

JAW: That is a wonderful question actually. My colleague Xavier Aldana Reyes's book on Gothic cinema makes the case that it's all about aesthetics—that in fact the fundamental criterion that you use to designate something as gothic is the way it looks—and I think that it's not a bad argument to make, that "we know Gothic when we see it." One of the interesting things that I've been thinking about myself is what I've been calling "prestige Gothic," gothic programs with very high production values that seek to engage our attention with ravishingly beautiful images of horrific things. Shows like *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016) come to mind, or *Hannibal* (2013–2015), that are just gorgeous to look at. And then you step back and realize what you're looking at.

There's often a kind of gorgeous grotesquery to the contemporary Gothic. Where narrative is concerned, I take the broadest possible approach to thinking about the Gothic. I define it as tales of transgression tending towards tragedy, which encompasses a lot. It's hard to pigeonhole the politics of the Gothic in any specific way because it depends upon narrative situation. In many cases, the Gothic ultimately is conservative in reaffirming the status quo at the end, by expunging whatever the threat is that intervenes in the middle, but not always, so it may well be that the defining criterion of the contemporary Gothic is how it looks, more so than any specific political orientation.

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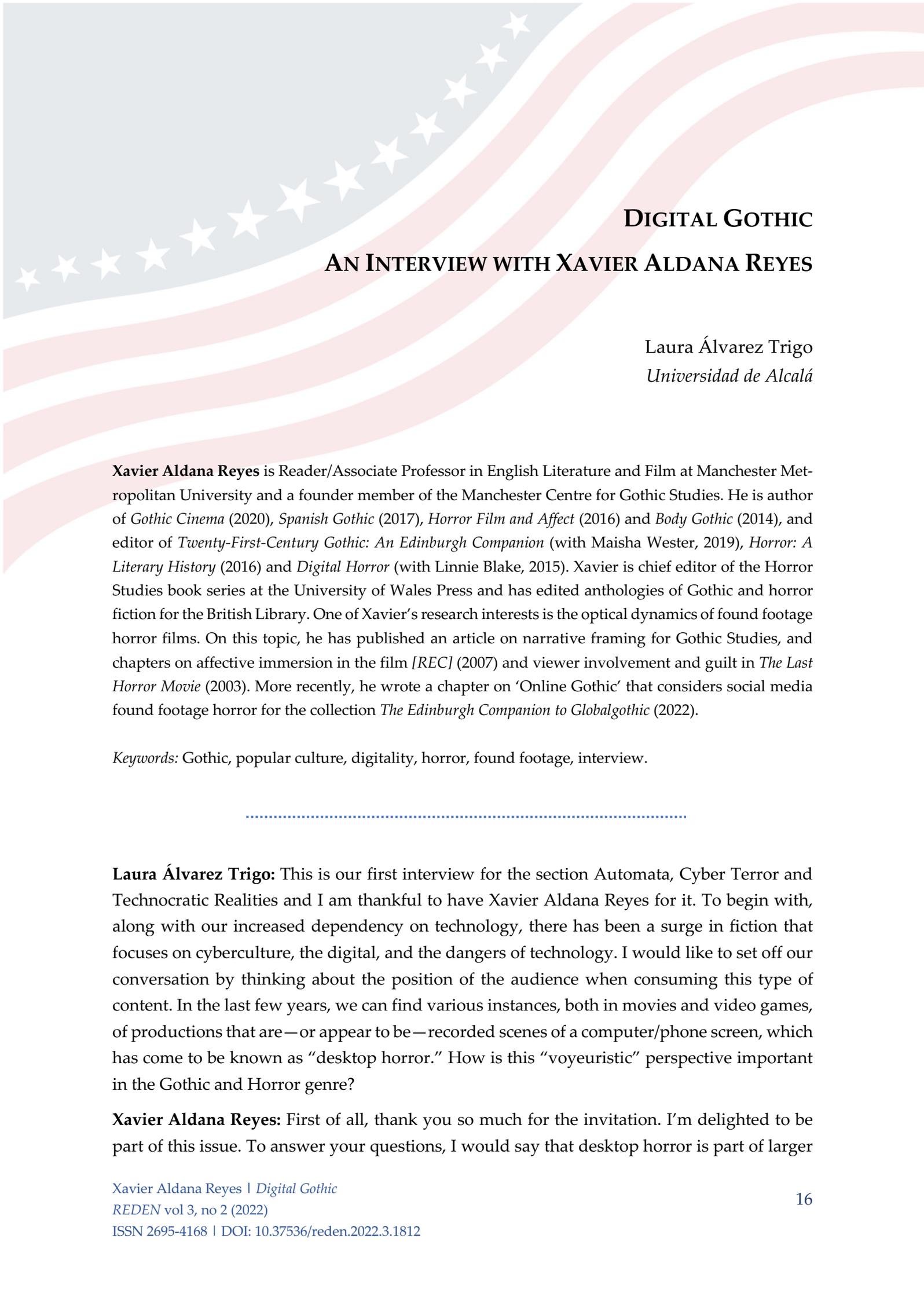
DIGITAL GOTHIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH XAVIER ALDANA REYES

Laura Álvarez Trigo
Universidad de Alcalá

Xavier Aldana Reyes is Reader/Associate Professor in English Literature and Film at Manchester Metropolitan University and a founder member of the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies. He is author of *Gothic Cinema* (2020), *Spanish Gothic* (2017), *Horror Film and Affect* (2016) and *Body Gothic* (2014), and editor of *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (with Maisha Wester, 2019), *Horror: A Literary History* (2016) and *Digital Horror* (with Linnie Blake, 2015). Xavier is chief editor of the Horror Studies book series at the University of Wales Press and has edited anthologies of Gothic and horror fiction for the British Library. One of Xavier's research interests is the optical dynamics of found footage horror films. On this topic, he has published an article on narrative framing for Gothic Studies, and chapters on affective immersion in the film *[REC]* (2007) and viewer involvement and guilt in *The Last Horror Movie* (2003). More recently, he wrote a chapter on 'Online Gothic' that considers social media found footage horror for the collection *The Edinburgh Companion to Globalgothic* (2022).

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Laura Álvarez Trigo: This is our first interview for the section Automata, Cyber Terror and Technocratic Realities and I am thankful to have Xavier Aldana Reyes for it. To begin with, along with our increased dependency on technology, there has been a surge in fiction that focuses on cyberculture, the digital, and the dangers of technology. I would like to set off our conversation by thinking about the position of the audience when consuming this type of content. In the last few years, we can find various instances, both in movies and video games, of productions that are—or appear to be—recorded scenes of a computer/phone screen, which has come to be known as "desktop horror." How is this "voyeuristic" perspective important in the Gothic and Horror genre?

Xavier Aldana Reyes: First of all, thank you so much for the invitation. I'm delighted to be part of this issue. To answer your questions, I would say that desktop horror is part of larger

trend, what we may call "computer screen cinema", not all of which is necessarily horrific. Desktop horror, in particular, focuses on the dark side of the connected anxieties you were mentioning (see Larsen; Hallam), and is primarily interested in the issue of human dependency on the digital world for practically everything. Giving up on social media and smartphones is increasingly unthinkable, since we now need Internet access for even minor everyday activities like catching the bus or shopping. Part of desktop horror's interest is how certain platforms and electronic gadgets are currently filtering human life, even guiding and predicting it to dangerous levels. We live through screens, through gadgets and informational flows, which breeds certain fears, like fraud or surveillance. These anxieties are key to the twentieth century and to the development of found footage.

Shoshana Zuboff has written about this topic in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), highlighting the fact that everything we do online leaves a trackable footprint. There is what she calls "behavioral surplus" (63–97), data exhaust which is being collected and used by companies like Facebook and Google for the benefit of third parties (advertising, for example). The voyeurism you refer to demonstrates an awareness that with social media comes the forfeiting of some personal freedoms, sometimes at a bigger cost than we realize. Then, there is the nature of social media. Films like *Megan is Missing* (2011), *The Den* (2013) or the *Unfriended* films (the first one from 2014, and the sequel from 2018, *Unfriended: Dark Web*), and even *Ratter* (2015), explore similar ideas of digital platforms and media being dispossessed or taken over by someone or something (some "thing") else. They are also preoccupied with the fact that people could be recorded unawares, hunted down and threatened by cruel, opportunistic hackers (individuals or corporations). In horror that explores voyeurism, there is a sense of involvement, that the viewer is part of the horrific exchange. This is also true of found footage horror that is not in the desktop tradition. I am thinking of films like *The Last Horror Movie* (2003), for example. In the desktop horror tradition, films like *Open Windows* (2014) or *Untraceable* (2008) are interested in people signing in to watch others being tortured, and portray scopophilic anxieties also being exploited by more recent films, like *Keep Watching* (2017). Part of it has to do with our moral position: are we willing consumers of, or passive onlookers to, filmic violence? I cannot help but feel that this is related to social media and our consumption of other people's lives, and how this, in turn, forces us to alter our own behaviours and desires, consciously or subliminally.

This new digital cinema is also distinct aesthetically, and inextricable from the interfaces it uses to express its horrors. As Adam Charles Hart has posited, films like *Unfriended* encourage a new type of involvement that exceeds the cinematic and is closer to the medium being rendered "uncanny;" they foster a species of "browsing" (3) of the film image. They stimulate a searching process for clues and, where supernatural agency manifests in the shape of glitches, viruses or intrusive pop-ups, for the cause of such errors and interruptions (Daniel 151). Desktop horror is, for obvious reasons, best enjoyed on an actual laptop that can frame the action

even more realistically. Its most successful examples are a fantastic blurring of medium, product, aesthetics and cinematic affect.

LAT: So with desktop horror as a response to our increased dependency on technology, which is a form of reflecting on contemporary cultural anxieties, we see that part of that anxiety corresponds to our experience of space and time and what you were saying about our own involvement when we are online. In your work on *Horror Film and Affect* (2016), you analyze "found footage" as a way of positioning the audience as a witness. Now, let us compare this found footage with desktop horror, for instance, the movie *Host* (2020). This movie is basically a recording of a Zoom call, so as an audience member, as you watch this movie you are sitting there in your room, watching the screen as if you were actually watching a Zoom call; you are watching and experiencing the same thing as you would "in real life" so to speak. So, how does it contribute to having the audience immersed in a more realistic way, contrasting with found footage movies when you are witnessing people moving around with their cameras in the woods, or running up and down a flight of stairs in found footage movies such as *[REC]* (2007), which are very different from the physical experience than the audience member is really having? Does this physical aspect have a role in integrating the audience in the narrative? How is this sense of "being there" important in the Gothic and Horror Genre in terms of the workings of fear?

XAR: You are picking up on a really interesting area of overlap here, but also potentially on where desktop horror and found footage horror diverge. In my work, I was initially interested in the dynamics of found footage horror precisely for the reasons that you raise. How do these films place us in the heart of the action? How do they mediate events and break the fourth wall? I was interested in these discussions at the time, when I was writing about torture porn and the kind of incriminating viewing experiences of films like *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005). My conclusion was that we could not call torture porn "sadistic," since its points of view were used for maximum effect on viewers – aligning them with both the tortured and the torturer. This point was even better articulated by Steven Jones (2013), who wrote what is possibly the best defense of this subgenre in terms of its complex viewer alignments. Found footage horror normally creates a sense of immediacy and of affect through an avatar that, in cases like *[REC]*'s, becomes a proxy for the viewer. Pablo in that particular film does not really say very much; we never really see him so that we may most unobtrusively embody his position. The off-screen space here can become, as it does in first-person POV survival horror games like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010) and *Outlast* (2013) and even more so in virtual reality (VR) horror films like *11:57* (2014), a source of threat, and the camera a visual replacement that provides the illusion of immersion.

Technically, desktop horror is very different, as the action is somewhat more static and the story can take place "live," as in the case of the zoom call in *Host*. This should render a type of horror that is more democratic insofar as, to go with André Bazin's influential view

on depth of field (35–6), one's gaze should be able to travel anywhere on the frame. In reality, we know that this not how these films work all the time. *Host* obviously directs our sight towards one video box or another as the narrative progresses. In other films, like *Unfriended*, the actions of a character guide our attention, and in films like *Open Windows* or *Searching* (2018), there are more media (news footage, for example) involved, live or not. Some of these, like most found footage horror, betrays the existence of an external editorial hand. For me, this is where desktop horror and found footage differ, even if both are interested in the "being there" pretense. One could argue that 9/11 has something to do with this; especially with the idea that iconic images of the terrorist attacks reached us before the information (see Wetmore 23–56). The digital image is now in a paradoxical position: it has massive indexical value, as we rely more and more on images and videos to chronicle and curate our lives; at the same time, it is a lot more prone to manipulation. Digital technology and software have made the distortion and falsification of images easier than ever, affecting the ontological value of the photograph, long held as *de facto* marker of reality (see Jenkins; Manovich). And in "post-truth" times (McIntyre) where alternative facts carry as much weight as actual ones, social media (now largely the conveyors of news for many people) have become havens for the distribution of misinformation campaigns and doctored images.

We are beholden to the image because it shows us reality as it unfolds; yet, it is also completely unreliable. Found footage and desktop horror emerge from this tension. I see desktop horror as a natural evolution of the aim to create an illusion of the "now." Irrespective of whether one likes *Host,* there is a certain prescient genius in deciding to shoot the film through Zoom and in releasing it in the middle of a pandemic that came to be defined by video calls after travel restrictions affected vast swathes of the world. One of the many things that excites me about horror is that it always has its finger firmly on the social pulse; it is able to capture the zeitgeist like few other genres. Desktop horror exploits the medium to tell us stories about our times and fears, which are really not that different from those of old—they are simply channeled by new, dominant technologies.

LAT: To expand on this idea of space and place from what you've mentioned about witnessing whatever is happening at the moment, and how it has become quite particular when thinking about the online realm; but also going a little bit more into gothic tropes, we could argue that the gothic mansion—as the liminal space—could be translated into an immaterial existence on the Internet. We have the virtual space as a non-place with no physical substance (regardless of the fact that the Internet is a physical thing that exists somewhere in the Ocean, but we don't think about that much), so the Internet is this non-place where we are not physically there. We merely have some representations of ourselves, avatars, and, possibly, some form of displaced identity that we present online. Do you think that this online realm can behave as a horror house? If so, how do you think our dependency on technology contributes

to these narratives? Does this "new immaterial horror house" want to entrap us? Or does the metaphor feel insufficient or inadequate here?

XAR: In terms of what the house normally represents in the popular imagination, it is a place of safety, privacy and reflection. This is why it is also ripe for Gothic hauntings (among many others, see Curtis; Meehan). They are the closest spatial proxy for our psychologies, which can be externalised through them. Think of Roger Corman's famous *House of Usher* (1960), where the crumbling, confusing mise-en-scène is meant to reflect Usher's descent into madness. So at a time when the boundaries between the private and the public are being eroded due to surveillance capitalism and the infiltration of social media into virtually everything we do, it makes perfect sense that the analogy of the haunted house should apply to the Internet, that it would transmute into a haunted digital netherspace. This, of course, is not a new concept; it was already thoroughly explored in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), where the mind floats freely in cyberspace while the body stays anchored, clotting in the reality of the bedroom, where time does pass physically.

The Internet, as a medium defined by flow and exchange, can also work as a threshold that lets through malignant entities. Think of *FeardotCom* (2002), with its "Do you want to see a ghost?" website that unleashes hauntings remotely with one volitional click. The Internet has become a new home for our private thoughts and the process of reflection, a door into other worlds, not always pleasant ones. We are haunted by the very social medium through which we construct our sense of self and by the avatars we invent from our bedrooms.

LAT: So, if we characterize the computer as specter and the Internet as a horror house—and you were also mentioning how we become somehow part of it—this brings to mind fictions of the automata, and specially Artificial Intelligence nowadays, in terms of how they might have a similar role to the monster in gothic fiction. Sometimes, this is a monster that is in a way enticing, attracting us, often sexually. And the sexuality of automata has been present in film for decades, mostly through men who establish romantic and sexual relationships with gynoids (a la Pygmalion and Galatea) such as *Ex Machina* (2014), to give a fairly recent example. So, thinking about affect—which you have mentioned before in our conversation—, how does the machine as a monster damage or enhance this human capacity for affect? Is the source of horror here a reflection of our fear to establish real connections with other humans? And, is there a gothic element to this, so to speak, ill-advised connection formed with the abject, liminal monster?

XAR: There is quite a lot to unpack here. Creationist fears of the machines we shape into being have an obvious and significant point of origin in the Frankenstein myth and, more generally, the mad scientist tradition – that is, the idea of the *tabula rasa* in the form of Frankenstein's Creature and the fact that the invention is always, to a certain extent, a mirror for the mind that makes it. This resonates with theorizations, like Marshall McLuhan's, of technology as "the final phase of the extensions of man [*sic*] – the technological simulation of consciousness"

(3). Fear of the machine has now passed on to AI and robots: we are concerned that machines' incremental power to think, to process vast amounts of information, will render our brains, with their organic limitations, obsolete. And we are very actively replacing human labour with machines in many industrial sectors, which generates concomitant suspicion and resentment towards automation.

Then there is the issue of the gendered nature of manmade creations. For example, in *Ex Machina,* the robot is given a female form. One of the things that this suggests, as explored in the novel *Frankissstein* (2019), by Jeanette Winterson, is that we are updating technology at such a breakneck speed that we almost cannot cope with the practical and moral implications of our actions. Our ideologies, our thinking, are not necessarily advancing as fast as our programming capacity. The prosaic example of the sex robot strikes me as significant: it is a technologically sophisticated sexual object thoroughly tied up in misogynistic and objectifying notions of womanhood. Winterson's novel critiques the gendered rise of this technology by contrasting it with a timeline featuring science fiction writer Mary Shelley and Ada Lovelace, whose famous account of the "analytical engine" made her a historically significant, if long overlooked, female scientist.

This leads me on to something else raised in *Frankissstein*: what do we do, morally, ethically, with new, complex technology? For all that our worries seem to be about robots taking over the world, at which point are we going to create conscious automated life that needs some form of legal protection? It might sound like a facetious question, but when will the life that we create be so autonomous in its thinking and power to feel that it requires its own rights? Humans will not be the only thing at risk from our technoscientific prowess.

LAT: Thinking about these ideas of the risks of technology, as well as bringing together all these ideas that we've discussed (audience point of view and involvement, the different elements of the gothic that might be present in cyberterror, our relationship to the machine/automata as a possible monster, the machines' rights…), we also find that there's been a number of quite successful recent productions in non-fiction dealing with these issues. Some of these productions play both with documentary style and fictionalized recreations of our online existence, such as the quite popular Netflix docudrama *The Social Dilemma* (2020), which foregrounds the dangers of social media and privacy by focusing on a crude dramatization of the dangerous experience, not focusing so much on discussing tangible political and economic measures that could be taken. And, quite a different example but also in the realm of dealing with some of the fears you have discussed in documentary form, we have the true crime series *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* (2019), which explores issues already present in the genre of snuff movies but with the added preoccupation of the exponential growth and accessibility thanks to the Internet. Do you see horror elements in these narratives as a form of warning, of working through our fears and anxieties (both on the part of the creators and on the part of the audience)? Are these retellings of the horrors of the digital? And, as you

were also mentioning in the beginning, there is the issue of privacy and corporate ownership so, in this sense, what is the political role of horror here?

XAR: To answer the first question: yes, both *The Social Dilemma* and *Don't F**k with Cats* essentially play out like horror films. I am not sure if they constitute a direct case of influence, or maybe of equivalence, but both examples strike me as manifestations of something that is in the air: the fact that we are aware that we are being watched, that the things that we do online leave a digital trail. There are two aspects to a documentary like *Don't F**k with Cats* that interest me. On the one hand, on a superficial level, it is about the direct dangers of the Internet as a place where harmful content circulates freely. Luka Magnotta's is a case in point: someone who uploaded videos of cats he was killing for views, and eventually went on to record the murder of a man. In that respect the documentary does raise some powerful questions about the Internet as catalyst for such material, as a captivated stage for the demented. A film like *Unfriended*: *Dark Web* (2018), which explores the "dark web," goes even deeper into the pit of unregulated content not even indexed by search engines. But there is another, equally dark, side to that documentary, and that is the zealousness of the people who hunted Magnotta down, especially how easy it was for them to track him down. It was a long process, admittedly, but they were eventually faster than the police. In effect, they were able to use the Internet against the perpetrator. Digital tracks make profiling easier than ever. To me, *Don't F**k with Cats* is a great documentary because it both feels like a horror film and raises all these issues around surveillance capitalism.

I guess this might sound a bit controversial, but to address the issue of what role the Gothic has come to play in all of this, I feel horror films about technology have become social realism. I watch a film like *Host*, a supernatural horror, and it does not feel too different from films where the killers are human, or from the documentaries you mentioned. Whether we believe, as in *Ratter*, that we are constantly being recorded and observed by people who do not have our best interests in mind, the capacity is there for people to hack into our accounts and gadgets. And that stands in for the surveillance practices of Big Tech. Everything you like, everything you click through to, leaves a record somewhere, that can be exploited by others. We need laws to stop such covert practices, as they have a direct impact not just on our privacy and the collapse of the private into the public, but, as we have seen in recent examples covered in *The Great Hack* (2019), also on the future of democracy. It is interesting that technology that was intended to offer freedom of information has been turned into a new digital panopticon. The emphasis in recent years on wearables, potentially even more intrusive forms of data acquisition, signals that this trend is not about to buckle anytime soon. And the Covid pandemic has only emboldened the tech giants, who have come out richer than ever before.

LAT: Yes, I completely agree with that. That is really the true horror behind this thing that we've put so much hope on for being a democratizing tool and then it has transformed into a new panopticon. So finally, could you share some final thoughts on the role of cyber horror

in popular culture nowadays? How is it going to develop in the future and how is it going to continue to play with our contemporary cultural anxieties?

XAR: It is hard to say because, in many respects, some of the aspects that I thought would characterise the future of digital horror are now its present. We will see a rising interest in policing. I think Catherine Zimmer, in her brilliant book *Surveillance Cinema* (2015), talks about surveillance as the "logic" of contemporary cinema. It is a complex argument that has to do with the dynamics of cinema itself, but her point that surveillance is a new popular aesthetic and cultural primer is interesting. It is perhaps not a surprise that all these digital Gothic texts, the supernatural ones in particular, are about the Internet and digital media taking on a life of their own that resists human control. I am thinking of *Friend Request* (2016), where Facebook becomes "haunted" and starts posting personal content following the suicide of a teenage witch. Supernatural social media are the natural next stage in the evolution of "haunted media" (Sconce) revitalised by *Ringu* (*The Ring*) in 1998. They replace analog abjection (Benson-Allott 102–31) with phobias about modern forms of image and information distribution such as streaming, browsing and downloading. These, in turn, materialise in forms of digital disruption like frozen frames and glitches (pixilation, changes in colour and other distortions), which, as Marc Olivier has put it, are "becoming to the twenty-first century what the crumbling mansion was to gothic literature of the nineteenth century" (253).

We are also going to see more films about isolation, not just because of Covid, but because of the silo-ing, cocooning nature of the Internet. *Kairo* (*Pulse*, 2001) was a great film in terms of anticipating a lot of the dangers of the digital revolution. We still have not seen everything that horror can do with the idea of the Internet as "trap" and how social media encourage a particular type of very superficial level of engagement in human communications. So, I think it is inevitable that there will be stories that begin to fantasize about isolation as a route into privacy, into escaping the noise of the hyper-activated world, rather than as an indication of personal struggles.

And finally, for the reasons that I mentioned above, we are going to see more horror stories focusing on forms of totalitarian control. We will see more dystopias in which the technology is going to play a significant part in the process of social discrimination. Currently, the greatest fear for a lot of this fictional material is that the tools that are used to collect behavioral surplus are turned against us. If you know what someone likes, if you can work out who they are from their daily digital and online interactions, you can predict where they will be tomorrow, what they may need then. In fact, you can predict what they will need before they realise this themselves. These are the type of nightmares that we are likely to encounter over the next few years, which will build upon the concerns explored by fan footage and desktop horror: technology as not just capturing, but altering and even dictating, human behaviour.

Open Q&A session

Anna Marta Marini: This just came to my mind now when you were talking about the non-fictional kind of digital documentary, on this showing and fueling this fear of the digital world. Recently I watched *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (2020)**.** This is the story of this girl that disappeared and they found their dad in the water tank of the hotel. Aside from the story, I found very interesting that a part of the documentary series was focused precisely on the found footage, basically because they found the footage from an elevator and you could see her and that sparked the attention of the public, and they really insist on this footage mystery. And then, the other interesting part was precisely what you were talking about now, the tracking of people on the Internet because this want-to-be detectives on the Internet tracked down this dude that was in Mexico at the time, so he couldn't have possibly been involved in the crime, and they accused him for some reason of being the murderer. And this guy had his life shattered, he lost everything. I liked that at the end of the documentary they interviewed him and they actually underlined this issue—even if I think not enough. So, considering this new—or renewed—passion for true crime shows, do you think there's been a sort of blending with some horror techniques or narrative strategies that are usually found in horror narratives?

XAR: I must confess I have not seen this particular documentary, but I will look it up. It sounds to me very likely that somewhere there must be videos that could incriminate anyone, just by dint of the amount of surveillance footage that is automatically generated on a daily basis. I do not know whether, in this particular case, the investigators used such material. Was it a public effort or a private one?

AMM: The police released this footage from the elevator and, for some odd reason, later on, some people on the Internet thought that this other guy was the murderer when he wasn't even there. So, I really felt, watching this series, that it was really like a fictional horror series. It was just planned and narrated like a horror series and not like just a documentary.

XAR: Yes. They definitely speak to each other. The surveillance ethic is the same. I guess in this particular case it is being put to good service (in order to uncover a crime), but we have the incrimination of someone who did not have anything to do with it, which is worrying. I think this is the other scary aspect about cyber-life: its indelibility. But to answer you earlier question more directly: yes, I think cinema and the documentary have long influenced each other. Documentary drawing on found footage techniques is an interesting reverse of events, as found footage films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Cloverfield* (2008) definitely drew inspiration from the documentary format, as well as the homemade video tape, in the first place. And of course, many of the internal narrative tensions of the horror genre apply to detective films and thrillers, especially the building up of tension.

AMM: Yes, I thought it was very interesting because it exactly used those things and it was built like a horror movie. It was really building on the suspense and, in the end, the mystery wasn't really a mystery.

XAR: I find the idea of documentaries being turned into a larger mystery series quite an interesting concept. It is probably not new, but I have definitely noticed the fact that documentaries have turned into suspense stories, with their own cliff-hangers and carefully curated storylines and character arcs.

Trang Dang: I'm interested in how, when the horror occurs what is that makes us scared? Is it the idea of how non-objects and non-human objects, automata, start to act more human and to have a consciousness? How does the agency of humans, and kind of automators in cyberpunk fiction and films portrayed in these media, is something described as something that humans and the automata already intrinsically have or is it something that they develop throughout the course of the films or the fiction? Both their uncanny and human features.

XAR: I think there is a tipping point. To go back to the example that Laura was referring to, *Ex Machina* strikes me as a great example of a story where technology is okay so long as it is dependent on humans, safe and controlled. The key to the horror in that film is that the automaton has been outsmarting the human all along and abusing our capacity for empathy. I think this is the most uncanny aspect of automata, not just the fact that they walk the path between what we recognize as human and inhuman, but the fact that we never really know what they are thinking or who has programmed them for what purpose. For example, in the YouTube videos featuring Sophia the robot, an incredibly advanced humanoid activated in 2016 and the first to receive citizenship of any kind, her suggestion that humans should not fear her immediately triggers doubt. I think there is something here around control and around who gets to make decisions. I would say that it is almost natural for us to feel this way because we simply do not know what hides behind the programming, in the same way that we do not know what databases hide behind Alexa or Siri. We talk to mechanized voices that have been programmed seemingly for our benefit, but where does that information go and who uses it? I think this is what one can extrapolate to the fictional automaton. It is all about the point at which we lose control over technology, at which we become potential victims of its magic, rather its beneficiaries.

TD: Do you think that this discourages us to spend more time with technologies in a way because it makes us scared and think about the control and you know the power that technology might have upon us?

XAR: I think it is the exponential aspect of the AI that scares us, that at some point it begins to learn independently and can outsmart us. As with all things human, I think it is a question of mastery. My concern is not with automata themselves, but the fact that I feel that they are spokesperson for someone else I am not seeing. The other idea (robots dominating

humankind) seems to me still, although maybe not for much longer, more in the realm of the science-fiction dystopia. In any case, I do not think knowledge of such extant dangers prevents us from using digital technology. It has been created and perfected to be almost indispensable, so most people would rather put up with a little discomfort and fear than give it up completely. And then, of course, there is the issue that it creates psychological addiction.

Caitlin Duffy: I've been thinking a lot about surveillance capitalism but in terms of haunted house films, so thank you for recommending Catherine Zimmer's book. Could you talk a little about how you see bodies, and maybe even body horror, play into desktop horror? As you were talking, I was thinking a bit about how surveillance capitalism sort of takes our digital selves and transforms us into just data, and I was thinking too about how the Internet could be, and you talked about this, it could have been this place of freedom or at least that's how we were originally imagining it, in this idealistic utopian sense, but then there's also this loss of freedom in the way that we're broken down into data. I think this comes across too in some horror movies and even the work we do to create our digital self. I was thinking in *Don't F**k with Cats* we even see that with Luka Magnotta all the work he did to create this identity. We see it in *Unfriended* a little bit too, and also in non-horror films like the recent *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2017) remake because there was sort of a chance for body horror there. So I was thinking about this and also the return of our past selves too because this other identity we sort of have to grapple with and I think that can be a sort of body horror in a way as well.

XAR: I think there are two types of body horror that are connected to digital horror. One of them has to do with our dependence on digital media. In *The Social Dilemma*, this is actually portrayed with both kids being so reliant on their phones that they cannot go without them for extended periods of time. Another great example is the "Nosedive" episode of *Black Mirror* (S3 E1, 2016), which is really a *reductio ad absurdum* or grotesque exaggeration of similar rating practices and apps already in wide circulation that articulate our social interactions and perceived socioeconomic and personal worth. It may seem like an overreaction, but the point about dependence is based on research that has proven that young people show all the withdrawal symptoms of addicts when their smartphones are removed for a day or more (Zuboff 446–7). This dependency translates in some films into the melding of the system with the user. *Sequence Break* (2017) and *Peripheral* (2018) illustrate interdependence through Cronenbergian body horror. In one, a console the gamer is playing starts fusing with his own flesh; in the other, the writer gets inked up and becomes part of the intelligent software facilitating the writing of her novel. These films explore our digital subservience. We lose ourselves in the process of constantly checking for updates, of validating ourselves through others' performative appreciation of us.

The other issue is the capacity of social media to dictate lives. We are sold the illusion that, because we have a Facebook profile that is ours, or an Instagram profile, we have the freedom to project whom we are, or even who we would like to be. But of course this is not

the case; we succumb to peer pressure in the same way we do socially. And this technology is always a potential means of extortion and bullying. What worries me, and what maybe some of the new horror films mentioned in our conversation are beginning to capture, is how we never really are who we think – and old Gothic trope that has traditionally found a fictional embodiment in the figure of the double. Online, we become the person that pleases our followers the most or who will garner the most attention and acceptance. There is something of our personality that gets inevitably lost in the process.

Films like *Unfriended* also seem to be exploring "revenge porn" and the illicit sharing of other people's private images. This is not just about a lack of consent, but about the erosion of the private and personal. The cause of the haunting in *Unfriended* is a girl who is humiliated publicly on Facebook and who wants her own back. It is the same for *Friend Request*. Someone who has been humiliated comes back for retaliation. It strikes me that these are the three things that body horror does in the digital realm: it explores Internet dependence, the artificial construction of ourselves under social pressure, and the impact of other people sharing private data, especially data that has not been consciously passed on or that is recorded and used without our agreement.

Heather Lukins: My question is about what you were talking about regarding digital desktop horror. With the current rise in Zoom, Teams and work from home in the current Covid-era, I'm looking towards the post-Covid era. Would you say this is sort of globalized and, at least in the western world of understanding of desktop horror, or is there still something that you would classify about the genre as being sort of quintessentially American, or is it this just because the prevalence of American-based companies in terms of big data, Facebook and Twitter?

XAR: I would say a bit of both because Zoom has strong links to China, as does TikTok. But yes, all the Big Tech has traditionally "lived" in Silicon Valley, in the US. I would say, though, that with Google, Microsoft and Facebook all having a global presence, issues easily escalate into worldwide problems. Where we might still see a difference is in Europe, thanks to GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), which has gone some way towards visualising the vast amount of information retrieved and sold without express consent. I really hope that the implementation of GDPR in 2018 marks the beginning of a turn towards a harsher take on the regulation of personal data.

Host was able to appeal to all of us because it was not exclusively about the technology. It was also about human contact during the Covid pandemic. This is probably what makes it a film that is not, strictly speaking, nationally specific. It is clearly a text about connecting with significant others during a time of enforced isolation, and the horrors that lurk within this mediated setup. If one believes that the Internet ultimately isolates people as much as it connects them, then *Host* becomes its own critique of how the very platforms supposed to bring us together can have unexpected negative consequences.

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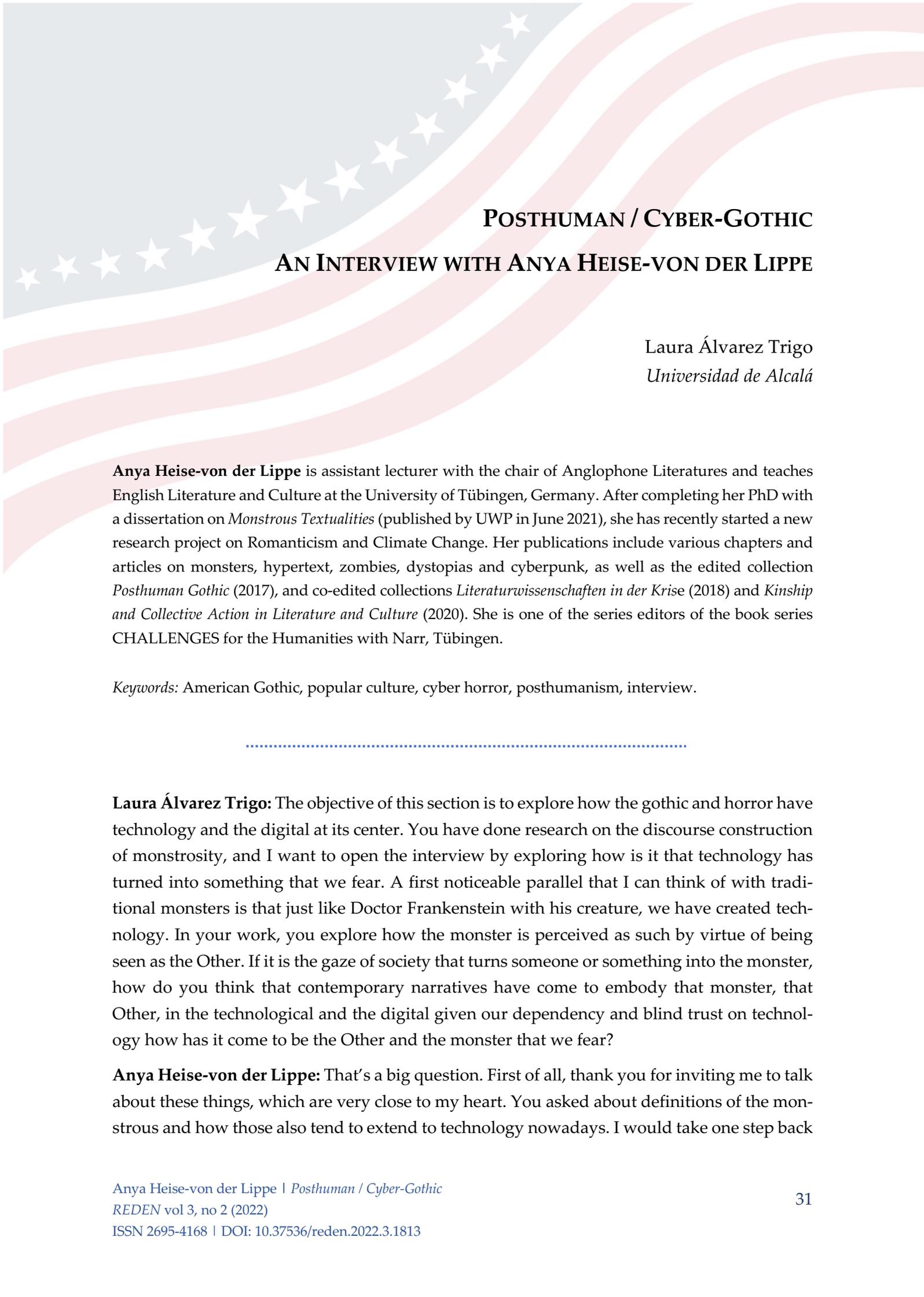
POSTHUMAN / CYBER-GOTHIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANYA HEISE-VON DER LIPPE

Laura Álvarez Trigo
Universidad de Alcalá

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Laura Álvarez Trigo: The objective of this section is to explore how the gothic and horror have technology and the digital at its center. You have done research on the discourse construction of monstrosity, and I want to open the interview by exploring how is it that technology has turned into something that we fear. A first noticeable parallel that I can think of with traditional monsters is that just like Doctor Frankenstein with his creature, we have created technology. In your work, you explore how the monster is perceived as such by virtue of being seen as the Other. If it is the gaze of society that turns someone or something into the monster, how do you think that contemporary narratives have come to embody that monster, that Other, in the technological and the digital given our dependency and blind trust on technology how has it come to be the Other and the monster that we fear?

Anya Heise-von der Lippe: That's a big question. First of all, thank you for inviting me to talk about these things, which are very close to my heart. You asked about definitions of the monstrous and how those also tend to extend to technology nowadays. I would take one step back

and say, to what purpose do we need to define the Other as monstrous? And I would say that happens in processes of human identity construction. So, when humans say 'this is the Other', this also creates a sense of unity—of a common 'we' that is opposed to this 'Other'. That kind of cements our identity as human beings—and when I say 'we' and 'our', those are already contested categories in many ways. In most Western cultures, we would, for instance, exclude the animal from this 'we' and we see that in gothic texts around the turn of the 20th century where Darwinian theory began to influence gothic texts that talk about the animal as Other. We have *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Wells 1896), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson 1886), and *Dracula* (Stoker 1897). Those texts explore the boundaries between the human and the animal as Other. We have a similar thing with technology, let's say, from the mid 20th century onwards into contemporary time, or even earlier emergences if you look at E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909), a short story from the early 20th century. It already explores this fear of dependency on the machine and what might happen if that machine doesn't work any longer. But I think that, in Forster's story, we still have a very clear sense of the machine and the human being presented as two separate things. There's dependency, obviously, on emerging technology, but there's no integration of human and technology. I think that what we see nowadays, in late 20th and early 21st century gothic and horror is a fear of an integration of human and technology. We have become so dependent on technology that it's intruding into our bodies. There is no sense of a clear boundary between human and technology any longer. I think what gothic and horror texts do is to explore where that might lead us. So this is not just about the integration of human and technology but it's also about the horror of what that might mean if the technology intrudes into the human body and what we might become if that happens. I think there's the sense of horror that doesn't stem from the technology itself but more from what it does to our sense of self as human beings, and I think that's why we have started to also reject technology as the Other in a way.

LAT: In this sense, I'm thinking about what you've mentioned about this self-identification and I'm trying to compare how we feel about technologies such as robots that are commonly related to this idea of the uncanny valley, because we see us reflected in them through our similarities, but sometimes in horror there's also these machines that are very non-human-like in appearance. I'm thinking about classic movies such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), but also more recent movies such as *Peripheral* (2017) and *Sequence Break* (2018). This seems to move away from this uncanny type of horror, and I'm thinking from this perspective of the horror and the gothic element, do these fictions where the machine is completely something nonhuman, like a computer for example, do they shy away from this idea of the uncanny or is the gothic and the horror present in some other form?

AHvdL: I think the concept of the uncanny works pretty well as long as we have the sense that that technology is still separate from the human body. So then, we see gothic horror embodying the fear of the automaton becoming too like us that's where we can apply the

uncanny and the uncanny valley. It goes back to Freud and his article on the uncanny, but obviously it's also the uncanny valley in terms of robotics when it becomes too like the human, it causes fear, or even a sense of disgust in many ways. The texts you mention, where technology isn't anything like the human, I think that's more a sense of intrusion and a sense of loss of boundaries that is at stake, no longer the uncanny. We're no longer afraid that the technology might become too like us or that we might no longer be able to tell apart a human individual and a separate robot. It's more a sense of technology intruding into the body, that we might be becoming something posthuman, something completely different by the integration with technology. There's an article that is called "Monstrous Machinery" by Micheal Sean Bolton (see Bolton), which is one of the first attempts at defining the posthuman gothic. He differentiates between those texts that are postmodern—where we have a fear of machinery— and the posthuman gothic where we have a fear of becoming technology in a way or of the integration of the human with the technology. We lose a sense of the self when that happens, we can no longer tell inside and outside, human and technology apart.

So I think the uncanny is often kind of still there in, let's say, texts that are focused more on a kind of traditional creation of horror of the machine, where you don't have this sense of becoming machine ourselves. Not every text is necessarily at the same level in terms of exploring the posthuman gothic. Where it is about shock effects, we often still have a sense of the uncanny, I think. But where it explores the edge of what we might become, we get gothic horror texts that are about the blurring of those boundaries. The example that Micheal Sean Bolton talks about is *House of Leaves* (see Danielewski) where we get this complete blurring of boundaries between inside and outside, where the house is much bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. It's constantly shifting around, you no longer can tell which level of the text you're on. So this kind of blurring of boundaries is, I think, essential to the posthuman gothic that moves away from those fears of the postmodern gothic.

LAT: This blurring of the limits between the human and the machine that you speak about also makes me think about the direct relationship we sometimes establish with the machines in these fictions. It is common for cyber horror and Sci-Fi horror narratives, those that deal with automaton, to deal with sexuality and sexual relationships and affirm and direct forms of attraction from these machines. So sometimes it is the machine that looks for this relationship when other times it is the human owner who imposes that relationship on the machine or on the robot. So we can find narratives where the sexual encounter is desired or maybe a facto established relationship, other times is forced, or it is a struggle between the human and the machine that tries to liberate itself. The representation of this sexuality, however, is rarely beneficial. It's rarely portrayed as something good so either it's the machine who is suppressed and we, as audiences, we often see men who establish this relationship with female robots as the 'weirdos' so to speak, like we know there's kind of something wrong there. So is it a form where the gothic surfaces? Is it a necessity within the logic of the gothic narrative for

this connection to become a threat or something that we find uncanny, again? And is this physical Otherness that we confront in the machine a form of abjection maybe?

AHvdL: I would say that the question is from whose perspective are we seeing those narratives; and it's often I think, in a sense, a way of trying to explore what becomes of a heteronormative model of sexuality. If you have a male creator enforcing their will onto a female robot that's very, I think, to a certain viewer, that may even be interesting or titillating or a story that they might like to explore. But for me it's often very cringe-worthy, and I'm not sure if this is in the narrative or if this is something that I, as a viewer, bring to that story. Overall, I think this kind of story often is about the questioning of certain boundaries and the question of what happens to things that we take for granted in terms of what human nature is, how do humans reproduce, what happens if humans try to reproduce with something that doesn't do reproduction in the same manner that humanity does? So, how do we think through those things? To frame this exploration of boundaries theoretically—from a feminist perspective, we could, for instance think of Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (See Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"). And I think this exploration of boundaries, that's what, at least some of these texts try to do too, from various perspectives. So it might be a very heteronormative perspective that looks at how uncanny it is to imagine a coupling with a robotic Other, or it may be a text that looks at this in terms of, let's say, more interesting explorations of new ways of relating to each other, like forms of kinship.

For instance, there's the music video for Björk's, *All is Full of Love*. It's visually a very interesting video about two robots who are kind of, I guess I would say, performing sex acts but it's not very clear what they're doing. It's very much about making love in a way, but it's between two machines, so it kind of explores something that, from a certain perspective, might look very uncanny but it also is a very interesting way of raising that question. As humans, do we find that interesting? Do we find that strange, perhaps? Is that a performance of love? Can robots express human attraction or love? What is going on there? So I think what some gothic texts do is also—I mean, the Björk video is obviously not gothic or maybe we can read it as gothic but it's more about posthumanist becomings I would say—but gothic and horror texts often like to play around with those ideas as well, either in a manner that is supposed to create horror or in a manner that is supposed to explore those possibilities, I would say.

LAT: That's very interesting. I really like the Björk example. So, thinking about this also from the perspective of the machine. So gothic fiction formats often are a format through which marginalized voices emerge. The genre has often been interpreted as a space for those without a voice to acquire one. This is interesting to me regarding the object of this thematic session due to the fear of autonomous or technology as a whole acquiring self-awareness and maybe rebelling against their owners or oppressors that they find in the humans. So, do you agree that this is a way in which the gothic is present in this technology, automata, cyber horror

narratives? Are these the voiceless that want to acquire a voice and what are those voices emerging in what form, and is it also a way of us losing our own voice?

AHvdL: In a way yes and in a way no. So let me try to unpack that. First of all, if we go back to *Frankenstein* (see Shelley), for instance, which I would read as a kind of proto cyber-gothic text, it's all there. The monster embodies a hybrid creature between animal, human and also a sense of technology coming in there in the act of creation—the spark of being, that is perhaps more present in later film versions. We have this very interesting construction of narrative perspectives where the monster is also allowed to speak, so in a sense it does exactly that, we're voicing the voiceless. We have this shift in perspective where the narrative perspective shifts from Victor Frankenstein, we've seen the monster from the outside as the devil a demon, and suddenly it shifts and we also get to understand the motivations of the monstrous creature, which is surprisingly eloquent—almost shockingly so—as if to draw the reader's attention to this new angle. And unfortunately, most of the early adaptations take this eloquence away. So, even this early in the history of the Gothic we already get the sense that the Gothic creates a possibility to voice people who've had no voice, marginalized people, the non- or perhaps not fully human. Also the monster is kind of shown as incredibly adaptable and while it's very artificial in its creation it's also a very natural perspective in many ways, it's a very sustainable creature. So even if it's a murderer, it's also a very interesting figure in terms of voicing marginalized perspectives and asking what it means to be human. And I think that also accounts for part of its continuing attractiveness for critics of various schools and backgrounds.

In a sense, the Gothic offers a platform for people to explore these marginalized perspectives, but not all gothic texts necessarily do that. We have a lot of gothic texts that are very much focused on reinforcing order, reinforcing hierarchies at the end of the text, so while they explore all kinds of horrors throughout the text, they will go back to "this is the structure the universe should go in" and "this is the conclusion that we offer" in the end. In a way *Frankenstein* also kind of does that by resolving the plot through death in the end. However, I would say there are texts that take that further and one of them is a much more recent *Frankenstein* adaptation by Victor LaValle, a graphic novel called *Destroyer* (2017), which picks up this Frankenstein narrative but also combines it with an exploration of anti-blackness and police violence against Black people in the US. It takes up this idea of the monster being able to voice Otherness. It's also very much about technology, I don't want to talk too much about the plot—it's fascinating you absolutely all need to read it—but the main character is this Black boy, who's also a cyborg, who is also kind of zombified because he's dead, so it's a very Othered perspective in many ways. What the graphic novel does is exactly give marginalized voices a space and use this idea of technology to explore how it could create a narrative of resistance against this very standardized narrative of how societies work and who's left out of those constructions.

To maybe bring this back to posthumanist theory as well, this is also where Donna Haraway goes with the figure of the cyborg and the idea of all of these mergings of the organic and the technological, that could also be read as a form of liberation (see Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"). I mean, it's an ironic myth, obviously, and she toys around with those ideas, and that's perhaps not a utopian vision that could be achieved for various reasons, but it's good that those ideas are out there and some gothic texts at least play around with those ideas and create a space for those to be explored a bit more. To come back to your question of voicing Otherness, I would say gothic texts can do that but not all gothic texts try to do that, it depends on the perspective people are working from.

LAT: In terms of this idea of the organic and how the Gothic emerged through a contrast with its precedent Romanticism, is there a place for cyber terror where the resistance to this other monster can be situated in nature? Maybe through the calmness or slowness of nature as opposed to the fast-paced aggressive menacing idea and aspects of technology.

AHvdL: In a way, again, kind of yes and no. If you look at *Frankenstein* again, which is my basic textual example for many of these things, you get a sense that nature is this very restful place. Whenever Victor Frankenstein is disturbed by anything and mostly, he creates those disturbances himself, obviously, but whenever he's emotionally upset, he would go on a hike in the mountains, look at the nature, and then that calms him; that kind of takes him back to his own sense of humanity in a way. We get similar glimpses of nature being restorative in many of the texts that are based in this romantic sense of nature as this idyllic and positive place. In the same way *Frankenstein* also blurs the boundaries between nature and culture, even in the very creation of the monster, so it draws attention to the fact that those boundaries between the human and the natural world are very much artificial boundaries. What the Gothic often does by undermining these boundaries is also break up this sense that nature is this completely separate place. So, when we talk about the boundaries between the human and technology breaking up, we also, on the other end, talk about the boundaries between the human and the animal, the human and nature breaking up.

So often in the same text we get a sense of a blurring between technology, nature, and the human so that, in that sense, it's no longer a refuge but it's something that can also become very threatening. If you look at *Annihilation* (2018) for instance. I'm talking about the film because the visuals are very interesting. In that film, we get a sense that it's no longer clear where this intrusive technology ends and where nature has become integrated with a very unfamiliar, very alien technology. All of these boundaries have been completely annihilated (in a way). So, if you take that to posthuman theory, obviously Donna Haraway also talks about "natureculture": there's no strict distinction between nature and human culture in those theories—nor should there be—because that's very much also a construct that is erected by humans to uphold our dominant position on the planet. If you look at climate change, we see where that kind of position, this assumption of a hierarchy between humanity and the rest of

the planet, gets us, so I don't think we, to be very harsh, I don't think we deserve this resting place that nature is for many people. We should think about how to preserve that, and I think what texts often can do is draw attention to this necessity to think about those things.

LAT: You've hinted several times in your answers at this idea of moving toward the technological or the idea of the cyber. Many sci-fi narratives these days, and from decades before really, are exploring these possibilities of technological advances and, I guess this is something that's somehow present in *Annihilation* as well, how does it take us into the future, or farther in a sense, and other cyborg narratives and medical advances like criogenization and all these things. This could mean that we could find a way of moving beyond the anthropocentric perspective through the cybernetic, which is what Donna Harway and some other researchers maybe are hinting at or grounds that they're exploring. Do you think that cyber terror in this sense can be used as a tool to imagine a posthuman future and can we reconcile with the Other in the monster and, in this way, get closer to it?

AHvdL: So, in a way I think what posthuman theory already does is question those strict distinctions between subject and object that we've built there and point a finger to where those are not helpful in terms of describing realities. Because, as you said, we're kind of already exploring those technologies. So it's not a question of whether we want to confront them— we're already doing that in many ways. If we look at technologies that we are already using— you don't have to go to cryotechnics, which people are apparently also exploring—but look at all the day-to-day technology that we're using. Posthuman theory says we need new paradigms because we're already so enmeshed with technology that there's no way we can ignore that (see Wolfe). So, in a way, what gothic horror narratives do is explore the flip side of that, they're not necessarily looking at technology as this huge utopian thing, where we might become better posthumans—or transhumans –, but I think they look very much at what can go wrong, what might happen if we adopt technologies too quickly, or unthinkingly, if we adopt the wrong technologies, what might get lost if we take the wrong pathways.

I think part of what technology does in contemporary society is, it doesn't have a will of its own, but it has a snowball effect. We develop something and then we can't stop it at some point. If we look at it, someone sits down and creates a platform where you can rate your fellow female students based on their 'hotness' or their looks, which is a dubious project in itself, but may, at first glance seem harmless, containable. And a few years later that tool influences elections all over the world, and we didn't see that coming. So what gothic texts can do, if you look at things like *Black Mirror* (2011-2019) for instance, is think technologies into the future and decide or point out where this might be going, point out the worst case scenarios that might happen if we pursue those technologies further. It's more of a compass pointing in all of the bad, dystopian directions, so that we can, presumably, think about those things and change our ways and do things differently. That's not necessarily a completely new effect. If you look at things like James Tiptree Jr.'s novella *The Girl Who Was Plucked In* (1973), that's

very early proto-cyberpunk text, fairly Gothic too, and it already kind of goes in this direction and explores many of these questions. If you create almost human beings and then send them out into the world—avatars steered by other human beings—this is what might happen and this is what this would do to the people involved, emotionally but also quite physically. So it's not a completely new idea, but I think it's an interesting effect of this kind of gothic text. And again, I would say it depends on perspective because there are obviously also gothic texts that are very much focused on simply the creation of shock effects and horror or surface horror but, for instance, things like *Black Mirror*, I would say that those are more theory-conscious and trying to create a dystopian effect where people actually start to think about their use of technology and what this might do to us.

So, does this create a possibility for a dystopian or for a utopian view of the future? I would say probably not, but maybe it creates a possibility of reflection and I think that's probably worth more than a strict sense of utopia—of all the bright futures that we could have. The Gothic is very much a "negative aesthetic" (Botting 1), so it doesn't explore the shiny and beautiful things that we might have in the future rather, from its start as a genre, it tries to point out the fault lines in Enlightenment rationalism; and our exploration of technology also ties into that. We are so enamored with our own minds that sometimes we need the Gothic to show us where the body, and the Other, and things like that come in to clash with this idea of rationalism and the impressive things that human brains can do.

LAT: Do you want to add some closing remarks about where you think the cyber-gothic might be going? If it's going to expand, if it's going to continue to serve us to create this dystopian space you were talking about to reflect on the problems with technology that we have?

AHvdL: Yes, I think some of the questions you raised today already point in very interesting directions. For instance, to give those explorations more space to explore minority voices. If you have creators from various kinds of minorities that engage with those topics, you get, I think, very interesting stories, because those are often the kinds of voices who are aware of all of those problems, because they already face them in day-to-day life in contemporary culture, and have done so for centuries. So I think that's one of the spaces that the cyber-gothic could explore further or it's already exploring further. There are very interesting pairings of Black, Indigenous and PoC perspectives and gothic / horror, for instance, there's a horror anthology by a collective of Arctic gothic writers called *Taaqtumi* (2019) and there's a very interesting cyber-gothic Arctic horror story, I would say if I had to put a genre to it, that combines those ideas of Indigenous horror and very advanced cyborg technology. The story is "Lounge" by Sean Qitsualik-Tinsley and Rachael Qitsualik-Tinsley in the anthology *Taaqtumi,* which means 'in the dark' in Inuktitut, and I am especially interested in what happens to this kind of human-technology interaction scenario if you shift the perspective and take it out of the context of settler colonialist hierarchies. So those are the spaces where I think there's room for development and which are also, I think, very interesting to gothic criticism because in many ways

monsters have become this staple of contemporary mainstream culture where everything is in a way filled with monsters, and monsters have started to lose meaning. So in a sense, if everything is monstrous there's no space for the monster to be this warning of Otherness or this kind of harbinger of category crisis that Jeffrey Jerome Cohen talks about (see Cohen), because it's just a part of everyday life—it means everything and nothing. So to take the monster or the Other or also the cyborg figure to new spaces and to combine it with other genres—I think that's probably the places or those are the things that are the most interesting to take gothic criticism right now.

Open Q&A session

Mónica Fernánez Jiménez: I wanted to ask if you could develop a bit more on the topic of kinship because you've mentioned some things and I've also seen that you've edited if I'm not wrong a volume titled *Kinship and Collective Action* (2020). It really caught my eye because I'm very interested in the idea of kinship, I've worked with it, the idea of kinship in the post era, let's call it the post-something because I've studied it in relation to postcolonialism and what I do, or some colleagues whose work I find interesting do, is thinking of kinship as separated from reproduction or linear reproduction in order to transcend notions of racial purity and things like that. I was surprised to see it in a completely, maybe not completely different context, because talking about the post era you've been talking a big deal about posthuman. So I was just thinking, although you've said some things, how kinship in its most strict linear terms challenged by technology or by cyber horror? Does cyber horror do something similar to what I've said in postcolonial narratives?

AHvdL: Let me say two things first, I co-edited that volume with three of my colleagues from Tübingen, who I'd like to mention briefly: Gero Bauer, Katharina Luther, and Nicole Hirschfelder. The interesting thing about the volume is that it arose from an interdisciplinary conference and the contributors take different approaches to kinship, so it's not just about the posthuman or literature, there are also sociological, art-based and education-focused approaches to kinship from various cultural backgrounds in that volume, and it's also not focused on gothic or horror. I think I'm the only person in that volume who actually works on gothic horror, and also the chapter I wrote is not necessarily from a gothic perspective but from a dystopian perspective. My chapter focuses on *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) by Cherie Dimaline and what I was interested in is kinship as a form of resistance narrative. It kind of works with what you talked about in terms of postcolonialism, so it's a resistance narrative against white settler colonialism and its exploitation of Indigenous people's bodies—and not just in the way that white settlers have done over centuries—but a direct exploitation of their bodies, their bone marrow because they—the white people—can no longer dream and the Indigenous people can still dream and that ability to dream is located in the bone marrow (which, is a very interesting metaphorical construction too, I think). So that's the the basic setup and what I look at in terms of kinship is the question of how the Indigenous people in

that novel build kinships beyond family relations, also kinship with nature, kinship with other beings in nature, and how kinship is also a form of narrative in a way because what they do is pass on knowledge through narrative and that is also something that Native American criticism explores (see for instance Daniel Heath Justice's work). So this idea of passing on knowledge not through kind of top-down history, the patriarchal line, but through learning from narratives that people from with whom you form a kinship group and practice kinship can tell you. Also, the idea, still present in many indigenous teachings, that you're not supposed to just learn, acquire knowledge, you're supposed to understand it, act on it, and grow from it in a way.

So if we take that to the question of how technology comes into that, and I think mostly in dystopian fiction, maybe if you look at more speculative fiction, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy for instance, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), where she develops this idea of a highly evolved, or not evolved, but technologically created posthuman species and explores this idea of where they might take forms of kinship that, still in that context, rely on biological reproduction but it's changed very much from what we understand human reproduction to be. The novel and the trilogy raise the question how a really sustainable species might explore ideas of kinship with other sustainable species. So the underlying question is obviously how could kinship help as a tool against what humanism does in terms of propagating hierarchies, propagating family structures that go top-down—patriarchal structure in families. And, in a way, that is not necessarily tied to technology, but you can take that to technology via posthuman theory. Haraway not only in the cyborg figure but also exploring ideas of creating together—"sympoeiesis" (*Staying with the Trouble*, 2016)—creating together with other species, becoming together with other species, and in that way creating a new, more sustainable way of existing on the planet. She explores these ideas of kinship with animal species, but I don't think Haraway would be opposed to adding in technology because the cyborg figure also kind of explores those basic ideas and might even come into that as a form of solution.

MFJ: I'm looking forward to reading the article because I think it's a positive approach to technology and if we're talking about kinship, it usually is. It's very interesting I'll definitely read more about that because I just only got to a very small side of the whole issue which is kind of big so I was just really looking forward to hearing your answer it's been very interesting thank you very much.

Anna Marta Marini: As you mentioned *Annihilation* the movie, I really liked it and I do share your take that the visuals are very interesting. It really gives you a feeling that nature is blending with some technology or with something uncanny, somthing we cannot quite put our fingers on and we don't know if it's an alien, if it's something that comes out of a technology indeed, or if it's some alien technology, or if it's something that came out of our planet in some mysterious ways. I think they really nailed that sensation of 'I'm not quite sure what's going on', and it has these colors, very beautiful unicorn colors, it's very nice and so I was

wondering, do you think this maybe, using the same word that Mónica was using, this post-something gothic, this is kind of new contemporary use of gothic modes, do you think it does have new aesthetics? Does it bring something new on the visuals? Do you think that this gothic is evolving from what we are mostly used to see in horror and gothic narratives? Is it evolving somehow and it's giving us something new to look at in a way?

AHvdL: I would hesitate to call *Annihilation* a gothic narrative, although it has some gothic elements, especially in its relentlessness and in how it repurposes ideas of nature as monstrous. And I think that's part of the whole "post-" thing—that now we also have all kinds of hybrids and blends and texts that borrow from narrative traditions like the Gothic, but also borrow from science fiction, and also borrow from other narrative genres in a way. I think where this new aesthetic comes from is a blend of different genres where we have science fiction blending with dystopian speculative fiction blending with an underlying sense of horror or the uncanny that I can also place into that. So that's maybe one way of answering it.

The other would be that the Gothic is very adaptable from the beginning. We're not looking at the same kind of gothic that we have in the late 1800s with Walpole, Radcliffe and "Monk" Lewis—where we have medieval castles and crumbling architecture and the "virgin in distress". We've moved far beyond that, I think in terms of aesthetics, even Mary Shelley moved beyond that already in 1818. So I think what the Gothic does very well is adapt to new threats, to new fears, to new cultural ideas to engage with, and to derive explorations of horror from. In a way this renewal of aesthetic is something that comes around again and again and again and I think often the most interesting gothic texts are those that also play around with new aesthetics on a narrative level, that also do something completely different with the gothic text—like *House of Leaves* plays around with the idea of doing hypertext in a printed book which is like a super weird idea but it works as a kind of staging of the Gothic. Also on a meta-narrative level it's not just a story about the Gothic but it's a gothic monstrous text in itself, and maybe that's also a way of looking at what happens with the aesthetics in films like *Annihilation,* which again, I'm not fully sure that I would call it a gothic text.

AMM: I wouldn't call it a gothic narrative per se but I do think there's a lot of this underlying anxieties and it's very actual, it's really contemporary and I think it's one of these cases that we have discussed even in other keynotes and it's a bit the basis of our conferences is this pervasiveness of gothic elements and modes in genres that you wouldn't really say 'this series is gothic' or 'this movie is gothic', but there is still this anxiety and this kind of way to cope with it.

AHvdL: Maybe also those are the more interesting places for the Gothic to crop up rather than those, let's say, standardized shock gothic texts that are really much about aesthetics. Jeffrey Weinstock talked about *Penny Dreadful,* which… it's very beautiful but it rarely explores a critical edge, it just replicates lots of very beautiful gothic aesthetics—which is also something interesting to do but it's not explorative or critical in terms of being theory-conscious or being

conscious of changes that are going on in contemporary society. I think there's places where the Gothic kind of pops up in unexpected ways or in genres where we don't expect gothic narrative modes, where it's also exploring critical edges.

AMM: Yes, maybe a little bit more stimulating to see how it can pop up as you say in some places where you wouldn't expect it really and with such beautiful visuals because it's really very nice that kind of color palette that doesn't really feel like a gothic narrative in the standard mainstream idea that people have for gothic really.

AHvdL: It's not dark but it's very uncanny, we talked about this fear of meeting someone or the figure of the doppelganger, so being afraid that something that is not you that is very alien could take over your role in a way and that's exactly what we have in *Annihilation,* so I'd say it's not visually dark but it's very dark in terms of where it takes the human imagination.

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PERNICIOUS PROPERTIES: FROM HAUNTED TO HORROR HOUSES
AN INTERVIEW WITH EVERT JAN VAN LEEUWEN

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Evert Jan van Leeuwen is a lecturer in English-language literature at Leiden University, in the Netherlands. He researches fantastic fictions and counter cultures from the eighteenth century to the present. He is also interested in the international, intertextual dimensions of genres like Gothic, Horror and Science Fiction, and explores how they manifest in the British Isles, the Low Countries, and North America. He has recently co-edited the volume *Haunted Europe: Continental Connections in English Language Gothic Writing, Film and New Media* (2019) with Michael Newton and has written articles and chapters about American gothic authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, amongst others. In relation to this, he has also published *House of Usher* (2019) a book analyzing Poe's famous story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), Richard Matheson's related film script and the cinematic adaptation by Roger Corman in the context of the 1960s counter-culture.

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Mónica Fernández Jiménez: In an article published in the journal *Studies in Gothic Fiction* titled "From Hell House to Homecoming: Modern Haunted-House Fictions as Allegories of Personality Growth" (2015), you claim that "since the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 almost every writer of gothic, horror, and supernatural fiction has published a haunted house story" (42). It is not surprising that Sigmund Freud's concept of "the uncanny"—described as "a class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220)—comes to mind when talking about haunted houses, as they are familiar spaces. Or, for example, Rosemary Jackson's idea that with the emergence of gothic fiction in the eighteenth century we move from the purely marvelous to the uncanny, which she defines as "fears generated by the self" (14). However, there is another definition of the Gothic as the rejection of Enlightened rationalism, as per David Punter's famous study (5). The aesthetics of the houses that appeared in eighteenth-century European gothic fictions,

which in Walpole's case was a castle, point to the medieval past. These are very different from the houses that appear in American settings, which have no medieval past. The castle aesthetics is based on the medieval romances that inspired the first manifestations of the Gothic in the eighteenth century. How do you then approach the haunted house formula translated into the American setting?

Evert Jan van Leeuwen: That's a good question. I think I agree with how you present the history of the haunted house and the haunted castle in gothic fiction. David Punter, who you just mentioned, and who is probably the most influential, pioneering scholar of the Gothic, also explores the uncanny and talks about the uncanny as having to do with the ancient, with the secret, ultimately with the return of the repressed, which is a particular theoretical framework for approaching the Gothic. My interest in both that article and the book I am working on right now (an extended study for which that article laid the foundations) has to do more with the present and the function of houses and haunted houses, or horror houses as I call them, in the present. I think you are right to say that it is difficult to simply translate the classic British or Euro haunted castles into American culture because there is no medieval past. I also, to some extent, take a different route to other scholars like Dale Bailey, where I see the house not so much as a place where all sorts of things are hidden, where the house becomes a space where repressed desires and instincts are hidden away to then jump out at the protagonists in the story. I see the house from a different perspective as a space for discovery, in a positive sense.

I base my work not on a Freudian psychoanalytical tradition but on the humanistic psychological tradition, specifically Kirk Schneider, who wrote a book called *Horror and the Holy* (1993), the subtitle of which is *Wisdom-Teachings of the Monster Tale*. It is basically an application of humanistic psychology to the classic Gothic—*Dracula* (1897), *Frankenstein* (181) and those kinds of texts. His point is that horror, rather than being about the return of the repressed, he says, "slashes through life's surfaces… it cuts through all of our comforts" (2). That is the key aspect that I focus on, this idea that what horror actually does has not always to do with the repressed aspects of the individual psyche, but with more social, political, and economic facades through which we live our lives. And what horror does is basically break down those facades and to show us the world that we live in, as it really is. And that is based more on the humanistic psychological perspective, where the focus is not so much on characters going into their past and acknowledging and encountering repressed desires and instincts; it is about raising awareness in individuals about where they are, what their own personal ideas and ideals about their own life are, what they want to achieve, what kind of a person they want to be, what drives them as human beings. In that sense horror makes them aware of the tensions between social norms, social demands, and the constrictions that political, legal, and social institutions enforce on the individual. It drives them to ask questions about whether that individual is in fact in the right place. So rather than thinking about someone who is struggling, who is encountering feelings of anxiety or guilt, thinking about them

as neurotic or struggling with repressed desires and instincts that are coming into consciousness, it is more about how that individual, as an individual, as a self, struggles with the outside world. How the individual struggles with ideology and how they have to confront ideological aspects in their life and learn to become critical and independent from the hegemonic culture.

That inspired me to take a new look at haunted houses as spaces in which characters go on a voyage of discovery, where what is behind the closed doors and in the basements and in the attics is not something inherently violent or destructive but something that can lead to growth, to insight, to awareness, and to the development of a stronger personality. I looked at that specifically in the context of haunted house fictions in which there are always characters who are the "effective protagonist" (see Dawson). They might not be the main character in the film or novel, but they are the character who actually grows throughout the story. Even though they may start out as more of a sidekick or marginal character, they end up surviving the house and, in a way, taking the central position. In that sense, rather than thinking about the Gothic being all about the fragmentation of the self and especially haunted houses being a space in which the self collapses, as in "House of Usher," it is about the building of the self, about searching for wholeness. That is the theoretical basis I am coming from. The kind of texts that I have been analyzing are texts like *Rose Red* (2002) by Stephen King. He wrote the screenplay for the TV series.

Another example is *The House Next Door* (1978) was a popular American novel, in its time. It is about a house that has no past; it is brand new. In his introduction to the novel, King writes that it is a traditional gothic text; he talks about the bad place, and its history, and its past, which is really weird because the whole point of that house in the novel is that it is brand new. It is built in an affluent suburb of Atlanta, and the characters who live there say things like "we like our lives and our possessions to run smoothly" (19). That is one of the phrases. I think that novel does exactly what Schneider says the classic Gothic does, which is to slash through the surfaces of life. The characters in that novel are confronted with the ultimate spiritual emptiness of their lives, that are lived obsessed with material possessions and social status, making sure that their little suburban enclave is an in-crowd of people who go to the same club, play tennis with each other, have drinks at the club, lunch at the club, and visit each other and create an in-crowd based on economic prosperity and social status. In that sense political power is also involved; they basically create a closed community of the powerful. The house in the novel is built on those foundations. The land on which it is built is said to be too small and the wrong shape, not meant to be built on. But the architect sees that as a challenge. He wants to make his name, and wants to be known as this great architect who builds houses where no one else can. The theme of hubris comes into play, as the architect uses that challenge to make his name and become famous, rich, powerful, and influential. And so he builds the house where it should not be built. That is why everything goes wrong. The characters who move into that pernicious property move into the house for the wrong reasons. They are unmasked as people who aspire to wealth, social status, power, and influence rather than a good

life, ethically speaking. They are entirely focused and obsessed with the materialist consumer culture of the late 1970s. They see their value and the value of their lives in being the most successful consumers, being the most successful participants in that culture. They are what Herbert Marcuse describes in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). It is a book about a one-dimensional suburban community in which people strive to be as one-dimensional as they can be because for them that is actually the epitome of life. And that gives the novel a very clear satirical bent. It suggests that if those are your goals, the houses that you live in are really prisons and that houses as the ultimate symbol of material prosperity will be destructive. That is what happens to these characters, they are literally gobbled up, they are first possessed by their property and then consumed by the consumer culture they uphold, so it doubles back on them. That is one clear example of my approach.

MFJ: That is fascinating. George Saunders' short story, published in *The New Yorker* in 2012, "The Semplica-Girl Diaries," contains the same idea about perfect lives; but I would have never approached it as a gothic text because it is so postmodern in its style; so that is a lot of food for thought. I think your approach to the Gothic is a route that needs to be taken. Even though it is impossible to translate these medieval castles into the American setting, the house for some reason keeps appearing so we need to explore different roads. Regarding the formula in the specific context of the United States and in popular culture, how has it changed through time? I am thinking of the works of Hawthorne and Poe, but then of what Bernice M. Murphy has called "the suburban gothic" (2) arising from the anxieties of the mass suburbanisation of America starting in the 1950s, where the aesthetic of the house completely changes. The latter are plainer, if you will. But then we have contemporary horror films like Rob Minkoff's *The Haunted Mansion* (2003) where houses go back to the obviously not medieval but aristocratic decaying mansion model, which of course exists in the United States, but is different from the suburban Gothic tradition. We could conclude that we also have a tradition within the United States, and I would like you to develop a little bit on that.

EJvL: If you take Poe's "House of Usher" (1839) as the big bang of American haunted house stories, we still have an allegory where the house becomes Roderick's head; it is his mind. The narrator is Roderick, he is journeying into his own mind. And he is nameless, that is important. One of the most significant things about Poe's story, and why it has become a story that is so often reinterpreted, reimagined, retold in all sorts of different settings, is that it has become a template: the architecture of the house becomes a way of describing a spiritual journey. I think that is really important for the American haunted house genre. Owning a house, especially in modern American culture, but in the nineteenth century as well, I think, was already a sign of being successful. It meant to have, not just a place to live, but a place in society, to be visible and meaningful. One of the things Roderick says in the story, when he has a sort of premonition, is "I *must* perish in this deplorable folly!" (403). The word folly has many meanings, one of which is a miniaturised house in a garden, a fake ruin that is there for aesthetic reasons,

that has absolutely no purpose apart from just being picturesque. I think there is an irony there. Poe was too much of a stylist not to realise that there is a pun in Roderick's phrase. What he realises is that he and his family are basically of the past. You could say it is a pastiche of the Gothic, in which Poe suggests that Roderick is living in his own mind, that he has completely enclosed himself, and that he is no longer living in the real world. In that sense there is no real world in that story, there is no world outside of the house. Roderick has basically disappeared from being. He has disappeared from lived experience. It is a very solipsistic story.

I think Hawthorne responded to that with *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), where he clearly, on the one hand, followed the tradition in which the house has a past. There is a legend, there are rumours of mysterious supernatural happenings going on. But what I like about *Seven Gables* is that it is actually set in the present; it is not about the past. The house has been there for generations, but it is all about the Pyncheon family, specifically Clifford Pyncheon, coming to terms with the present. Critics have dismissed *Seven Gables* as a gothic story because of its happy ending. In traditional gothic and horror novels haunted houses either gobble up their inhabitants or they fall to ruins, and in this particular story what turns out to be the real horror is really the villains' drive for power, affluence, social status and ownership of property and people. They want to have both legal control and material control of the assets, and that is really what is causing the ruin in the story. In his work on self-actualization, Abraham Maslow, the psychologist, said that what he calls self-actualizing people "live more in the real world of nature than in the man-made mess of concepts, abstractions, expectations, beliefs, and stereotypes that most people confuse with the world" (xii). And I think most of the Pyncheons in the story live that kind of a life. They are too obsessed with the man-made mess of concepts, abstractions, expectations, beliefs, and stereotypes that they think is what life is. The reason why it ends happily is that there are protagonists who grow out of that perception. The characters who die and the characters who come to a bad end clearly fail to do that, they hold on to the drive for power and control over others and use the house, its history, its status as a way of controlling others. Whereas the characters who leave, you can be critical of them because of going back to their land but I do not think it is about that. I do not think it is about Hawthorne having a go at his characters for leaving that house only to embrace an even more gothic mansion. It is about the fact that they have rejected the need to conform to the demands of their culture, and they are following their own wishes and their own desires. Phoebe and Holgrave marry because they want to marry not because they have to marry, not because other people expect them to marry; they do not have any vested interests in marriage. It is about the characters becoming much more independent and following their own particular desires and what is good for them. That makes it an important novel; maybe its happy ending was a bit avant-garde for the time. It did not fit within the American gothic genre, even though it dovetails with Radcliffe's endings. Hawthorne liked it; he felt that was his better novel and I tend to agree with him. *Seven Gables* for me is his most complete novel. I do not have issues

with it ending happily because I have seen the characters grow and I have seen the characters haunt the house and search through the house, open the doors, break down the boundaries, come together and grow as characters. I think that is important for Holgrave and Phoebe specifically, the younger characters in the text. They find each other through the house. I think that is an important moment where, in American culture specifically, the house becomes about the present and about looking forward into the future.

This is true for *Rose Red* as well. I love Stephen King; I love his writing. I am a big fan. At the same time, I realise that almost nothing that he does is in any way original. Most of his stories are adaptations of existing texts; but maybe that is his power, to make his sources his own. And I think in *Rose Red* he makes *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) his own. For me *Rose Red* is all about characters learning and becoming aware of what their goals in life are, what they really want to do. The house becomes simply a playground for them to go on that journey of discovery. Those who fail are those who remain egotistical, who remain interested purely in status and power. The parapsychologist is quite mad from the beginning; but she goes drunk on power and the idea that she is going to finally prove to the rest of the world that her theories are true and that other people's theories are not true. She just wants to outdo everyone in her department; that is her goal in life. And so she suffers and eventually, of course, fails to achieve her goal. Emery Waterman, by contrast, starts off very much down in the doldrums. In the course of the story he learns to turn his face towards the future. He is a retro cognitive psychic, so in that sense he has got his face very much aimed at the past. There is a really important moment at the end of *Rose Red* where his dead mother comes out of the mirror and tries to grab him and pull him into the world of the dead and Kathy says "for once in your miserable life, fight her!!!" while he is screaming for help. So initially he still cannot do it on his own and then eventually manages to expel her back into the mirror and that is a really important moment for Emery, when he finally realizes that he has to take control of his own life and cannot constantly be looking towards the past. He has to acknowledge his own wishes, his own desires, and create his own path in life. And that is of course where King turns around *The Haunting of Hill House*. In Jackson's novel, poor Eleanor eventually drives into a tree. That is the negative exemplar entirely. She is ostracized and stunted in her growth by everyone else around her. The external forces around her stop her from being herself, from trying to achieve her own goals. And she has that moment in the novel where she realizes that she too "wants her cup of stars" (21), which I think is wonderful, when instead she acknowledges what she wants, but everyone else in the novel does not allow her to achieve her goal. They all want to control her; they all want to project an identity onto her, and that eventually leads her to commit suicide. At least that is how I read the novel. She is driven to despair. But King creates Emery, who manages to escape, who manages to defeat the house and start life anew with greater awareness of who he is, of where he is, and of what he wants to achieve in life. I think that is an important aspect of American haunted house movies that you really do

not see much in the classic Gothic. The idea that they are labyrinths that the characters navigate but then come out of rather than get stuck in. I think that is important.

MFJ: I totally agree. It made me think of these templates and metaphors about the body and the house. You mention in your article that the formula of Poe's short story implies that the house equals the head (42), which actually is how you have started your answer, talking about bodies. For me it is impossible not to think about the film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Many would say that this is not a gothic film. I am thinking again of Jackson and her attempt to establish clear-bounded categories for which she invokes, as I said, the notion of "the uncanny" (14). I am wondering what you have to say about the boundaries, or lack of which, of the gothic genre with regards to other categories such as supernatural horror or science fiction products that deal with body horror or house settings. Is this film gothic or not? You were talking about the present, the past, the body, the metaphors… and there is not one single template.

EJvL: You are right. It is unavoidable to have these genre debates; how we categorize a book or a film says much about how we understand the text. Maybe it says more about the viewer/reader than the text itself. Over the past decades, there has been broad agreement that Ann Radcliffe is a gothic author. Many of our definitions and understandings of what gothic conventions are were developed from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century texts. But what do we do with *Frankenstein* (1818)? Is it gothic? Is it science fiction? Is it horror? That really depends on what the reader focuses on. If you are obsessed with the speculative science in the text, then it becomes science fiction. If you are fascinated with the trope of doubling and see Frankenstein and his creature as alter egos, then you can link it to Poe, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and it becomes a gothic text. Whether a text belongs to the Gothic, SF, speculative fiction, or fantasy has much to do with how the particular reader would understand those genres, but also what the interest of the reader in those genres is.

If you take *The Body Snatchers*, the most recent edition of which was published in the Science Fiction Masterwork Series, then it must be an SF text, but of course that is not true! It really depends on how you approach it, on how you read it because in many ways that text is a classic paranoid gothic text. It can be read in the context of Robert Miles' argument about the Gothic being about "the subject in a state of deracination, of the self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation" (3). The text is probably one of the most uncanny texts that you could think of, where identity becomes such an ungraspable notion that you can no longer tell the difference between your real neighbor or the invaded neighbor, and you yourself start questioning whether you also may be invaded. Have you been taken? It is the ultimate paranoid gothic text about the boundaries between self and other disappearing, and people in that sense becoming almost clones of each other. You can read it in the historical context of the 1950s and relate it to the Cold War and

the Red Scare, and then maybe it becomes more of an SF invasion text. But if you focus on its gothic tropes of erasing and fragmenting identity, and dissolving the boundaries between self and other, then it becomes a classic gothic text. I think most texts in the fantastic genres are hybrid in this way. It is all a matter of degree: how much does one particular genre trope dominate and how much does another. I guess it is most often taught as an SF text because its publisher branded it as such, and the original film version is typical 1950s SF. But the 1978 film version has a definite gothic vibe, even if it stars Leonard Nimoy (from Star Trek). I have also seen J.G. Ballard taught on gothic courses. Ballard is the master of inner-space fiction. You could say that the Gothic and inner space fiction are very closely aligned. "House of Usher" is, if anything, an inner space fiction. So, it is very difficult to come to some kind of a definitive answer about whether the text is X or Y, SF, gothic horror or fantasy. But it is a really important debate to have because it teaches us much about how we categorize and thus understand these texts, and about what our interests in these texts are.

If you incorporate *The Body Snatchers* into a gothic course, it would work perfect with Stephen King's *Dreamcatcher* (2001). What happens in *Dreamcatchers* is that aliens invade the earth; it is very 1950s. But they do not do it in UFOs or weird shuttles. They invade the minds of people. They are like clouds, not little green men. There is a wonderful moment in which the main character, Jonesy, has been invaded by an alien and King writes at length how Jonesy's self, his core identity, hides away in his own mind. King then creates an inner mind as if it is an office space. He hides away finally because the alien is taking over his brain. He has to run and he closes his office door and he is in a tiny little office with a desk and things and he is hiding, looking out of the window, and the alien is right outside. And this is where King's SF novel turns into a gothic text; he clearly turns to "House of Usher," this whole idea of the head being a house. He literalizes it in the context of the story, where he simply constructs a mind as if it is a house with rooms and offices… there is a library with lots of files. And the challenge for Jonesy is to dare to step outside where the alien is so he can find the right files, which of course are metaphors for his memories and his knowledge, in order to defeat it because initially he is cowering away and hiding away in the secret corner of his own mind. By actually turning that into a space with doors, windows, walls, furniture, things to hide behind, filing cabinets to find things… he allows the story to become an allegory of someone who has to overcome his fears and confront his greatest anxieties—although in this case it is an alien called Mr. Gray (think of grey matter, the brain). I think that is what Poe does. I think that is what he does in *Dreamcatcher*, a novel that really starts out as a classic 1950s alien invasion novel and then slowly transforms into a gothic thriller because Jonesy's head becomes the house of Usher. The haunted palace. I think that is where the two really overlap.

Open Q&A session

Sofía Martinicorena: I really love your vision of the Gothic as a way of raising critical awareness about our positions in the world and I think that can really allow us to see the Gothic as

something contemporary and relevant for us and not as something having to do with castles and monsters. You have said at the beginning that you are interested in the present and in the function of haunted houses in the present. Considering this, I have a question about Poe's "House of Usher" which deals with the fact that we cannot seem to stop reading it despite being really old. You already explained that this text is a a template for many American obsessions like owning a house, and that explains a bit of its relevance. It has had so many adaptations like the silent movies of the 1930s, the Roger Corman adaptation about which you wrote a book, or even a 2020 film entitled *The Bloodhound*. There are musicals and theatre adaptations, lots of graphic novels… You can think of hundreds of different examples. What is there in this text that makes it so compelling? Not only for contemporary audiences but for audiences all throughout the years. I think your analysis of Roger Corman's movie is about how Roderick Usher is a symbol for the counter cultural 1960s. That is an example of the translatability of Poe's text into the present and a myriad different contexts. So, what is it in the text that makes it so compelling, so relevant, so thought-provoking for us and for us to think about our present and our past and the relationship between them, which is often expressed in gothic terms?

EJvL: I was obsessed with that film and with Vincent Price as a teenager. I never thought about it that way at the time but I thought Price in the role of Roderick was most fascinating; I was completely in awe. When I watched *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), there is that famous shot of James Dean going "aaaaghh, you're tearing me apart." I was like "I've seen that before!" Price does exactly the same thing; he is like "aaaaghh!" Then I realized that what makes him so fascinating is not that he is a disturbed old man; it is his experience, it is what he has experienced, it is the complete angst of a meaningless existence. That is what attracted me to it. You know, I actually am a big fan of Disney's *The Haunted Mansion* (2003). I watched that thinking it was going to just be a piece of fluff. A film based on a theme park ride? I mean what is that? And it has Eddie Murphy, not a famous horror actor. I do like Murphy a lot; I grew up with him and love films like *Beverly Hills Cop* and *The Golden Child*; so Murphy's presence got me interested. I think the film is really subtle, I think there are many little jokes and ironies there. The prophetic lady in the glass, Madame Leota, draws Jim Evers towards her and says "whom do you seek?!" And he says "I am seeking a way out of here!" which is all he is interested in. And then she says "then you must look within." That is straight from "House of Usher"; that is what you have to do. You have to journey into your own mind and look deep within your soul. David Elkins, who is a humanistic psychologist, has said that outside organized religion the concept of the soul is extremely meaningful still. Even people who do not believe in God and the afterlife or anything like that still talk about "soul." He says, when we talk about soul, "we must go down into the depths of our being" (44). In his work, Elkins explains that when we talk about soulful experiences, or soul music, this is not about the vibrant, easy, happy-go-lucky, the things that come without any effort. It is about the things we struggle for; it is about the things we work hard at, the things we doubt, and about overcoming that struggle,

overcoming that doubt (see part 1; chapter 3). That is what *Haunted Mansion* is all about, despite its silly facade, because the film begins with Jim Evers saying "it's love isn't it," and at that moment it is just an advertising slogan, he is trying to sell a house. He is using love and these really important words and phrases in a human's life as advertising slogans. Initially he talks in advertising slogans. When they arrive in the house, he sees the graveyard and he says "this [is a] historical sprawling manner with spacious grounds" and his wife says "hey, that's a good! Put that on the listing" and of course it is the daughter who says "and leave out all the dead people!" And so, what Jim Evers and his wife need to do, of course, is learn to look into their hearts, to find a spiritual meaning to life rather than just making lots of money by selling big houses, which is initially what they are obsessed with. He is late for his own anniversary because he is too busy selling a house; even when he talks to his wife initially in the film, he is pretending to sell a house. So even that film, which is a Disney comedy based on a theme park ride, reproduces the kind of tropes that you find in so many haunted house films and novels in America. In many ways it has to do with rejecting materialist ideology by trying to find a spiritual path and spiritual fulfilment. It is about well-being rather than welfare. That is what makes it such an important text because Poe's story is about that angst, the angst of a meaningless existence.

SM: I agree, that is what makes it universal in a way, its capacity to reach out of its context and to speak to people from all ages.

Laura Álvarez Trigo: I was wondering if you had any comment regarding the aesthetics of the house because you were speaking about the different adaptations of "House of Usher" and that got me thinking about the houses, which look very different. If we think about the gothic mansion as compared to the aristocratic decayed mansion, how does that affect the horror?

EJvL: When I think of American haunted houses, and I am limiting myself to the twentieth century, they are not castles, they are nothing like the classic Gothic. But most of the time they are also not your brand spanking new condominiums; they are the ultimate suburban villa where you have the broad road, and some nice grass, and the sidewalk for the pedestrians, and then wonderful lawns… When I think of the house in *The House Next Door* or *Rose Red*, they are a kind of industrialist's dream. It is mock Gothic. It is still just a big sprawling mansion in a very urban environment. And the house in *The People under the Stairs* (1991) is that kind of a house, or the house in *Halloween* (1978). It is not a haunted house but it is a horror house. And what fascinates me about many of those modern houses, which are freestanding with a lot of grounds around—therefore, isolated—is that people are living together but there is so much space around them, and their houses are so large and roomy that they are still isolated because they can simply ignore the rest of the world.

In *The People under the Stairs,* which I think is a fascinating film, the house does not have locks to keep people out, it actually has locks on the outside to keep people in. I thought that was a really important symbol. The family who lives there are not only trying to keep the evil world out, they are trying to keep whoever is in from going out, from meeting others. Their daughter has never been outside and when the kid who infiltrates the house says "Don't be scared, you never seen a brother before… I mean a black dude… there's black folks in this neighborhood," she is like "neighborhood?" She has never heard that word. And Fool explains: "a neighborhood, you know, outside." This is really important in the film that in that suburban area, where everyone lives in these big, huge, beautiful, sprawling kind of suburban homes, they are all living alone, they are all isolated, they are alienated from each other, whereas the kid who infiltrates the house, who comes from the ghetto, constantly lives with other people. He actually is living in a community. One of the wonderful things about that film is that his community eventually ends up at the house to literally strip away all the things that these two people who live there have built up in defense against the real world. They are literally showing these people that they exist and cannot be ignored. The mantra of the two people who live in that house is "hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil." Basically, ignore the world. If you ignore the world, if you pretend it is not there, if you lock yourself in, then life seems grand. But, of course, they are real estate brokers and they own half the ghetto and they are exploiting the people there for their own welfare. That is part of the theme of that particular film. But they can only do that if they ignore the reality of those people's lives. They can only keep exploiting them if they are blind to the misery of their lives. And so the small kid who manages to infiltrate manages to unmask it, and in the end his entire community comes to his aid as well. I think that is a really important aspect. So, for me that is when I think of the aesthetics of the American haunted house, its isolation, through what John de Graaf has called "affluenza." These families and the families who live in these houses have become so materially prosperous that they are able to build castles for themselves, isolate themselves, and ignore the rest of the world. And so these houses look beautiful, they are new, they have wonderful gardens, huge garages and they look like everyone's dream house, but actually they are a hell house. They are prisons and people have imprisoned themselves in them. And I think that is key to the aesthetics of many modern American houses, that they actually look so much like the home we all want to own. They are not ruined castles and some of them do not even look creepy. They actually look really inviting and you think "wow, if only I could live there!" But then the films tell you the drawback of that, the dangers of becoming completely isolated and self-imprisoned inside a gilded cage.

Heather Lukins: I want to revisit what you were saying about the house as the site of trauma and the house as body. I was thinking about how the house has developed through the Gothic into the horror genres. You were saying that the house is a place for discovery rather than about things that are already hidden, that sort of reversal of the frontier narrative that happens

within the American house. Why is it do you think that trauma has to come into the house, why is it never out there already? I was thinking about the film *Poltergeist* (1982) and particularly how the house demolishes itself at the end. And then how that relates to the breaking down of boundaries of families, as in *Pet Sematary* (1983), where originally the trauma is out there and then it just sort of collapses in on the house and the family, particularly with the kid who is running around with a knife. Why do you think that is that there is such a focus on the trauma invading the house and the family?

EJvL: I think there is an important historical context which goes back to Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799), where the protagonist suddenly wakes up and he is in the middle of the wilderness and then he ends up under a pile of corpses. That is a really horrific text. When I watched *Poltergeist* as a teenager all I could think about was the kid with the braces, because I had braces and all I thought about was whether my braces were going to grow like that. Then when I watched it later on, I suddenly realised that the film, despite all its sensational aspects, is really about an estate that has been built on an Indian burial ground, which is a classic gothic trope. If you think of *Pet Sematary*, that joins those two well together. I would think of another film like *The Fog* (1980) by John Carpenter, which is about a town being built with stolen money. I think, ideologically, this is the underbelly of Manifest Destiny. If you think of American civilization historically as beginning on the East Coast and then slowly sprawling West, I guess that is quite accurate. They went out West. So clearly, that is part of it. You can think of it as progress in the sense that the wilderness was paved and tarmacked and cities and houses were built but at the same time, of course, it is about a complete rejection of the actual landscape, and the actual people, and the actual animals that live there. So in many ways it is not just a psychological aspect; narratives like *Edgar Huntly*, or *Poltergeist* can be read as revenge narratives. They are like those eco-horrors where you have nature's revenge on mankind. They are powerful horror films at the moment. I think the idea of these external threats attacking the so-called nuclear family in their wonderfully comfortable home are a revenge of the original authentic landscape and its peoples and its animals who say "look, we didn't move where you are, you moved where we are! We're here! We're living here! You can… you know, you can displace us violently but then we will seek revenge!" And I think that is a narrative that you find in Frontier Gothic. James Fenimore Cooper is important. But there is a tradition, of course, of gothic Westerns that is rather underexplored. I looked into gothic Spaghetti Westerns, which are actually Italian of course, but there are also some gothic American Westerns that pick up on that idea, that there was actually a real kind of dark unrecognized aspect moving American civilization out West. And Americans are still being confronted with it, I think. many of those films are very much about that. That is maybe where haunted houses and more of an ecological kind of angle would work well together if you want to explore that. It literally is the Western wilderness striking back at artificial society.

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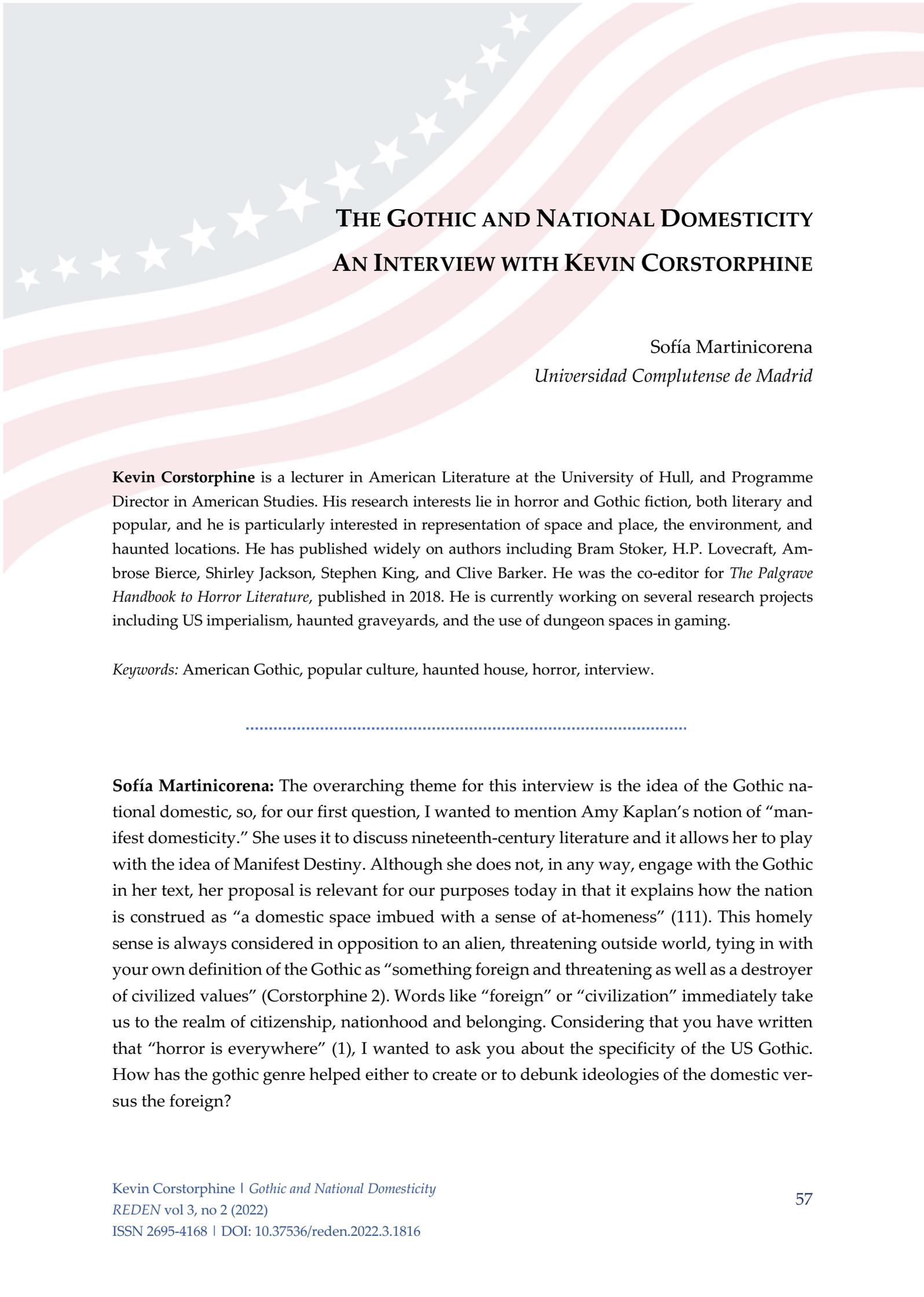
THE GOTHIC AND NATIONAL DOMESTICITY
AN INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN CORSTORPHINE

Sofía Martinicorena
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Kevin Corstorphine is a lecturer in American Literature at the University of Hull, and Programme Director in American Studies. His research interests lie in horror and Gothic fiction, both literary and popular, and he is particularly interested in representation of space and place, the environment, and haunted locations. He has published widely on authors including Bram Stoker, H.P. Lovecraft, Ambrose Bierce, Shirley Jackson, Stephen King, and Clive Barker. He was the co-editor for *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature*, published in 2018. He is currently working on several research projects including US imperialism, haunted graveyards, and the use of dungeon spaces in gaming.

Keywords: American Gothic, popular culture, haunted house, horror, interview.

Sofía Martinicorena: The overarching theme for this interview is the idea of the Gothic national domestic, so, for our first question, I wanted to mention Amy Kaplan's notion of "manifest domesticity." She uses it to discuss nineteenth-century literature and it allows her to play with the idea of Manifest Destiny. Although she does not, in any way, engage with the Gothic in her text, her proposal is relevant for our purposes today in that it explains how the nation is construed as "a domestic space imbued with a sense of at-homeness" (111). This homely sense is always considered in opposition to an alien, threatening outside world, tying in with your own definition of the Gothic as "something foreign and threatening as well as a destroyer of civilized values" (Corstorphine 2). Words like "foreign" or "civilization" immediately take us to the realm of citizenship, nationhood and belonging. Considering that you have written that "horror is everywhere" (1), I wanted to ask you about the specificity of the US Gothic. How has the gothic genre helped either to create or to debunk ideologies of the domestic versus the foreign?

Kevin Corstorphine: That's a very interesting question and one I have been trying to pin down. In terms of the US as "home" versus "the foreign," what we've seen a lot in political discourse lately is the demonization of a couple of specific foreign groups. First, with Mexico, it's about the anxieties around the border wall, which is such a blatant symbol of defining "us against them" and almost laughably obvious as a physical symbol. Second, anxieties over immigration from Islamic countries with Trump's famous "Muslim ban." Both of these are linked to discourses of "savagery" versus "civilization" and to the symbolic threat of the figure of the terrorist. Trump's famous decrying of immigrants as murderers and rapists coming either from Mexico or through Mexico from South America plays into this narrative, where you have this construction of the home territory, the domestic versus the invader. This is set up in a highly oxymoronic way, even contradictory when contrasting it to the founding of the US, because we're dealing with an immigrant nation, we're dealing with a melting pot of different cultures. Thinking about your question, I keep coming back to the idea of the Native American. Even though in this case we'd be talking about the Other within the borders, the western (the cowboy versus the Indian) is *the* narrative that the US has given the world, and it's a very flattening and simplifying narrative but still a very powerful one. It gives us this conflict between the strong, stoic frontiersmen and these forces of "savagery."

Thinking about domesticity and the home, drawing back to those ideas of how early American culture deals with the legacy of displacing, killing, and stealing land from Native peoples, brings up certain anxieties. It's so foregrounded in American Gothic that we keep coming back to the trope of the "old Indian burial ground." It's one of those classic motifs that are (and this is what I love about popular gothic) almost so obvious that they don't seem to bear analysis. But then, the more you do it, the more that comes out about what's actually going on there. We have this typical story of someone moving into a property and investing all their hopes into it. In *The Amityville Horror* (1979), they literally call the house "High Hopes," then, they discover this horrific past linked to its former ownership by Native Americans and they become haunted by spirits and events from the past. That initial guilt is essentially how American Gothic is often defined. I'm thinking about the work of critics like Teresa Goddu's *Gothic America* (1997) and Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). Fiedler's famous idea is that American literature is "bewilderingly and embarrassingly a gothic fiction," (Fiedler 29), which is resting on these twin anxieties about the injustices of slavery and injustices of the appropriation of Native land. How does all this tie into the question of foreigners? It's about the construction of a mainstream dominant culture defined against something else, something "savage," something "uncivilized," and how this opposition tends to reveal more about that culture than it is intended to.

To illustrate this, we might think of Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983). In this novel, there's a line that I love where they're talking about the land and the wife, Rachel, says "Honey, do we own this?" and the neighbour, Jud, says "It's part of the property, oh yes" and the husband, Louis, has this thought: "Which wasn't quite the same thing" (29). So, who owns

land and who has the right to build and work on the land is absolutely foundational to the American project and to its fiction. I'm thinking as well about John Locke's theory that private property is land mixed with labour, which justified land grabs in the colonial period. That's a haunting quality, that if you put your labour into a space or a place, it becomes somehow yours, but then, that's actually a contested property, and that's the doctrine used to take land from Native peoples. It's bound up with the kind of fear coming from guilt over history and this is also projected onto borders. It's all in a stew that builds up this idea of the home as civilization and a specifically American kind of civilization.

SM: You have touched on many themes that I hope we have the chance to unpack later, and I agree with everything that you said about the binary "civilization versus savagery" that articulates so many expressions of the Gothic. I would like to move to a more general level and ask you how you feel about the triangulated relationship between pop culture, the Gothic and the nation. What happens when we add the element of popular culture to this formula?

KC: Many of these texts that we've talked about have been very popular and interesting through that lens of pop culture scholarship. I mentioned as an example *The Amityville Horror*, and I've also been thinking a lot lately about where this intersects with thrillers as well. I just saw a new thriller movie called *Run* (2020) about a wheelchair user who is trapped in the home. It's sort of a version of *Rear Window* (1954) and it explores the suspicion that there's something horrible lurking below the surface. This is not a movie specific to weird gothic fans or a little off-beat, it is completely mainstream as are some of the themes that we're speaking about. I do keep asking myself these questions. In gothic studies, we talk very freely about anxiety and cultural anxiety, just as we do in lots of pop culture scholarship, but we don't often put that under the microscope quite enough, and there's a worry that we might talk too generally. How can we all be suffering all this anxiety all of the time?

To illustrate this, for instance, we've seen a lot of controversy over statues in the US of confederate soldiers and white supremacists. We can see what's the problem with them and where the hurt is coming from but, where it gets more interesting is when we trace this back to Christopher Columbus and the European discovery of the US. In this light, Columbus is someone who is a criminal sailing out to conduct his own ventures, and who is guilty of the death and displacement of millions of people. The thing is that all of this is true and, even though most of us are aware, we turn a collective blind eye to it, we become comfortable with the colonialist myth even though it's horrific from the point of view of the colonized. We are living in the bad timeline, so to speak, in the one where the bad guys have won and we've essentially built up a civilization out of this. All of these debates are very healthy to reassess our past and consider the stories that we're telling ourselves. My point is, in regards to the Gothic, that to think of the past in this way, particularly of the foundations of America, is both deeply gothic and deeply mainstream.

SM: I separated those three terms in my question (the Gothic, the nation and pop culture) but I really do not think that you can consider the Gothic without the popular culture element. It is part of the whole thing. We have been talking about the nation in general terms, following the metaphor "nation as home," and now I'd like to focus on the inside of this home and talk about the regional Gothic, which is one of the most pervasive ways in which the Gothic is manifested in the United States. Dominant US culture has tended to identify the national identity with certain regions or certain landscapes like the West, for instance, in the 19th century, or the suburban landscape more recently (especially since the post-war era). So, of course, these issues—probably because they relate to very exclusionary processes of nation building—have been treated in gothic terms. You mentioned Teresa Goddu before, who has argued that "the American gothic is most recognizable as a regional form" (3). Thinking of the many iterations that the regional Gothic has in the US, such as the New England Gothic, Southern Gothic, or even Frontier Gothic, how do you think the Gothic relates to questions of space, region and landscape in the US?

KC: When I talk to people who haven't studied the Gothic, perhaps broader literary specialists, the first thing that has sprung to mind for many years is the Southern Gothic. That is the quintessential and established version of what the Gothic *is* in the US, and it works so well for that, it's like the Freudian Id, the dark secrets and so on. Those themes of the past obviously play into this. We're dealing again with the legacy of slavery, with poverty and inequality and with family secrets. This is manifested even in respected mainstream literature like *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), where Blanche DuBois has her hidden past that she tries to gloss over and, then, her secrets are exposed, resulting in madness. So, with the Southern Gothic, it's no wonder that it has elicited scholarly attention. However, there's been a rise of more and more studies in the Gothic lately. We've seen, for instance, the New England circle of writers brought to the fore and other exciting explorations of things like Californian Gothic and Texan Gothic, so this trend has very specific regional elements to it, but not necessarily always the Deep South.

Coming back to Southern Gothic though—and I mentioned Mexico earlier—, this idea of Othering is somehow baked into the Gothic from the start. With those original gothic novels, the classic criticism has always associated them with a protestant Britain demonizing Catholic Europe, for instance, Italy and Spain are full of mad monks. Europe is represented as this place of darkness and superstition that is associated with the past. In American literature, the South has absolutely worked like that in the eyes of the North. Flannery O'Connor talked about this. There's a sense that Southern Gothic writers have had to play up to that image for Northerners who are reading their books. It's a specifically identifiable and appealing genre of writing and I think that perspective works very well. There's this novel by Nick Cave, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (2003), that, despite being Australian, it's utterly American Southern Gothic in its mood and tone, and I think that shows that it's a mode that can be transposed to

all kinds of other countries and places. Locally, the US has also managed to establish genres, tropes and gothic modes that go beyond those regions themselves.

SM: Absolutely. I think the West is the most obvious example for this because of its transnational projection. People are talking about the global post-west, and how this region has expanded to a planetary dimension.

KC: I just thought it's really interesting to consider the revisionist Western, which has that specific outlook, like Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985). It is such a gothic novel in so many ways in its worldview that everything is bleak, nothing means anything. This comes back to what I was saying about the Western frontier and this Western narrative being exported to the rest of the world. I have no doubt that we're becoming quite Americanized in terms of these stories, but we also see regional resistance (and that's a whole other topic).

SM: I would like to ponder about the slippage that exists between the dominant culture and its identification with certain emblematic spaces, and other cultures or identities that are erased from these spaces. In your view, how does the Gothic intervene upon this problematic identification between spaces and a national identity that is construed along specific and restrictive gender, racial and class lines?

KC: We're back to this classic discussion over whether the Gothic is progressive in its politics or whether it simply demonizes the Other and it is reactionary and a demonization of social change. I don't want to duck out of that or sit on the bench, but I think that it does both of those things in different texts, or sometimes even in the same one. Space and geography in terms of race, class and gender are so utterly fascinating in the way that they're inscribed. I've been thinking a lot about how in America for example you hear a lot about "bad neighborhoods" or the phrase "sketchy" neighborhoods. We are aware that these refer to black neighborhoods, and that they are racist classifications. The ways in which space is being carved up in those racialized terms has always been gothicized. We might think here about one of those quintessentially racist, albeit important, films: *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and how it characterizes African Americans as a dangerous force. But, lately, the Gothic has really been revising this in fascinating ways. I'm thinking most obviously of *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016) by Victor LaValle, which rewrites H.P. Lovecraft's fiction. In particular, "The Horror at Red Hook" (1925), has an African American character who is a jazz musician and moves through different areas of New York, but it is in Harlem where he feels safe. From the white mainstream culture perspective, Harlem could be seen as a dangerous place to be, but this African American character is comfortably at home. As he moves out towards the suburbs into very white areas, suddenly, the space becomes threatening and dangerous. What's so fascinating about it is that it really turns on its head the prejudice about non-white spaces as being threatening and dangerous. We can see this assumption in Lovecraft very clearly, and LaValle shows this other perspective through an act of creative storytelling revising the story. Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft*

Country (2016) does something very similar as well. Ultimately, the Gothic can demonize but it can also be a great vehicle to explore those very same themes from the opposite perspective, and there's a lot of writing being done in that vein at the moment.

SM: That kind of taps into my next question about Imperial Gothic and the interrogation of whether the Gothic is actually progressive or conservative. As Stephen King said, "Monstrosity fascinates us because it appeals to the conservative Republican in a three-piece suit who resides within all of us" (*Danse Macabre* 55). Now that we have looked at the inside of the "nation as home," the question remains of how the US as a nation sees its "threatening" outside. Here, I'd like to turn to the Imperial Gothic as a term, which Johan Höglund has defined as an engine of horror (328). He takes his cue from Patrick Brantlinger who popularized this term to talk about British fears during the 19th century about the crumbling empire. I was wondering if you could talk about whether you see a correlation between this reality in nineteenth-century Great Britain and the current imperial situation in the US, or the situation of the US within the world as a global power. I am thinking especially of the mainstream film industry, which is quite prone to imperialist narratives, so, what are the fixations and obsessions of the US Imperial Gothic according to you?

KC: Yes, I don't want to oversimplify in conflating these things but I think you're right that the Gothic brings together certain parallels. This idea that there's a certain responsibility and that the US sees itself as the world's policeman as Britain did in the 19th century. Kipling famously called it "the white man's burden" to civilize the world in that often criticized quotation from a poem of the same name. But this has some other parallels, for instance, the film version of *American Sniper* (2015), the autobiography of Chris Kyle, the most prolific US sniper in military history through his service in Iraq. It begins with this powerful sounding and very interesting quotation to dissect where he says that "there are people in the world who are sheep, there are people in the world who are wolves, and there are people in the world who are sheepdogs." This wasn't actually from Chris Kyle to begin with, it was from a US military strategist. Essentially, the idea is that some of us are just docile citizens going about our business, some of us are wolves (terrorists, criminals, etc.) and some of us are brave enough to take on this role of protector. This "sheepdog" needs to have the capacity for violence but to also buy into the values of civilization, which often suppress violence when appropriate. I think this analogy works very well to start the film with. There's so much going on to unpack in there as to how you define what constitutes this view of civilization. For one thing, it's quite a bleak view of civilization that we're all sheep and we've kind of domesticated ourselves. Another thing is that this shows how we're, at least on some level, anxious about the freedom of other cultures and, historically within the US, for example, with Native American peoples. But, both of those set up this very masculine and very presumptuous view that you need to be stoical, that you need to go out into the world and civilize it.

Coming back to the Gothic in Imperial era texts, you see bad things coming back. You see these people being tainted. This is particularly obvious in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), where Marlow comes back with the knowledge that Kurtz has "gone native," that he's cut off heads and put them on sticks. He's brutalized the native people and, yet, he somehow absorbed their most brutal aspects. Marlow protects Kurtz's wife from this, and then, he has this vision that the Thames has somehow become the heart of darkness. You see similar things in all types of authors from the time, like Richard Marsh with *The Beetle* (1897) and *The Joss* (1901), but we also see it in contemporary American narratives dealing with trauma, particularly, leading out of the Gulf conflicts. To come back to *American Sniper*, we learn in the film that Chris Kyle was killed by a traumatized veteran that he was trying to help. This whole story of the trauma of war returning and affecting the whole nation is what's so compelling and so gothic about those stories as well. We see this everywhere. There's a horror movie from the mid-80s called *House* (1986) about a Vietnam veteran who is haunted by his friend, whom the main character wasn't able to kill for mercy's sake when he was wounded and suffering. He didn't have the kind of courage to do this dark act, and, therefore, he's haunted. You see it as well in *House of Leaves* (2000) with the character of Will Navidson that's playing on the real photographer Kevin Carter with the picture of the girl being stalked by the vulture but not helping. This idea that there's something dark out there and that you might bring a piece of it back is a very compelling gothic element in that story.

SM: As an example of these problems, I wanted to bring up 9/11, which is probably one of the most obvious examples that one can think of in terms of national and Imperial Gothic. 9/11 has been characterized as a gothic event many times, and, in a way, this has supported the Bush administration's racist narratives of the "War on Terror" and everything that entailed. So, going back to the idea of "reactionary versus progressive" or "transgressive," and given how prone the Gothic can be to fuel reactionary discourses due to its power of Othering, do you think that pop culture gothic can be used to offer cultural resistance to US imperialism?

KC: Yes, absolutely. We're coming back to that idea of guilt in Fiedler. The other narrative about 9/11 is that this is coming from US intervention in the Middle East, going back a long way. The act is absolutely morally wrong but there's a long violent history behind it. Considering these narratives of trauma, I'm drawn to *First Blood* (1972) and the *Rambo* films, the third of which involves Rambo helping the Taliban to fight against the Soviet Union. There's this sense that the chickens are coming home to roost. Not that we want to justify any of this, but if America is worried that there are religious fundamentalists out to kill Americans then it's because of a situation created by American foreign policy, and we might make the same comparisons with the British empire with contemporary British fears about immigration and racial contamination. You might say, then, that if you don't want to have a multicultural multi-racial society starting a global empire is perhaps the wrong way to go about that project. We can't be too complacent in thinking of the Gothic as just being fearful of Othered things, or about

having a dark and gloomy worldview. There's something valuable about cynicism and the Gothic tells us that these narratives of patriotism, these very simplified jingoistic stories that we're fed, they're nonsense, and that if you scratch beneath that surface there's always something else going on. So, there's definitely capacity for resistance in that kind of gothic storytelling.

SM: Yes, I agree. I think it has the potential to be both. Even though the Gothic can, as you say, give hints about the absurdity of certain narratives, it can also be voyeuristic in that we are seeing the deconstruction of certain things, but that does not bring about any real change.

Open Q&A session

Paul Mitchell: I was thinking very much in terms of the movie *Don't Breathe* (2016) by Uruguayan filmmaker Fede Álvarez. It's a home invasion movie, in which three young adult characters invade a man's house and realize that he's blind. It turns out that the house owner is a military veteran, so the movie is about what happens to the invaders when they're in this house. Considering the things you were saying about trauma and about linking that to issues of imperialism, American foreign policy and the role that veterans play within that the promulgation of that narrative, I wanted to ask how you respond to that movie within this context of the domestic space—fundamentally, it's about a home invasion, but it's got this greater sort of political militaristic narrative about veterans and about the promulgation of American foreign policy.

KC: I thought that movie was really interesting. It's got that very satisfying narrative that the presumed bad guys have messed with the wrong guy. It's bringing me back to those ideas of this necessity to be a sheepdog as mentioned in terms of *American Sniper.* There was more to this though, because he was actually quite sadistic. He's got a girl that he's kidnapped and that he's got tied up, so it plays with your assumption about who is the villain and who is the victim. It speaks well to that question about whether the Gothic is progressive or if it is actually reactionary. It seems to be quite an interesting movie in the sense that it's really complex and in terms of what it suggests about America and some of its attitudes. I think that's absolutely fascinating regarding that sense that something threatening is elsewhere, that the violence and the darkness happen over there and that people are expected to (and often quite young people—we can get into quite a lot about the funneling of kids into the US military) commit acts of extreme violence for the right purposes. If we think of Guantanamo Bay, it is considered entirely appropriate if it's in favor of a particular political military end, but it's completely inappropriate in the domestic context. So, I love that idea that those very qualities that make this veteran a hero also make him a villain. I think this really brings together some of the stuff we've been talking about.

[NN]: We have talked about the political leniency of the Gothic and how it can be progressive and transgressive, but also conservative. Do you think the genre has a responsibility to be either? Or can we take it as a form of art, in and of itself, without a second objective? Can we still enjoy Lovecraft regardless of the fact that he was a racist?

KC: That's a very important question for our times. I've already mentioned Victor LaValle. In his introduction to *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* (2019), he wrote about reading Lovecraft and enjoying his fiction. Then, realizing that he was horrifically racist, as an African American, he decided that he couldn't enjoy this anymore. Eventually, he came round to a perspective that is along the lines of being able to criticize someone and still appreciate aspects of their work. Now, in some ways that's not very contemporary. This is a huge issue and partly a generational thing but we have started to demand certain standards of creators and even stories themselves. I don't want to endorse any evil narratives though, and there's no doubt that I do enjoy gothic narratives that either satirize bad things or that put forward viewpoints I agree with, so there is a picking and choosing of where your own standards lie. I just don't think it can ever be a completely morally responsible genre. Fred Botting, in one of the most foundational statements in this field, claims that the Gothic is a writing of excess and it always has to cross boundaries, including those of taste. I think that's why it's important for us to take a critical stance.

N: To build on that, do you think something is more artistic or intrinsically more valuable when it has a political or social message? For example, *Funny Games* (1997) versus *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). The first one presents violence without a context, while the second explores whether it is better, morally speaking, to have a choice to do good or to not have that choice. However, it doesn't give you an answer, that's on the viewer or on the reader to ponder.

KC: Both films are held up as works of art and they're generally quite respected on that basis. I do like Oscar Wilde's idea that all good art is perfectly useless and there's an element of that in ambiguity. When I teach the Gothic, my students get a bit annoyed sometimes about the ambiguity of Hawthorne and authors like that. They often ask: "what did actually happened?" "What are we supposed to think about this?" Well, that's part of the medium and I think that's great. The aestheticization of violence and of immorality is in itself interesting.

Paul Mitchell: You talked about *The Ballad of Black Tom*, and how it explores this idea of non-white spaces being dangerous, and that led me to think of the filmmaker Jordan Peele, specifically the movie *Get Out* (2017), and the way it does a very similar thing in its opening to what you've mentioned. I wanted to ask if you've got other examples of texts by African Americans, women or other minorities who are using the Gothic as a space to present an alternative and/or subversive vision of America.

KC: That's quite a broad-ranging question. In LaValle's work, there's these things that the protagonist does when has to adopt mannerisms of what's expected of him to avoid racism,

which takes me back to representation of being African American in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and other similar classic examples. But there, interestingly, the narrator says: "I'm not a spook from Edgar Allan Poe or anything like that." I also like the way that Toni Morrison has used the Gothic. It is particularly compelling in *Beloved* (1987) because it's essentially a haunted house novel about the traumas of the past. *Lovecraft Country* is another one, Matt Ruff is a white author, and this is interesting if we think of the racial politics that we've been talking about, but there's still plenty of things there to unpack. I definitely think there's a lot going on in this area at the moment. The comparison between *Get Out* and *The Ballad of Black Tom* definitely works, and that also evokes the complacency of liberal people. It fits with a lot of James Baldwin's writing about hypocrisy and about using African Americans for your own ends.

Mónica Fernández Jiménez: You've mentioned Hawthorne in one of your previous answers and I wanted to ask if you could elaborate a little bit more on your ideas about Hawthorne as a figure of the American gothic. These foundational figures are very interesting and there are many themes and elements that can be explored but, how do you interpret the appearances of houses in his fiction, where there's a strong connection with Europe and the Calvinist tradition?

KC: That idea in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) that the mischiefs of the past are revisited on the present portrays the house as locus for guilt. The thing that gets me about Hawthorne with those texts set in the early Puritan period, such as *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and short stories like "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) and "The Minister's Black Veil" (1836), is that it appears as if these stories are contemporary with their events when, in reality, Hawthorne is looking back to a period of about 150 years before he's writing. Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and Herman Melville's "Bartleby" (1853) are written very close together but one of them seems even more modern than it is, and the other one seems like it's set in the medieval past and yet, they're contemporary.

We have a trend now for Neo-Victorian fiction that takes knowing look back. The most recent one that I've read and that I've found interesting is *The Essex Serpent* by Sarah Perry (2016). It dips into the minds of the characters and suggests that they couldn't know what we know—that kind of thing is what John Fowles does in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). My point is that I think Hawthorne is completely fascinating in terms of being one of the foundational authors of writing a history about that early period with the benefit of hindsight, with the knowledge and the weight of guilt that implies. There's that biographical detail that his great-great-grandfather had been a judge in the Salem Witch Trials and that he was kind of embarrassed by the religious fanaticism, superstition, hysteria and scapegoating. That mood has stuck with American gothic, that sense of the guilt about the past and how the past still lives on in the present (for instance, with slavery, as we've been talking about racial issues). There's that famous Faulkner quote that the past is not dead, it's not even past and, for me, that's what Hawthorne does.

Alejandro Batista: You talked about regionalism in the Gothic and about looking back. It seems that it has a lot to offer to the Gothic in terms of exploring the past but, what about the future and future gothic authors? We are in a globalized world right now, and regionalism is somehow diffused and blurry. So, how do you see the future of the Gothic in this regard?

KC: That brings me back to the previous question about the slightly revised takes on the Gothic we're seeing from certain authors. I would recommend a novel by British author Helen Oyeyemi, *White is for Witching* (2009), which is about race and the Gothic. It deals with the expansion of perspectives across areas that we talked about earlier focused on race, class, gender and sexuality. The range of authors working in this field and using the traditional storylines of the Gothic for their own ends is probably the most transformative thing that that we're seeing. Traditionally, to go back once more to that early Gothic, it's partly about people who see themselves as the mainstream dominant culture worrying about this weird crazy person over here, which is about that Othering that's at the heart of the Gothic. But we're starting to see some of those narratives turned around a little bit, and again, globalized. I talked about Mexico as a US's Other, if we look at things like the recent Mexican gothic and the ways in which people are using these narratives, there's a reclaiming of the ghosts, spirits and monsters of these stories that have such different meanings in their native context. They've been completely misrepresented. This is potentially fun but there's also a lot more potential to explore these myths and stories that the Gothic draws on in a more authentic way. That seems to me to be the near future, a wider range of perspectives and viewpoints.

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Rear Window. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Paramount, 1954.

Run. Directed by Aneesh Chaganty, Lionsgate, 2020.
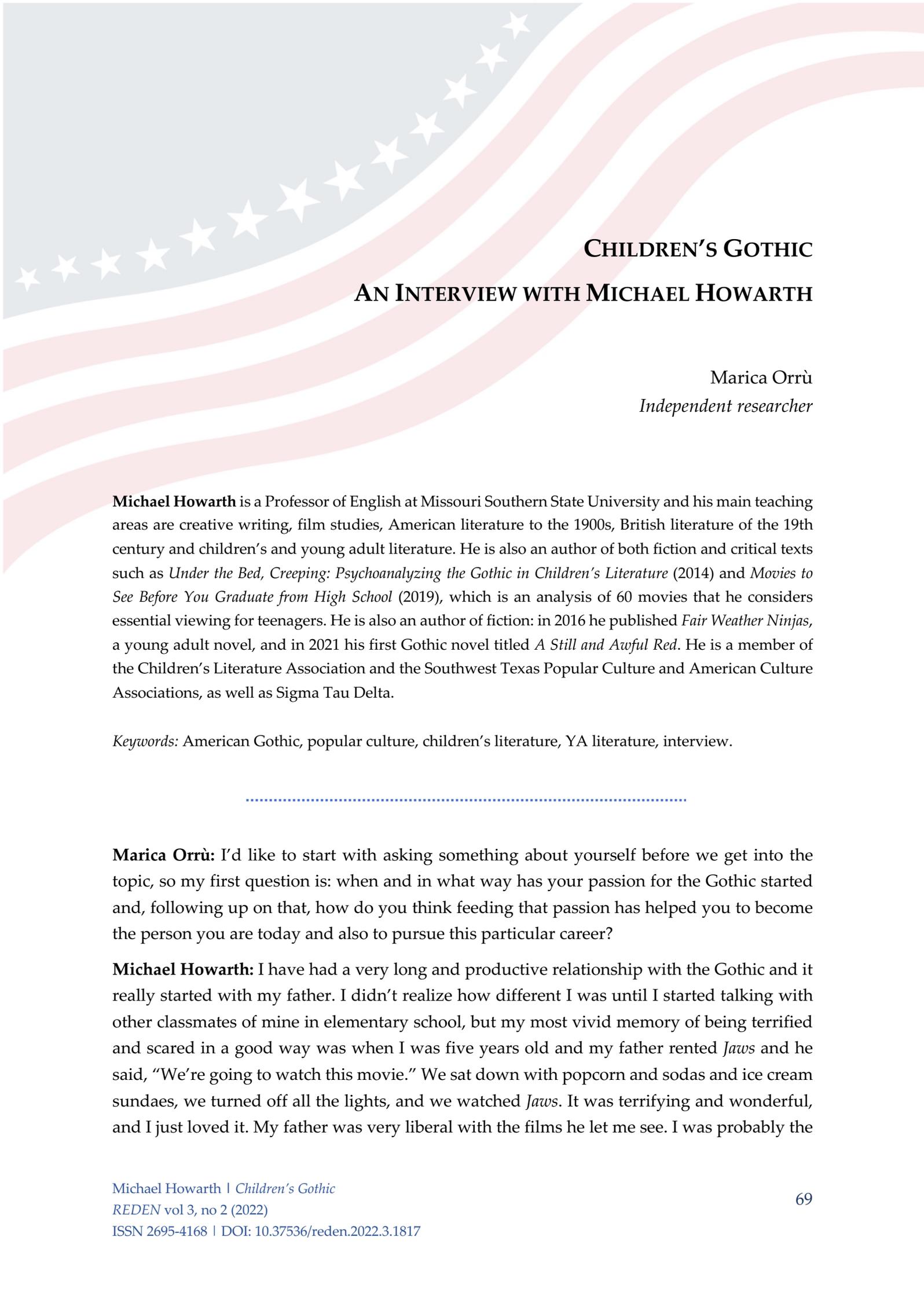
CHILDREN'S GOTHIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL HOWARTH

Marica Orrù

Independent researcher

Michael Howarth is a Professor of English at Missouri Southern State University and his main teaching areas are creative writing, film studies, American literature to the 1900s, British literature of the 19th century and children's and young adult literature. He is also an author of both fiction and critical texts such as *Under the Bed, Creeping: Psychoanalyzing the Gothic in Children's Literature* (2014) and *Movies to See Before You Graduate from High School* (2019), which is an analysis of 60 movies that he considers essential viewing for teenagers. He is also an author of fiction: in 2016 he published *Fair Weather Ninjas*, a young adult novel, and in 2021 his first Gothic novel titled *A Still and Awful Red*. He is a member of the Children's Literature Association and the Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Associations, as well as Sigma Tau Delta.

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Marica Orrù: I'd like to start with asking something about yourself before we get into the topic, so my first question is: when and in what way has your passion for the Gothic started and, following up on that, how do you think feeding that passion has helped you to become the person you are today and also to pursue this particular career?

Michael Howarth: I have had a very long and productive relationship with the Gothic and it really started with my father. I didn't realize how different I was until I started talking with other classmates of mine in elementary school, but my most vivid memory of being terrified and scared in a good way was when I was five years old and my father rented *Jaws* and he said, "We're going to watch this movie." We sat down with popcorn and sodas and ice cream sundaes, we turned off all the lights, and we watched *Jaws*. It was terrifying and wonderful, and I just loved it. My father was very liberal with the films he let me see. I was probably the

only kid in my kindergarten class who had seen John Carpenter's original *Halloween*. Of course, he made me wear a blanket over my head during some of the nude scenes, but that was really my first introduction to horror films and to the Gothic. I remember in the early 80s when we would go to the video store to rent movies, my favorite section was always the Horror section and while my father was roaming around looking for something to rent, I was looking at the covers of *Friday the 13th* and *American Gothic* and *Halloween*. I read the descriptions on the back covers and let my imagination wander. It was wonderful.

So, all of that was the impetus for what started me on this creative and critical journey of being interested in the Gothic. My favorite season has always been autumn, and my favorite holiday has always been Halloween. I'm excited when the leaves start turning different colors and it stays darker for much longer. I'm never happier than when it's thundering and raining outside, when the sky is gray and overcast. That atmosphere is absolutely wonderful, and it's probably because I appreciate the duality of good and evil that the Gothic portrays, those negative aspects of humanity that to me are very realistic. And I also like the psychological and philosophical aspects of the Gothic. Sometimes, in realism, trying to present a message can come across as didactic or preachy, but when you wrap it in a Gothic story it doesn't feel so much like somebody is beating you over the head with a particular message. So when I was a kid, not only did I watch a lot of scary movies, but I also read a lot of horror books. I can particularly remember reading the *Scary Stories* anthology by Alvin Schwartz. Not only are the stories creepy and fascinating, like "The Thing" and "Harold," but so are the illustrations. I read that series over and over again. In fact, I just reread it a few years ago and those stories still hold up. The *Scary Stories* series was very popular and also banned in a lot of places. And if we know one thing about being a child or a teenager, it's that if something is banned, then you can rest assured that almost everybody will read it because people don't like being told they cannot do something. The word "no" almost always triggers some kind of resistance.

My imagination was constantly whirling in lots of different ways with lots of different ideas. I would picture scenarios in my head and write creative stories. In middle school, I wrote horror stories all the time and turned them in for assignments because they afforded me a passion not just for gothic literature but for creative writing and for wanting to teach. It was through the Gothic that I began to understand and appreciate the liberal arts, and this pathway of the Gothic made me want to discuss and teach the things I was learning about, especially because it's a genre that doesn't quite get the respect it deserves. There's a lot the Gothic can offer us if we just allow ourselves the freedom to explore it.

MO: Do you think that growing up fully absorbed in these atmospheres and narrations of the Gothic has influenced both your research and your fictional production? And since we're talking about it, would you like to tell us more about your upcoming novel?

MH: I started writing creatively when I was in middle school. In fact, I can remember very clearly that my seventh grade teacher was not a fan of horror and I wrote a lot of imaginative

short stories, everything from killer vegetables to a chocolate monster running loose in a candy factory. But the story that upset my teacher the most was a Christmas story about a demonic Santa Claus who killed people. He had elves who were demons and they slaughtered people, and instead of garland hanging on the Christmas trees it was the victims' intestines. My teacher gave me an F because she said she was horrified. Though she did compliment my writing style. In her scribbled comments at the end of the assignment, she told me I needed to write something more upbeat. So, the next story I turned in was an overly sentimental story about orphans finding a home on Christmas. Later, I remember my teacher talking to my parents about the types of stories I was writing, and my parents supporting both me and my creativity. They sat me down and said, "We know there's nothing wrong with you. You're just being imaginative." That was a huge moment for me because I felt validated. I knew I shouldn't feel guilty about loving this genre and all of its characteristics.

It was writing those Gothic stories and reading a lot of children's literature that led me to focus specifically on children's literature when I got my Ph.D. And it was the gothic texts I read, like *The Secret Garden* and even some of the *Harry Potter* books, that made me start to wonder how the Gothic can be used not just as a teaching experience, but as a way to help children and young adults gain a sense of their own self-identity. That's one of the reasons why I wrote *Under the Bed, Creeping*. I wanted to explore that connection between literature and the growth and development of young people because I love the idea of being able to talk about issues like class and power and gender in ways that don't just feel preachy. Then I wrote my young adult novel *Fair Weather Ninjas*, which centers on a high school student dealing with a lot of past trauma, specifically the loss of his father. He thinks he's a real ninja, which allows for some funny moments in the story. But there's also a lot of pathos in the novel because those two elements—humor and pathos—are key parts of coming-of-age stories.

But I had always wanted to write a story about Elizabeth Bathory who is a famous Hungarian Countess and is considered one of the most prolific serial killers in the world. She murdered about six hundred peasant girls during a ten-year period. She would bathe in their blood because she thought it made her skin look younger. That story fascinated me because under the surface this is really a story about a woman who is afraid of growing old, a woman who did everything she could to retain her power and beauty. There have been a lot of stories about Elizabeth Bathory, many books and films, but I wanted to approach it from a different angle. I wasn't writing a biography, but a work of fiction that tackles the story from the perspective of a young woman who comes to the castle to work as a seamstress and begins to suspect that things in the castle are not quite what they seem. So there's a mystery that unravels over the course of the novel.

I tend to be working on multiple projects at any given time, usually a creative project and a critical project. That helps to keep me fresh. And if I'm not working on a chapter or an article, I'm at least jotting down ideas for future projects or outlining potential ones, or even creating a list of books I want to use for research. Currently, I'm almost finished with another

gothic historical novel, and I am also working on some research involving the Gothic in children's films. In fact, I recently wrote an article on Val Lewton's *Curse of the Cat People*, exploring how the film's gothic elements can act as a philosophical mirror for children to work through various issues in their lives.

MO: So, considering your studies on the topic obviously but also your personal experience, as we heard, in growing up as a fan of gothic stories, how do you think that gothic literature and more generally gothic elements in children's literature can help a child in the process of shaping his or her identity?

MH: Sometimes, when we read gothic texts in my children's literature class, students will ask, "Is this appropriate for children?" And I always repeat Madeleine L'Engle's famous quotation that states, "How can children appreciate the light if they've never seen the darkness?" Which is a great quotation because if you try to show children only the happy and sunny times, that does not prepare them well for when they need to face the darker times in their life. As much as we don't want to admit it, our lives are a mixture of good and bad times. There's sadness, there's depression, there's grief, and there's death. It's unavoidable. If you live on this planet, then you're going to have to deal with trauma at some point and preparing children and young adults for that is very important.

I tell my students all the time that Gothicism helps children deal with the problems they're facing because childhood itself is scary. It's a time when you're making friends, losing friends, and being bullied. You're living in a world controlled by adults, a world in which you have no power. For example, children are often told when to eat, where to go, and how to behave. They make few important decisions on their own. But gothic literature is all about power and control. In fact, some of the best gothic literature is about characters who are struggling to assert power over other characters, and even over other landscapes, that seek to control and manipulate them. Gothicism also externalizes our internal fears, and so it takes abstract ideas like grief or anger and it puts them in concrete terms that children can understand. Children, especially young children, have a difficult time verbalizing abstract ideas. They know they experience a certain emotion, and they know when they get mad or jealous or depressed, but they have a very difficult time articulating those emotions and expressing themselves in a way that gives them control over their own emotions. The Gothic helps them to do that.

If you look at *Where The Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, that's a book about dealing with anger, and it becomes very clear that the wild things symbolize Max's anger toward his mother, and in taming the wild things he's essentially taming his anger. So, the book helps children to understand what anger means while also showing them how to deal with that anger and how to process it in a positive way.

This is much different from how Gothicism was often used in children's literature, which was as a deterrent to bad behavior. If you look at Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*, you will

notice how different it is from the Disney version, especially because the puppet is stabbed and hanged and beaten and caught in a steel trap, and almost eaten alive twice. That book is very dark because Pinocchio goes through hell to become a real boy. The gothic elements in that book are used to scare children into behaving properly and listening to the adults and respecting adult authority. The problem with that approach is that it doesn't allow for an intelligent and insightful conversation between either the child reader and the book, or between the child reader and the adult. This is because the child is so scared and often doesn't want to talk about those issues and conflicts. There has to be a safe space, and I think we're seeing a lot more of that now where the Gothic is not used as necessarily a punishment.

Gothic literature and film are approaching issues of diversity a lot more than they have in the past. There's a nice message in some of these stories that not all monsters are bad. In Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard* book the characters that are normally associated as being evil are the good characters and the characters that are normally associated as being good are the evil characters. He completely flips the reader's expectations and allows us to have a conversation about not just diversity, but how we label people and how we have certain prejudices.

When we look at children's gothic texts, we have to remember that these books were not written by children, and what's fascinating about this idea is that you have adults making decisions about how they think a child should act and how they think a child should think and what types of character and stories they think a child will enjoy. To complicate these ideas, there are artists like Roald Dahl and Tim Burton who tell stories that are accessible not just to children but to adults. Their stories, for instance, show how eccentric and strange adults can be in their own way of thinking and approaching the world, and especially how those adults approach the idea of childhood. *The Secret Garden* is another good example. It's a book many adults can relate to because it's about a parent coping with grief and dealing with a child who is sick. It's about trying to reestablish a relationship with your child. But for children, *The Secret Garden* is about making connections with friends and discovering nature and exploring the unknown. So it's clear there are always different layers in a book, and different ages can relate to different layers.

In many ways, children's literature, especially the gothic texts, are more than just a reflection of the frustrations and conflicts that can surface during childhood. They're also a commentary on how children view adulthood. *Alice in Wonderland* is a great example because all of the adult characters in that book are crazy: the Mad Hatter the Queen of Hearts, the Cheshire Cat. Poor Alice wanders around looking at all these adults and thinking how weird they are and how their words and actions don't make any sense to her. And that's realistic. Many times, children don't understand why adults do the things they do. Many of these Gothic children's books are important because they offer well-rounded characters that children can relate to and themes that children can understand, thus reminding child readers they are not the only ones who harbor some of these thoughts.

The Gothic provides a safe space, meaning children can work through many of these themes and issues in the context of an engrossing story. They understand how other characters react to those issues, they understand the actions those characters make, the consequences those characters face, whether they're good or bad, and they can learn from those actions. When children face similar situations in their own lives, perhaps they are more prepared because they've read about those situations in a book and had ample time to think about those unique situations.

With COVID being so prevalent at the moment, there is always the topic of vaccinations, and I bring this up because in many ways each of the books or stories or poems that children read is like a small vaccine. You can give it to children to prepare them for when they get older, for when they have to deal with similar situations in their own lives. Literature, and even film, can adequately prepare them for dealing with lots of themes and issues and problems that the world might throw at them when they become adolescents and then adults. And isn't that a huge part of a parent's job, or any adult for that matter? To prepare children for the larger world they will someday inhabit? To teach them how to make good choices? And to move them away from constant dependence to confident independence?

Added to that, gothic literature also promotes a feeling of victory, which is especially important for an age-range that, as I've already mentioned, does not enjoy a lot of power and control. Gothic literature often celebrates some type of victory at the end of the story. It might not always be quite the victory that the character or the reader wants, but it's still crucial for child readers to see another person, even if he or she is fictional, learn and mature and achieve some level of success. Those moments, which can lead to a sudden realization or an epiphany, are instrumental in shaping a child's growth and development.

I also admire how the Gothic is honest when it comes to presenting a level of realism within a fantastic or supernatural story, meaning this is a genre that is not afraid to portray how the real world functions. Whether we like it or not, the real world is not always fair. Good does not always triumph over evil. We don't live in a fairy tale, and gothic literature forces us not only to understand that idea, but to confront what scares us. It forces us to question what we can do to survive in such a world. A lot of times, people don't want to admit they are scared of something or someone, but gothic literature creates that safe space in which readers can deal with those issues and then process a multitude of emotions. And if the reader becomes scared, then he or she can just close the book and return to the story at a later time when he or she feels more settled and comfortable.

MO: Yes, very true. As we already mentioned, you teach children's literature at Missouri Southern State University. Why do you think it's important to teach gothic literature and also what would you say are the most common responses to the gothic themes from students who attend your classes? Do you find that these responses have evolved during your years of teaching? And finally, do you think that could be a correlation between young people's relationship with the Gothic and great changes in our society?

MH: Whenever I use gothic literature in my classroom, or even when I teach books that contain Gothic elements, I always have some students who are a bit leery and question whether or not those elements are appropriate for children. And that's a great conversation to have. There's not one specific age where children are suddenly able to handle gothic elements, or to understand the symbolism and how those elements connect to the story and characters and setting. Every child is different. Clearly, I was an anomaly, watching *Jaws* and *Halloween* and *Aliens* when I was still in elementary school.

Children can always handle a lot more than adults give them credit for and that's something I constantly tell my students. I tell them it's important to teach gothic texts because at some point in our lives we are all going to encounter the Big Bad Wolf, in whichever form that takes. Gothic texts can help to illuminate the way we view the world. They help us to learn what frightens us, and they help us to learn what fascinates us. What most children remember about the fairy tales they read are usually the scary parts and the violent parts and the gory parts. They're somewhat fascinated by that dark side, as are most people, even those who are afraid of horror films. Some people who watch horror films cover their eyes with their hands, but they still peek through their fingers. Why? It's because they are still intrigued by what is happening, and they are equally intrigued by the possibility of what could happen.

Therefore, the Gothic becomes an important mechanism for learning how to conquer our own fears and how to keep them at bay, or how to communicate them to other people. It helps us to establish a sense of our own independence and thus develop our own self-identities. Gothic stories help children explore their surroundings. If you want children to be engaged in literature, then you have to give them something to think about, and Gothic literature always gives you something to think about. Right now, we are seeing the Gothic becoming more established. More children are reading gothic stories, and part of that reason is because of social media and streaming services. Children nowadays are more in tune with what's going on in the world, so they are not quite as sheltered as children in the past have been. More and more, it seems children are questioning how the greater world functions and how they fit into that world, and so many authors are writing gothic books that deal with social themes and issues that children deal with on a regular basis.

Children regularly deal with heightened emotions and a heightened imagination, two elements that are often prevalent in gothic texts. So it makes sense that children would gravitate toward a genre that contains many of the same levels of emotion and imagination which children often experience themselves. Children are constantly finding themselves in power struggles, not just with their parents but with their friends and their communities, or even with how quickly or slowly their own bodies are changing. In gothic texts, they are able to watch those struggles play out through various characters and plots and settings. They get to live vicariously through other characters and test out what happens when they want to act like a character who succeeds, but then when a character fails they can ask also themselves questions about what that specific character could have done differently. Interacting with

those gothic elements is important because it's a reminder that such struggles and conflicts are an unavoidable part of life. But those hardships are also crucial in helping each one of us figure out who we are and who we want to become. We can grow from these experiences as long as we make good choices and learn from our mistakes.

In my university classes, all the students in the teacher education program must take a class on child psychology, so by the time most of them enroll in my children's literature course they have studied some aspects of psychology and are better able to grasp some of the gothic elements we read during the semester. As a professor, I like to focus on the choices and decisions the characters make, and how those characters change as a result of their decisions.

When I teach literature, I try to emphasize the importance of universal connections because one of the great things about literature, and especially all of those well-written characters that live within the pages, is that regardless of what country a reader is from, regardless of their race or ethnicity, there is something about the characters' behaviors and traits that strike a chord within the reader. Readers enjoy connecting with certain characters, relating to similar passions and desires and interests and fears.

So I always try to find ways that readers can connect to the characters and ask questions about how they are both similar and dissimilar to the characters in a given novel. One exercise I often ask my students to do is to write a paragraph about how they are like a specific character and then write another paragraph about how they are not like a specific character. Then I will ask them to write about a good decision made by a character, as well as a bad decision made by that same character. Questions like those really allow readers to explore the psychology of the characters. Because then you can have a conversation that centers on the idea of what makes a good choice and what makes a bad choice. And then you can discuss the repercussions of those decisions.

And every time we have those discussions in my classroom, we talk about what lessons children can gain from a particular text. Because the first question you always want to ask when choosing a book to share with a child is: What do I want my students to learn from this text? What is my reason for teaching this text? And if you can answer that question, then you can provide a roadmap for the readers to follow. When I teach a text, I always begin by telling my students what concepts I want them to understand, and I ask them to focus on important themes in the text and how the main character changes from the beginning to the end, or how a secondary character is pivotal in the main character's growth and development.

What I love about discussing literature in the classroom is that every person has his or her own response to a given text because we are all different people, meaning we all have different life experiences. We've all made different choices, we've all succeeded, and we've all failed. We've all experienced happiness and sadness and pain, so whenever we read a text we tend to gravitate towards those characters and conflicts that we relate to personally. Everyone has a favorite scene or character or line of dialogue, but the readers also disagree as to whether the ending is satisfying or the character has grown sufficiently over the course of the novel.

And those differences and similarities are what allow us to engage in those inspiring and interesting conversations. To really understand and appreciate a text you need to reread it a couple of times. We don't have that luxury in a college classroom, but the closest we can come to that experience is having twenty different students read the same book and then have each of them share their own interpretation of the text.

Overall, the responses in my classroom have been largely positive whenever I have incorporated gothic texts into the curriculum, whether it be through novels or stories or poems. At the very least, my students have gained a deeper appreciation for the Gothic and can now understand its importance.

MO: I have one final question: in the epilogue of your book *Under the Bed, Creeping*, which we have already mentioned, you write, and I quote, "Children's literature is for all ages." Can you explain what that means and why you think it is so important to keep this idea in mind when dealing with children's books?

MH: Children's literature is certainly taken more seriously as a genre than it was in the past. Even still, there are people who think the vocabulary in children's books is always simple and the stories are straightforward and not complicated. But children are very complex, and so the best children's literature needs to be complex, too. Once we start exploring children's literature in my classroom, my students are always shocked by the serious issues and advanced vocabulary words that exist in those texts, not to mention the big themes and ideas. And I always share with them, at the beginning of the semester, one of my favorite quotations by the author Philip Pullman, who says, "There are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book."

People tend to think that children's literature deals with only the emotions that children deal with, but there's really no emotion that is specific to children. If you're a human being, then you experience anger and depression and happiness and grief. Plus, no one ever escapes his or her childhood, which is one of the reasons why children's literature is for all ages. We don't just cut loose our childhood when we reach a certain age. Our childhood is like a shadow that is with us throughout our lives. We may not always see it, and there are times when it might be bigger than it really is or more pronounced, but it's always there. And the books we read as children, the conversations we have about those books, and the use of our imagination all work together to help shape our identities. We carry those experiences into adolescence and adulthood. Stop for a moment and think about who you are as an adult and then ask yourself how your childhood experiences helped to shape your identity. At what point did you begin to separate from who you were as a child and start to make your own decisions and to act more independently?

An important theme in children's literature is the idea of home away home, in which the child starts off at home, is supported by parents, is dependent on adults and then must go off on his or her own and make choices on his or her own, whether those choices are good or

bad. The child character learns from those decisions, and oftentimes from any mistakes, and returns home at the end of the story changed and now more aware of his or her place in the world, as well as having a better understanding of how to make important decisions.

When I wrote *Under the Bed, Creeping*, I made a conscious effort to write it in a way that non-academics could understand it. I don't want to target just one specific group of people. I would love for parents and teenagers to read some of these critical texts and connect with them to the point of saying, "I understand how this relates to me." If you have kids and they're interested in this type of literature, or if you're looking for literature to use with them to get them thinking about certain issues or ideas that they might feel uncomfortable talking about with you, then why not read some of these critical articles and texts? They can help people to learn more about what specific books to use with children and students, as well as how to approach them in regard to discussing certain issues and ideas.

As I read more and more children's literature, and the accompanying critical analysis, I continue to be fascinated by how many details have been changed over the years, like Cinderella's stepsisters chopping off parts of their feet to fit inside the slipper, or the wicked queen wanting to eat Snow White's lungs and liver. I suppose adults believed those details would terrify children too much and warp their growth and development. But that's a mistake because in changing many of those stories, they remove the opportunities for the main characters to make their own choices, which hinders that character's maturity process. In life, we all have to make good choices and bad choices. We all have to understand and live with the consequences, otherwise there is no room for growth. How can children be expected to mature if someone else is always making choices for them?

And let's not forget that children are smart enough to know it's just a story. Plus, they enjoy those darker and more violent details. That's one of the reasons why we are seeing the original versions of many of these stories becoming more popular and being read more and more to children. Perhaps adults are understanding the positive aspects of Gothicism and realizing that children can indeed handle a lot more than we often give them credit for.

If I could give two or three book and film recommendations to someone who is interested in exploring Gothicism in children's literature and film, I would recommend *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman, especially if they are familiar with Disney's *The Jungle Book,* which addresses some of the same key themes and ideas. I would also recommend a novel titled *Peppermints in the Parlor* as well as a book geared toward middle-grade readers titled *Scar Island* that deals with bullying and grief and abandonment. In terms of films, I recommend *ParaNorman*, Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie*, and Val Lewton's *Curse of the Cat People* from 1944, which deals with childhood trauma in a way that's spooky but also very touching. These books and films are important because they use Gothic elements, sometimes in fantastical settings, to explore realistic issues and conflicts that feel both personal and universal at the same time.

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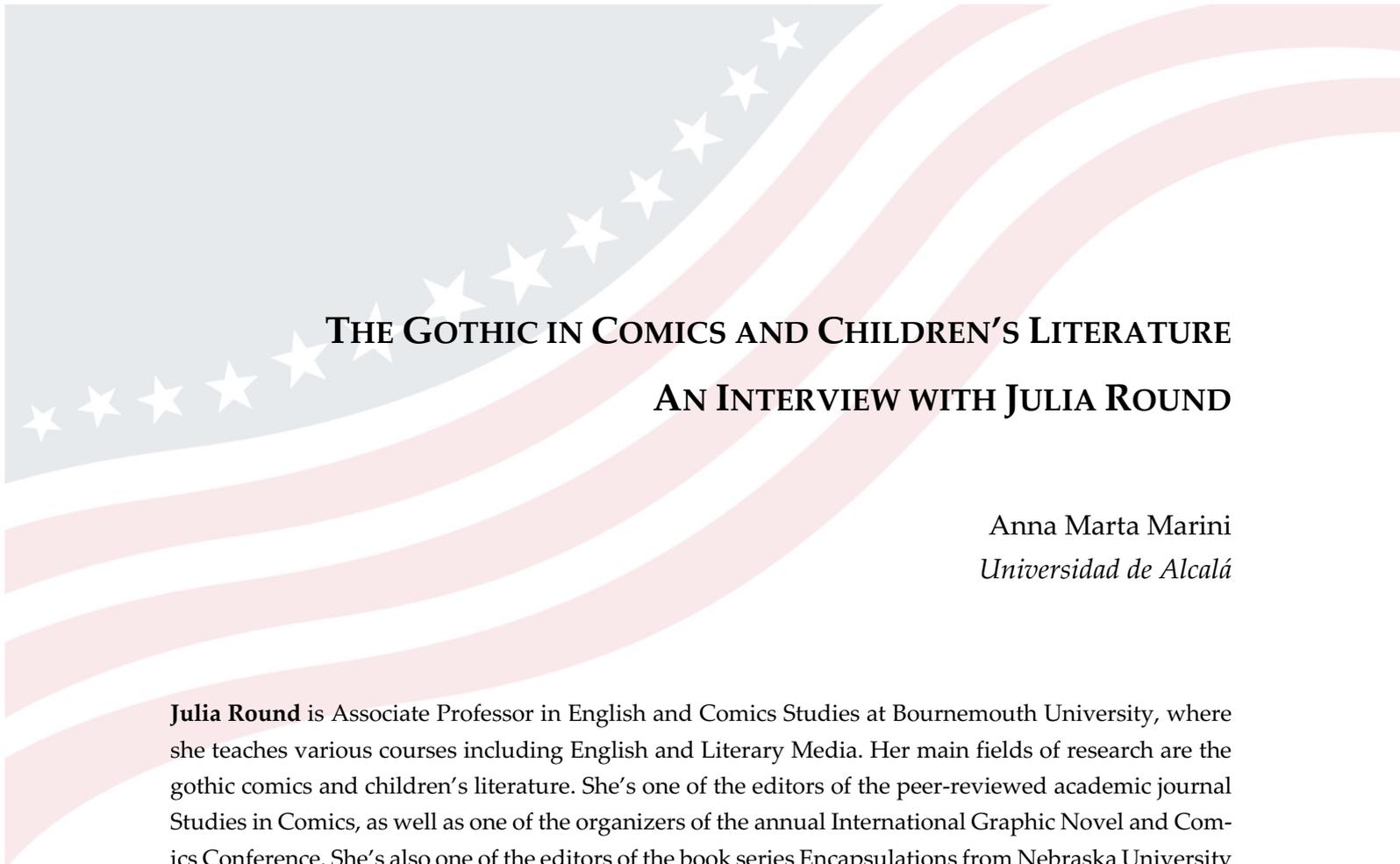
THE GOTHIC IN COMICS AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIA ROUND

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Julia Round is Associate Professor in English and Comics Studies at Bournemouth University, where she teaches various courses including English and Literary Media. Her main fields of research are the gothic comics and children's literature. She's one of the editors of the peer-reviewed academic journal Studies in Comics, as well as one of the organizers of the annual International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference. She's also one of the editors of the book series Encapsulations from Nebraska University Press. Besides publishing numerous essays, she's published the monographs *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach* (2014) and *Gothic for Girls: Misty and British Comics* (2019). She's also an author of short comics that have been published in anthologies and fanzines, including "Doll Parts" (with art by Catriona Laird), "The Haunting of Julia Round" (with art by Letty Wilson) and "Borrowed Time" (with art by Morgan Brinksman). She shares her work at www.juliaround.com.

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Anna Marta Marini: You've been focusing your research on children's literature, the Gothic, and comics. How were these interests born and how they developed through time? Why do you think they represent relevant topics for academic research?

Julia Round: I think a lot of my research in all those areas comes from a really personal place. And I'm going to start maybe with the gothic angle because I think that goes all the way back to my teenage years, where I was absolutely a goth… and I came to that through rock and industrial music. It all started with Alice Cooper. One of my favorite songs is "Billion Dollar Babies," where Alice duets with the singer Donovan—there's a really weird contrast in their two voices on this song. I also loved bands like Nine Inch Nails, who are very industrial but with a real high and low and melodic top layer in their in their music, creating a lot of variation, and for me that's the appeal of Gothic more generally. I think it draws together these

sorts of dichotomies and contradictions. It has got surface ideas of horror, but also hidden depths, things that are secret and obscured alongside quite explicit and confrontational horror. I like those sorts of contradictions. I also like the history of Gothic around those contradictions: as it developed from being named after barbarians into an elite, canonized literature. Another point of tension might be the way it plays with fear and attraction… even goth culture, which I think is on the one hand quite introspective and quite introverted but is also quite performative and confrontational. So Gothic exists on the borderline I think. And a lot of its archetypes do too. It's got all these symbols that are very rich to look through.

That's part of the appeal and the starting point for me, but my interest in the Gothic wasn't just because I was a surly teenager, it also came from a lot of the children's literature that I think was given to me. When I was growing up in the 1970s and early 1980s a lot of the classic children's literature that I read had these quite isolated protagonists, who might discover these strange new worlds or some fantasy land, often with some very gothic tropes. They even appear in work from unexpected writers like Enid Blyton, who is probably more known for adventure and mystery stories, but there are lots of old castles and isolated islands, peril, and people being trapped in these tales. Also writers like Roald Dahl, who are perhaps mainly known for their comedy, have this grotesque, anarchic, terrifying aspect. So, I studied children's literature as an undergraduate and I became really interested in the complexities behind it. I think it takes quite a lot of skill to distil something down into a short format that will entertain and keep the attention of young children. There's an economy of words and concepts there. You have to make things accessible—not necessarily simplify them, but make them accessible and understandable. And children's literature I suppose feeds into comics in a sense, although they're obviously not the same. But they do share some qualities, for example their use of illustration as something that's complementary to the words of the text, not just duplicating what's there, and that might often do something quite gothic: maybe obscuring the meaning of the words, or misleading us in some way, or offering something more.

My way into comics definitely came from children's literature as well as from my gothic teenage tastes. The first comics I read were DC Vertigo ones, given to me by my younger brother, and I was really attracted to Vertigo as it seemed to be a rewriting of things I was really interested in, like traditional fantasy and fairy tale and myth and stories along those lines. But there was also a lot of horror within the initial launch of Vertigo. For example, *Sandman* is remembered as this mythological epic, but the first two trade paperbacks have a very strong horror focus. They adapt a lot of British horror film images and have some pretty gnarly situations. Other titles like *The Invisibles* and *Hellblazer* have got magic and darkness. *Preacher* is an exercise in body horror amongst many other things. So, I think there's some interesting stuff going on there and for me it all starts to come together and interrelate to each other.

Figure 2 *Advertisement for* Sandman, *1988.*

What my work now tries to do is to use gothic critical theory to understand how stories are told in comics. I published a book about this back in 2014 that drew comparisons between the two things from different angles: looking at the histories of comics and Gothic and analyzing shared points and synergies, such as similarities in the cultures that have developed around them, or moments of censorship, or the way that gothic archetypes like vampires and zombies have developed in the comics medium. It also used gothic critical theory to look at formal comics theory, bringing in ideas like haunting and excess and decomposition, and using them to understand how storytelling works in comics, how it relies on echoes of previous images and pages, or a juxtaposition of different visual and verbal perspectives, and the role of the reader in de-composing and interpreting the panel content. My current research brings it all together even more: I'm looking at children's horror comics, particularly two British comics called *Misty* and *Spellbound* that were published in the 1970s. I was inspired by the work of other scholars, like Chris Murray, Mel Gibson, Maaheen Ahmed, Joan Ormrod, Roger Sabin, and Paul Gravett, and I've spoken to a lot of British comics creators. But the other thing that

motivated this research was a very personal childhood memory, which was the search for a story from a girls' horror comic that had literally haunted me for over 30 years. I was looking for a new project after my gothic book and I thought I could try and track down this story and dig into the horror of British girls' comics a little bit more. I'd like to share it here as it has some elements that speak to some of the other points I want to make about Gothic and comics and children's literature later on.

Figure 3 "Mirror… Mirror," *Misty* #37. Art by Isidre Monés, writer unknown.
Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd,
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It's a story about this girl who isn't very pretty and is picked on because of it. We can see her on the first page in that highlighted circular panel, hearing people talk about her and feeling pretty crappy because of it. But then she's given this magic mirror by a random old lady on the second page and told that it will make her beautiful if she just follows the instructions correctly. She does, and it works, and she becomes beautiful—but as she becomes more beautiful she becomes more mean and vain and nasty and then one day she breaks the mirror by

accident, and when she wakes up the next day her face is all warped and smashed like the mirror. The final image of her warped face really stuck in my mind, with the narration alongside it, which I remembered as "How would you like to wake up every day like this?" So that's where my most recent research into British girls' comics started—with a quest to track down this story that had haunted me for over thirty years, and I read a lot of old comics at the British Library—and I did eventually find it.

What's striking to me is that I remembered that whole page layout and last bit of narration almost word perfect for over thirty years. And that's led me to think a lot about the importance of investigating the literature of childhood and particularly the overlooked and more horrifying aspects of that. When we look at children's literature more generally, as I said, we often find isolated protagonists, children who have been separated from their parents, or might be disbelieved by the authorities in the stories. There are often strange and uncanny worlds—they might be secret worlds, they might just be fantasies, or they might be completely new lands. And there's this perhaps idea of danger and excitement that's combined with a clear moral lesson. I think we see all these things in Gothic literature as well as in children's literature.

Scholarly work on Gothic and on children seems to fall into two main types: either examining the presence of children in gothic writing or exploring the presence of Gothic in writing for children. In terms of the first, Lucie Armitt (2017) has done some interesting work that focuses particularly on the gothic girl child and how this figure appears in literature over the last 150 years and is surprisingly unchanged. She conceptualizes the gothic girl child as a quite liminal figure on their way towards womanhood. She points out that their journey is often quite problematized or made difficult and sometimes made quite explicit and confrontational, particularly in more modern versions like the writing of Daphne du Maurier or Angela Carter or Stephen King, which might focus on menstruation, attraction, and the difficulties of maturing, combined with some very gendered and quite creepy gothic metaphors such as mirrors, toys, dolls, blood and so on. Other critics such as Monica Georgieva (2013) also discuss the depiction of the gothic child and how models of abandonment are integrated into this figure. There is a drive towards foundlings and orphans and again isolated children, so what's interesting to me is that through Gothic motifs childhood becomes characterized as a very dangerous and uncanny and liminal state: it's quite literally a threshold which seems quite key to gothic writing. Armitt also points to this as she discusses the Victorian belief that pre-pubescent girls were particularly close to the spirit world and possessed these creepy and telepathic clairvoyant powers. So suddenly all these evil children who pop up in Gothic literature make a lot more sense.

The other strand of scholarship on Gothic and children looks at gothic themes in writing for children and focuses on the way that these two things developed alongside each other and the shared themes that they have, such as moral lessons and identity exploration. Dale Townshend (2008) surveys the historical relationship between Gothic and children's literature and

argues that the two are very much intertwined because nurses and carers habitually told folktales and this led to the creation of children's literature as we know it. Later scholarship (Smith 2008) has also argued for the usefulness of gothic children's literature, saying that teenagers can identify with outsider figures and with the monstrosity that Gothic offers, so we have many sympathetic monster stories and perhaps a trend for these sorts of non-standard archetypes that's appearing in more recent teen Gothic. So I think gothic children's literature often expresses these fears of growing up and these fears about the world around us.
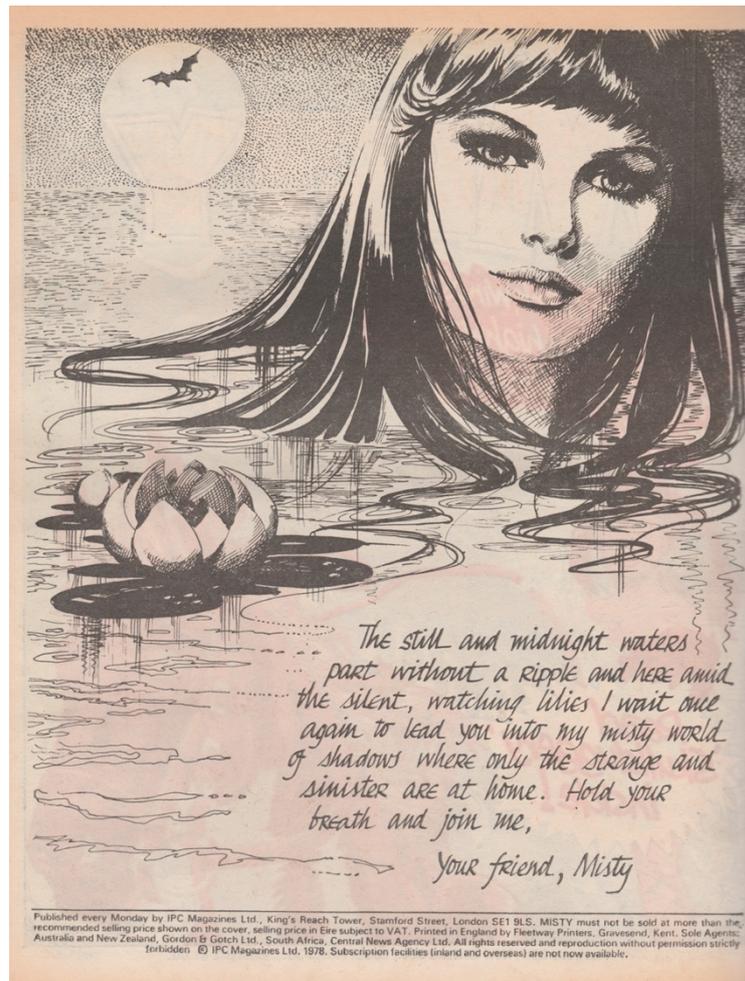
Figure 4 Inside cover of *Misty* #18. Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Pub-lishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

It's interesting to think about how children's gothic and horror handles and mitigates these fears. For example, American horror comics like *Tales from the Crypt* are best remembered for having a host character who welcomes young readers to the issue, addresses them directly, and provides a sort of comedic buffer between the horrifying events. We also see this in *Misty* where we have the character inviting us to enter the comic on the inside cover, literally speaking to us through this letter at the start of every issue. She frames entering the comic very

much as a journey to join her somewhere else. There are lots of references to the body and the physical properties of horror and terror: things are breath-taking and spine-tingling. We're often told "look behind you" or "take my hand" so there's a real physicality pervading this experience of Gothic for younger readers. This physical focus also appears in the stories, which can be read as metaphors for puberty.

In this example, "The Cult of the Cat," we meet schoolgirl Nicola Scott, who has the destiny of being the chosen one of the cat goddess. It's a story that cuts between Egypt and England, as the Cult of the Cat in Egypt dispatch a messenger to go and awaken Nicola, which seems to basically involve following her around and creeping her out quite a lot. Their messenger places a cat ring on Nicola's finger while she sleeps that Nicola can't remove and then Nicola starts to develop what she feels are cat-like traits… a fear of water and great agility and so on. Basically she becomes terrified she's turning into a cat and she has nightmares about this, and it's really a story of increasing tension and fear as Nicola worries about what's described as this 'slow frightening cycle of change' that is happening to her. There are two things that strike me about that in terms of how Gothic is framed for children and young adults. The first is that we can absolutely read Nicola as this persecuted and pursued gothic heroine. She's got these special qualities, she only slowly realizes her true identity, and she's in flight, being chased by seeming antagonists, throughout almost all of the tale. But the idea of this slow, frightening cycle of change can also be read as a really clear metaphor for puberty, with a loss of control over your own body repeated over and over again. Here where Nicola is pleading "leave me

alone and keep out of my head," she's really scared by the changes she sees in her body. She examines it in the morning and finds that "everything's changing."

This parallel between puberty and supernatural changes is something that I think underpins a lot of children's Gothic and it's used to destabilize identity. It led me towards theorizing my concept of "Gothic for Girls." This is basically a story that develops some of the things we see in fairy tale, but that explores and enacts identity. It problematizes who we think we are through the figure of an isolated protagonist, whose world is invaded by magic in some way alongside more mundane youthful concerns, whether about friendship or bullying or fitting in or whatever else. I think this story template confronts readers with this idea of something unknown or Other and it is very gothic because it drives them simultaneously through fear (as we saw in Nicola where she's scared of what's happening), but also through attraction (like Nicola's secret destiny). Lots of the stories I've analyzed suggest that either self-control or self-acceptance are what is needed to escape and gain some positive end to the narrative (in Nicola's case she accepts her destiny and sends her 'secret spirit self' to Egypt to help the Cult)—but that doesn't always happen because sometimes those qualities are lacking. So in all these stories, childhood—and particularly girlhood—is acknowledged and constructed as this very uncanny, very fearful uncertain moment and experience.

AMM: You were talking about physicality and how these girls were represented. Do you think the comics as a medium and its formal possibilities can serve gothic narratives in a peculiar way, compared to just verbal text? How is the uncanny built in graphic narratives?

JR: What I really want to do with my work was to go beyond horror comics and not just say "Hey look, there are horror archetypes in these horror comics." Instead, I try to explore how comics storytelling itself, across multiple genres, can be considered gothic. To do that I draw on a lot of existing work by formalist comics scholars. These include comics creators like Scott McCloud, who was one of the first to try and articulate a theory of how comics work. He writes about how they use time as space on the page, and about closure, the work that the reader does between panels, where we've got to imagine events based on what's on either side. He also classifies lots of different panel types based on how word and image relate between them, noting that these can be quite complementary and supportive, or they can be really contradictory. Charles Hatfield is another scholar whose work I've built on. He talks about tensions that underpin comics storytelling, things that create meaning such as the tension between word and image within a single panel, that might contradict each other or might support each other; or the tension between a sequence of events as opposed to the image we might get when we look at the surface of the page as a whole; the effect of seeing images in series rather than seeing them on their own and isolated, how that might change their meaning and offer a doubling of meaning in some way; and the experience of reading as opposed to the half narrative or the material book that we have in front of us. Finally, Thierry Groensteen is the third critic whose work I draw on. He approaches the comics page as this collection

of interlocking elements and says that on the page all these different visual things interact with two main processes: one is gridding—how the page is broken up spatially—and the second one is braiding—which is the relationship between any panels that is supplementary in terms of meaning. So if we bring those ideas together, I think we can see that formalist comics criticism often talks about three things: the space of the page, the interplay between word and image or other things on the page, and what the reader is doing.

What I wanted to do in my first book was combine all this and build on it, and argue for a critical model of understanding comics based around these three ideas, but reimagined using gothic notions—the concepts of haunting and of excess and of the crypt. I talk about the layout of the comics page as a haunted place where moments coexist, and within which we often see gothic processes of doubling and mirroring. We often see symmetrical page layouts and things that are duplicated or repeated. The second part of my model explores some of the different combinations and subversions of perspective that are possible and describes this as a gothic excess. So, we might have a very abstract art style that adds layers of meaning to a depiction, or we might combine a disinterested extradiegetic narrative voice with the first-person visual point of view of a character. These things are at odds with each other, so by putting them together we are creating an excess of meaning. Then finally the active role of the comics reader, who must enter this encrypted space between the panels and define what's happening there... which is something that can only take place historically, once you've moved past that panel on to the next one, so it only exists in the reader's memory, or in "backward looking thoughts" (Davenport-Hines C3) which of course is very gothic.

Haunted Places

Temporal disruption
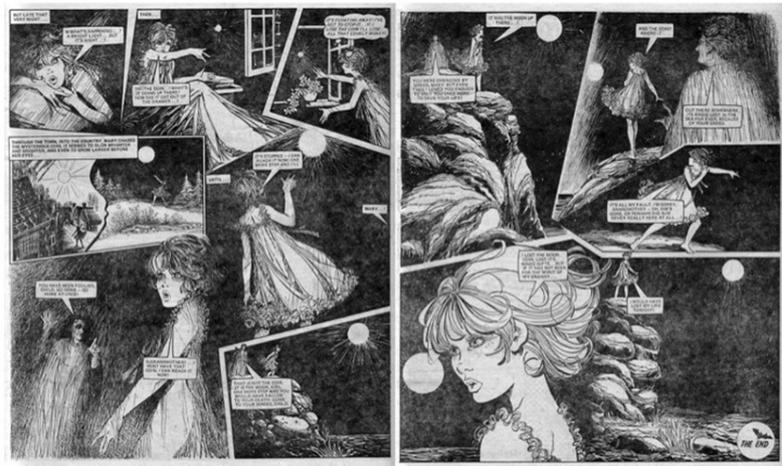
Angular deviation and broken borders

Figure 6 On the left: extract from *Hellblazer: Tainted Love* (Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, 1998).
Hellblazer™ DC Comics Ltd; copyright © DC Comics Ltd, all rights reserved.
On the right: "Catch the Moon if you Can," *Misty* #95 (art by Jose Ariza, writer unknown, 1979).
Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

This means that when I'm analyzing comics I'm thinking about temporality on the page as this co-present and static structure that we (as readers) only move through and experience sequentially, and I'm considering things like how the echoes of past and future are used to emphasize key moments or themes. So, things like false panel borders like in this example on the left from *Hellblazer* are quite interesting. Here, they might emphasize how one of these characters (who doesn't move during the sequence) is completely static and downtrodden. Or on the right we've got this double page spread from *Misty*, which deviates radically from the idea of a standard grid that might underpin the page, so the visuals contribute to the wild and uncanny mood, for example as extreme angles are used, panel borders are broken and so on.

Excess, Embodiment and Artifice

Preacher

Visual/verbal doubling — supportive or subversive

Arkham Asylum

Artificiality and signification of style

Positioning us as monster or victim

Crossed

Misty #21 (1978)
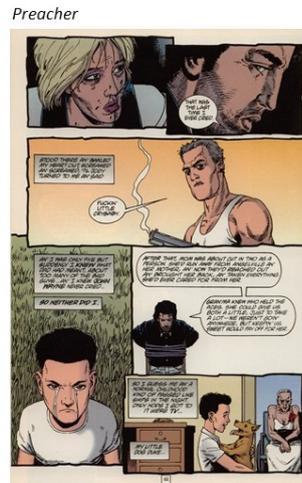
Preacher

Excess of perspective – embodied or disembodied

Figure 7 Extracts from *Preacher: Gone to Texas* and *Preacher: Until the End of the World* (Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon).
Preacher™ DC Comics Ltd; copyright © DC Comics Ltd, all rights re-served.
Extracts from *Arkham Asylum* (Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, 1988).
Arkham Asylum™ DC Comics Ltd; copyright © DC Comics Ltd, all rights reserved.
Cover of *Misty* #21. Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

I also talk about excess and embodiment, the idea that we have these contradictory moments going on where conflicting information is being given to the reader. I think in comics this can be overwhelming. We're given this constantly moving perspective: one second we might have this long distance shot and then the next we're given an intradiegetic character point of view. Things like the interplay between word and image totally contribute to that, so for example on the left here Tulip in *Preacher* is talking about an event from her past, but what she says completely contradicts what we're being shown. Then we have stylized image and text like this example from *Arkham Asylum*, or places where the reader is given a mobile perspective.

For example, in this page from *Preacher* on the right, we move through multiple different shots, but within a scene that is taking place within a single character's memory.

We can also be positioned in various embodied moments in the text whether as a monster or a victim, as in these other two examples here, and so I think the work of the reader doesn't just take place between panels. It also happens when we interpret what's going on within panels as well, and when identifying moments that might be obscured spatially as well as temporally. So, what my model tries to suggest really is that there are lots of techniques available to the comics creator to convey their story and they might not use all of them, but they will use some of them, and I think when and how they use these techniques is significant to the story being told. Considering what is used and where it happens helps us understand how the story achieves its affect which I think is a gothic process.

Haunting (page):
- Size, position and depth all used to emphasise the image of the bed
- Branches form fake panel borders in tier 1
- Thought bubbles lead the eye

Excess (style):
- Giddying angles in central panel
- Disembodied perspective assigned to reader
- Typography used to emphasise amazement
- Bed as a 'nameless thing', indicating its uncanny potential

Revenant (reader):
- Eye motif recalls comics history
- Not much to do except watch helplessly!

Figure 8 "The Game," *House of Mystery* #178 (Neal Adams, 1969).
House of Mystery™ DC Comics Ltd; copyright © DC Comics Ltd, all rights reserved.

I've got a few different examples that show how this might work when we bring it all together, such as this page from "The Game" by Neal Adams, which was published in *House of Mystery*. It reveals the ways in which Adams uses the comics medium to create atmosphere and stress the central motifs of the story. The layout of the page emphasizes the image of the bed as central location, and the conjurer of the uncanny content that happens in this story, as it appears at the center of the page, breaking the panel borders above it. Then it appears again at the bottom right, where it's shaded to catch our eye, and here its size emphasizes it. There are other haunted spaces on this page—for example, the first panel running across the top tier has fake panel borders: the branches of a tree are used to create this illusion of multiple different

panels that a character is moving through, but actually it's just him replicated in the same picture of the no tree. Sharp angles are also used to create a sense of mirroring in the interior of the house: the floor is sloping off towards us, the panel borders are angled and bizarre, we're given a disembodied perspective where we seem to be floating somewhere in space looking at these images, and language is also used to emphasize the uncanny nature of the page. The bed again is introduced with our protagonist Jamie's statement "Empty! No walls… Nothing except for… *that!*," so it becomes a nameless thing with this uncanny potential.

Figure 9 Extracts from "A Good News Story!," *Care Bears* #19 (1986). Copyright © Marvel UK Ltd, all rights reserved.

So I'm suggesting that if we approach the comics page with these sorts of ideas in mind, we find that every page uses one or more ideas to enhance its message. And it doesn't just happen in horror comics, it happens in lovely fluffy comics too. This is a completely different example, from the *Care Bears* comic—an American children's franchise which was published here in England by Marvel UK. The gothic potential of comic storytelling is being used to reinforce the direct address of the message to the audience. It's a story about Eleanor, who has to write a news report for a homework assignment, and discovers there's good news all around her. This is a clear moral. But every time it's directly reinforced to us (by Share Bear, who has appeared to help her), there is something uncanny happening with the layout. So we have an unbordered panel appearing on that first page, on the second page the fourth panel offers a similar message and is partially unbordered, and again in the very last panel of the story where Share Bear breaks the fourth wall to directly address the reader, and his arms break the

panel borders. The key story moments where the moral is made explicit are the only point where all these methods are combined and the only instances where we get unbordered panels. I think these narrative features disrupt reader identity as they undermine the borders of what we might think of as the story world. So, by using gothic concepts to analyze comics, I think we can see how story content is enhanced by the medium and it emphasizes story elements in uncanny ways. It defamiliarizes by deviating from standard panel borders and a standard grid. It disrupts reader identity by undermining the storyworld borders. It provides hauntings and echoes of meaning. It quite literally makes the familiar strange to us.

AMM: Do you think that in these comics aimed at children and young adults there are some gothic archetypes peculiar to them, that make them different from those aimed at adult readers?

JR: I think there's a perception that Gothic is all about archetypes and these certainly dominate in particular subgenres, including those for children or YA audiences. Catherine Spooner argues that postmillennial culture holds monsters as "virtually synonymous with Gothic" (Spooner 121), whereas in early gothic texts, monsters were "virtually unknown." And people who have written about British children's Gothic like *Misty* have certainly talked about "all the ghosts, zombies and eerie beings that haunted its pages." ("Jinty, Tammy, Misty and the Golden Age of Girls' Comics" in *Guardian*, August 18, 2012). One of the advantages of looking at comics that had a relatively short run (*Misty* ran for around two years with 101 weekly issues) is that I've been able to quantify their content and crunch numbers quickly. For example, gothic archetypes like witches and ghosts appear in less than 40% of *Misty* stories, and they appear even less in *Spellbound.* This is a lot less than some later British horror comics like *Scream*, which was for a slightly older and mixed gender audience… or indeed the American pre-Code horror comics, which used archetypes like zombies and skeletons an awful lot. For example, archetypes appear in 50% of the comic strip stories of the first five issues of EC Comics' *The Haunt of Fear.*

Figure 10 On the left: "Was it Just… a Game?" *Misty* #14 (art by Carlos Guirado).
On the right: "What's on the Other Side?" *Misty* #26 (art by José Canovas).

Of the gothic archetypes that do appear in *Misty*, the most common is the witch, followed by ghosts and vampires. Critics like Anna Smith have commented that sympathetic monsters and outsider figures often appear in YA Gothic literature, and I think that happened quite a lot in this comic. For example, although the witches in *Misty* can be evil antagonists, they're most often given some justification, or they're shown as victims in some way. So in "Was it Just… a Game?" on the on the left here our protagonist Nina is bullied at school and called a witch, but gets her revenge on the bullies as the series of accidents happen to them on a school trip… and the final big reveal is that she's the witch and she's caused these with her voodoo doll-type processes. But we also get witches as antagonist figures for example, in "What's on the Other Side?" where an evil witch travels from medieval times to possess Peggy, who's watching television when she shouldn't be. She traps Peggy on the other side of the television screen and takes her place and we can see Peggy screaming frantically, until her mom turns the television off. Again, this destabilizes identity through all these doubles and dolls, or seeing yourself on the other side of the mirror or inside the TV. These motifs are used quite a lot alongside the ghost figure as well. We quite often see characters walking through mirrors to join other dead figures, or characters who become aware that they themselves are already ghosts.

'Moonchild'

"I said we should look at all the kinds of female adults' fiction that were around at the time, and do girls' comics versions of that"

(Pat Mills, 2011)

Figure 11 Misty #12 and #13 (Pat Mills and John Armstrong).

I think there's a distinction between these stories for younger readers and the more adult ones, and actually when it comes to *Misty* I can see that directly because a lot of its serial story content or some of it was directly adapted from adult stories. Pat Mills's story, "Moonchild," which appears from the first issue, is a fairly direct adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie*. In it we have a protagonist called Rosemary Black—who's a witchy character. She discovers tele-kinetic powers after a practical joke is played on her, and she's consistently bullied by a girl called Norma and her gang. Unlike *Carrie*—which ends with a bloody and dramatic prom night—it ends with a birthday party for Rosemary in which they give her mean gifts and spray her with paint and a disgusting cake. Then it goes full *Carrie*, as you can see in this middle image here, as Rosemary rises up. It's enhanced by the perspective used—the reader is put alongside the bullies here cowering away from her. In the story, the building catches fire but everyone escapes and Rosemary's powers ultimately vanish after the death of her also witchy grandmother, and she gets to go and live with her best friend. I'd like to draw attention to how Mills' rewriting directly reworks the story into more juvenile forms: it has a witch arche-type in it but it removes all the sex and death and blood that we might find in an adult equiv-alent of that story. The gore vanishes, there isn't any bucket of blood at prom night, although there is pain. But I think resonances remain: we've got Norma's gang deciding to throw a party for Rosemary and chanting "Shame! Shame!" rather than "Plug it up!", so we've still got this animalistic bullying and mob mentality that's so striking in *Carrie.* We also keep the tragedy, although 'Moonchild' sacrifices the outsider rather than the protagonist, so Rose-mary's grandmother dies trying to save her and this enables her to move on… but we've still

got this tragic overtone at the end, as Rosemary says she's got what she wanted, but at a terrible price. This also happens in other *Misty* serials that have been adapted from adult stories or exploit more adult gothic archetypes. So I think the content of these Gothic for Girls stories does speak to common ideas and archetypes that underpin the female Gothic, particularly when it comes to things like witches and ghosts (and women have often been described as a spectral presence in Gothic), but it's always modified for the relative world size of young readers, and couched in ways that are acceptable for pre-teen audiences.

Open Q&A session

Mónica Fernández Jiménez: I think you've touched upon this issue but with this broader topic of the Gothic we always tend to be a bit comparative because of the 18th century beginnings of the genre. Can you use it to sketch a bit about the differences between British comics and American gothic comics?

JR: I've looked so closely at things like DC Vertigo in the past I should have really great detailed answers for this, but it does give me pause because there's so much nuance in different genres and different publishing formats. So I'm very wary of making claims that all American comics are in one particular way and the same with British comics. I actually found some really unexpected similarities between the British comics industry and the American one when I analyzed *Misty*. The British comics industry had tons of titles and was dominant for at least three decades in this country, but what I hadn't realized was we had our own big two publishers—DC Thomson and IPC/Fleetway—and it was the back and forth between these two that really pushed the stories to new heights. I think this is something that happened in American comics as well and that there are a lot of hidden industry similarities there. I mean DC Vertigo are obviously famous for headhunting British talent, in a process that a lot of people have called the "Brit Invasion," where writers in particular were taken from the stable of *2000 AD* and other UK comics to breathe "new life" into American superheroes in the late 1980s. Although I've written on this in the past, I now find it a bit problematic because it describes the relationship as quite a one-way process… there's no account of the American influences in British comics, which totally exist. For example, Chris Murray has done a lot of work on the British superhero, and a good thing for me to do here might be to flag up the work of younger scholars that I know of also working on this relationship. For example, Kelly Kanayama researches transatlantic narratives and cultural exchange and the processes of back and forth between these two industries, looking at the work of people like John Wagner and Garth Ennis and Grant Morrison. She says that the give and take between the British and American industries demonstrate a paradoxical but ongoing fascination with both the energy but also the inauthenticity of the American superhero, and American pop culture. She conceptualizes this relationship as a two-way street and she uses quite gothic concepts, like hauntology and simulacra, to analyze how the superhero's being depicted. Olivia Hicks also researches and compares the teen superheroine between British and American comics,

focusing on key case studies and challenging the idea of the superheroine as something in-nately American, and instead exploring how these characters feed into each other. She argues that the supergirl figure in both instances is an unstable construction of whiteness and impe-rialism, stardom, the limitations of gender and liminal threshold age, and also queerness. So the supergirls threatens patriarchy, even as she upholds it. And again there's something quite gothic about that dialectic to me.

But to say something a bit more precise based on horror and the things that I've looked at, I think both countries have felt the resonances of the Comics Code very strongly in terms of how they've handled things like horror since the 1950s, and again lots of scholars have studied the global impact of the Code. Certainly the impact of the Code came across in the texts I looked at. For example, *Misty* was never really labelled as a horror comic… it was branded as a mystery story paper and I think that was quite telling, as it was drawing on a more acceptable idea of Gothic for young girls: looking back to the more traditional literary Gothic rather than contemporary horror. The story titles in comics like *Misty* and *Spellbound* have a very low usage of gothic language, instead most just make vague allusion to a myste-rious item or are a pun or joke on the story content. There isn't much language of horror or fear, unlike the classic American horror comics. Perhaps because of this, they never attracted much controversy despite having some fairly shocking content and a lot of death.

I think there are other shared elements between British and American comics when it comes to horror. Most obviously I think the use of a host character. I've talked about Misty herself already but she's just one in a long line of characters in British girls' comics who were mostly attached to the scary story section of the comic, where they introduce weekly one-off spooky stories. So we get figures like Damian Darke in *Spellbound*, or the Storyteller in *June and School Friend*. They serve a similar function to EC Comics' horror hosts, and to Cain and Abel from DC's 1970s mystery comics, or Uncle Creepy and Cousin Eerie from the Warren Comics. So, there's a common framing function that I think is due to the gothic content of both these titles. These host characters are there to set up a mood or an atmosphere (as Misty does in her comic), and to safely frame and defuse the horrifying events (for example to frame them more humorously and acceptably). They tell us how to read the stories, as Timothy Jones comments in his book *The Gothic and the Carnivalesque*. So I think there's interesting work to be done here on the reciprocal influences across cultures and media when it comes to horror hosts, that I'd like to do more on.

MFJ: In the origins of the Gothic there was an emphasis on the lack of existence in physical terms of this horror, it was all suggestions, it was all in the character's minds. I was wondering how this non-physical horror is created in comics?

JR: McCloud talks about unseen and hidden horror as integral to the way comics tell stories. For him, a great deal of story content takes place between the panels. He calls this closure, and says these hidden events are something the reader must take responsibility for inventing and visualizing. So, he has the example of a character chasing someone with an axe and then the

next panel is just a scream, and he says between those two panels is where the real violence and the death has happened… and you have done that as the reader, that's been put onto you. I agree, but I think we can take it further, as one thing we see quite a lot of in comics is the use of perspective to obscure things. So, we might be given the perspective of a victim, characters might loom over us threateningly. Being given that viewpoint disrupts our identity and makes us imagine and embody the horror—even if it is physical horror.

Another comics technique that can be used to express non-physical horror is the reaction shot, so—coming back to *Misty* again—I found that most of the *Misty* covers relied on suggestion, by using Ann Radcliffe's version of terror rather than horror. Radcliffe famously separates terror and horror, claiming that "terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them" (1826, 5). Terror is something threatening, obscured, and unknown, while horror is confrontational, shocking, grotesque, and obscene. I argue that the *Misty* covers mostly rely on terror because what they show is a fearful reaction, obscuring the actual source of the fear. This might include someone screaming or recoiling or gasping or otherwise looking scared. Some of the covers also included horrifying images, like skeletons, grotesque witches, giant insects etc. So, I think that I think comics have this potential to convey that dichotomy of terror and horror that Radcliffe set up so well. They can give us a horrifying reveal with the turn of a page. But they can also leave a lot unsaid in the way and force us to 'awaken the faculties' and extend our senses by looking closely at panels to decode what's going on. We might be forced to think quite deeply about what might have happened between two panels. All this absolutely fits with Radcliffe's definition of terror as the unseen thing that makes our senses reach out for it. I think comics have the potential to do both and I think like most good gothic and horror texts it's never exclusively one or the other. It's like a pendulum swinging between the two: firstly the build-up of terror, then the reveal of horror. And I think comics have some very useful strategies for doing that.

Anna Marta Marini: I was thinking, now that you were talking about the turning of the page and such, that color is also used sometimes to stress some specific feelings…

JR: That's true. I think color is a big part of artistic style, and obviously we've got all the usual connotations of certain colors but also the textures. So I'm interested in how people have chosen to colour their comics as well as what colors they have chosen. There's some beautiful, purely pencilled comics where things can become much more pastel and ethereal… I'm thinking again about things like Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series. Lots of different artists worked on it, and some of the final few issues (#70-73) were done just in pencil by Michael Zulli, before moving to a direct inked-only issue from Jon J. Muth and then ending with the final issue from Charles Vess. Other artists on that series like Mark Hempel used very digital very blocky style and colors (*The Kindly Ones*). So as well as color palette, I think we should be looking at the

print process and also the artistic process the artist has chosen—whether heavy hatching or lightly shading or something completely different, as I think that can really change things.

AMM: I think—at least in some comics that I've been working on—quite often there's for example green palettes usually when something eerie or evil or something bad is going to happen… or red is used when you as a reader need to be shocked…

JR: Yes, that's a really good point. I think we build up this library of signification of different colors in our head and maybe it's specific to single comics… but maybe there's stuff to take out that applies to more than one title and trends that happen at certain times as well.

NN: I do love physical printed comics and especially graphic novels with beautiful bindings, but I'm interested in digital comics and the future of publishing and I do think—although it might not be happening at the moment—as creatives experiment more there's lots of opportunity with embedded multimedia potential. I'm thinking of game-like elements and embedded video, and I appreciate there's not a lot of it happening at the moment but this is what I'm looking out for. I'm just thinking with the Gothic I could imagine there being some… just even thinking with music, you mentioned music at the start, even having background playlists that you could have with digital editions. Or imagine if you were a writer, maybe you'll play this while you're writing the comic you could then share with your readers and they could open the same playlist and listen to the same tracks. What future do you think there might be for digital and the Gothic and comics?
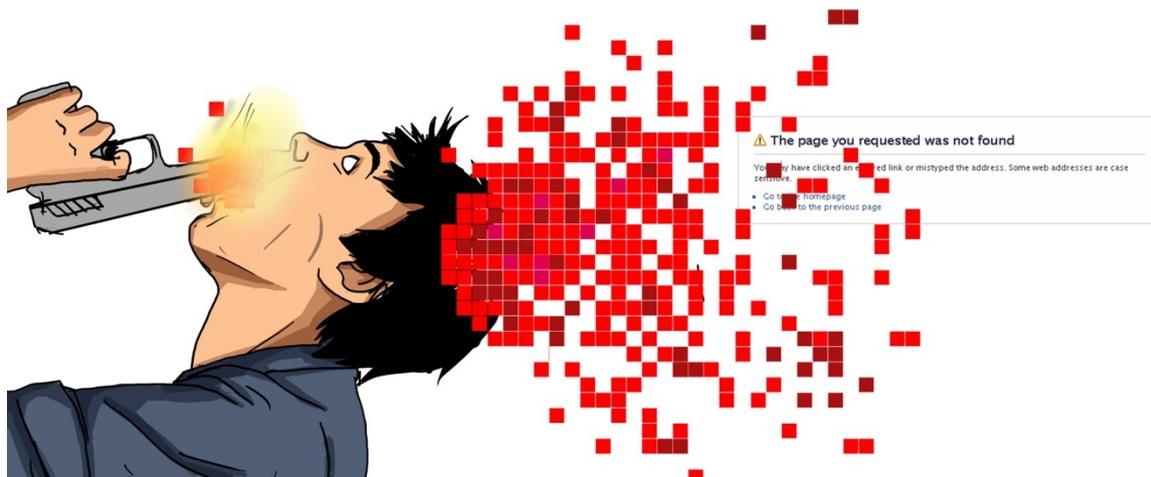
Figure 12 Kill Screen (Mike Garley and Josh Sherwell), 2014.

JR: I love the fact we've come back to music! I totally agree there's a lot of potential to be had there… I love the idea of comics as a communal space that involves so many readers, and so the possibilities for things like playlists and so on are very exciting. Not just ones created by the authors but ones that were created by people in the processes of reading as well—

enhancing collaborative reading aspects. I also think there's lots of potential for Gothic to mess up our minds digitally, right from virtual reality to the overload of different information. Even just speaking aesthetically, there are some interesting print comics that play with the idea of pixelation and what happens when that breaks down. And there's so much good work being done in web comics that have adopted some of these collaborative conventions and give even more power to the reader than comics do generally—for example by using a "choose your own adventure" approach. We could enter a whole debate of "are these still comics?" and some people might want to claim that these types of interactive narratives are doing something else. But to be honest I'm happier with an inclusive definition of comics, that includes motion and sound and anything else that people want to throw in. That sort of absorption of other genres and media also seems very gothic to me!

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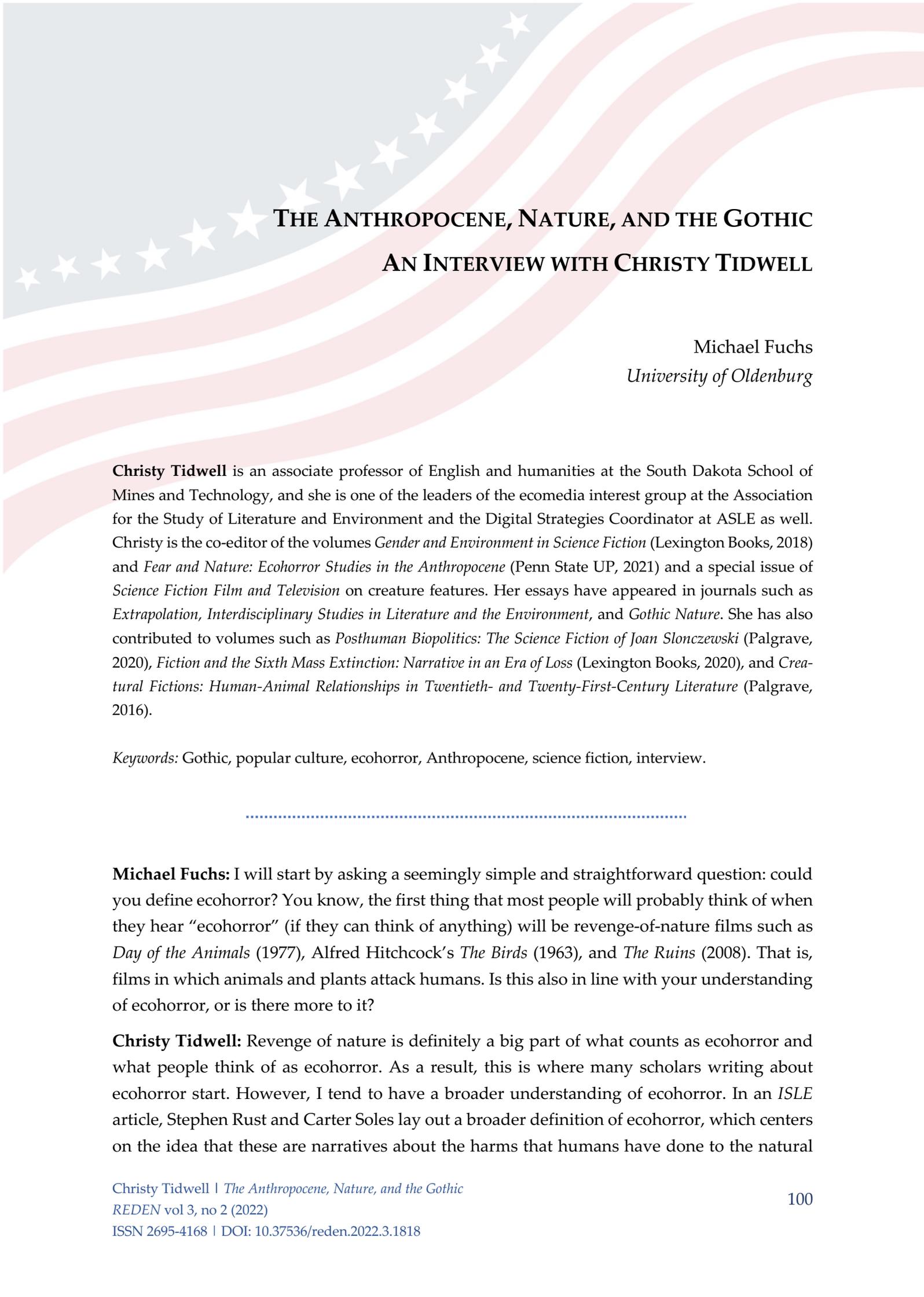
THE ANTHROPOCENE, NATURE, AND THE GOTHIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTY TIDWELL

Michael Fuchs
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Christy Tidwell is an associate professor of English and humanities at the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, and she is one of the leaders of the ecomedia interest group at the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment and the Digital Strategies Coordinator at ASLE as well. Christy is the co-editor of the volumes *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* (Lexington Books, 2018) and *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene* (Penn State UP, 2021) and a special issue of *Science Fiction Film and Television* on creature features. Her essays have appeared in journals such as *Extrapolation, Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, and *Gothic Nature*. She has also contributed to volumes such as *Posthuman Biopolitics: The Science Fiction of Joan Slonczewski* (Palgrave, 2020), *Fiction and the Sixth Mass Extinction: Narrative in an Era of Loss* (Lexington Books, 2020), and *Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature* (Palgrave, 2016).

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Michael Fuchs: I will start by asking a seemingly simple and straightforward question: could you define ecohorror? You know, the first thing that most people will probably think of when they hear "ecohorror" (if they can think of anything) will be revenge-of-nature films such as *Day of the Animals* (1977), Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), and *The Ruins* (2008). That is, films in which animals and plants attack humans. Is this also in line with your understanding of ecohorror, or is there more to it?

Christy Tidwell: Revenge of nature is definitely a big part of what counts as ecohorror and what people think of as ecohorror. As a result, this is where many scholars writing about ecohorror start. However, I tend to have a broader understanding of ecohorror. In an *ISLE* article, Stephen Rust and Carter Soles lay out a broader definition of ecohorror, which centers on the idea that these are narratives about the harms that humans have done to the natural

world or that might promote ecological awareness or that might blur the lines between human and nonhuman (Rust and Soles). At that point, the definition becomes quite capacious because, suddenly, texts become ecohorror that one would usually not see as such. Nevertheless, ecohorror is a different way of looking at texts—finding ecohorror in horror texts that might generally not be considered ecohorror or finding markers of ecohorror in texts that are not necessarily horror.

For example, there are a number of movies and novels about pollution, many of which are not necessarily horror. However, they illustrate this idea that ecohorror tells stories about the harm done by the human world to the natural world. Nuclear fallout is a similar example. Godzilla is a monster, for sure, but we created it. Or climate change. *Godzilla* (1954) and climate change fiction also showcase how traditional genre boundaries begin to blur in this context because I have a hard time separating science fiction from ecohorror. Think of films such as *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004): these are science fiction films, but they have elements of ecohorror, too. Or even a classic example such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), which is less about nature fighting back and more about how what we have done to animals and the rest of the world comes back to get us. In this particular case, ecohorror then is also closely connected to Carol Clover's idea of urbanoia (115).

There is so much that could count as ecohorror that I could go on for a while, but I seem to always return to Rust and Soles's definition because it opens up the question of defining ecohorror in some really interesting ways.

MF: This idea of "opening up the field" ties in with an article that you contributed to the latest issue of *Gothic Nature*. In that article, you read *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) as ecohorror; that is, as the type of film that, to quote from your article, "does not immediately declare itself to be ecohorror" ("The Ecohorror of Omission" 85) but that nevertheless reflects on our interactions with the natural world.

CT: I honestly felt a little strange about that article up until it was accepted and published, because I argue that *Nightmare on Elm Street* can be read as ecohorror even though no one ever views it as ecohorror. And there is, in fact, no obvious reason to look at the film in that way, but one day I found myself thinking about the Elm Street of the title and asking, where are the trees in this movie? What kinds of trees are in this movie? The more I dug into it, the more I found it really interesting to consider the ways that the trees are, in fact, absent. "Elm Street" stands in for something larger than just the trees, particularly in twentieth-century US culture.

But I ultimately argue for what I call an "ecohorror of omission"—an argument that is really more about the silence about environmental harms than their presence in these texts. There are lots of texts and practices that we could look at in this way and we would find practices and ideologies that are just below the surface: the history of deforestation, planting certain kinds of trees, and Dutch elm disease (and how we have dealt with that or failed to

deal with that). And there are some interesting connections between that movie and its gothic sense of itself and the haunting of the trees.

MF: Indeed, this emphasis on what remains unsaid or unseen is much-needed and in line with Lawrence Buell's notion of the environmental unconscious—this idea that the physical world is repressed, forgotten, and/or distorted in a literary text (18). And Mark Bould's book *Anthropocene Unconscious* argues, in ways that are similar to your argument in your article on *Elm Street*, that cultural artifacts do not have to address global warming explicitly in order to be about global warming and/or the Anthropocene. There's just so much interesting work being done at that intersection of ecohorror, the ecogothic, and sf.

I would like to return to something that you mentioned earlier—the entanglements between humans and nonhumans. As we know, both horror and the Gothic are transgressive genres (see Botting). And if you go back to the roots of the American gothic, you have the narrative (or even myth) of the Puritans going into the wilderness, which is often framed as a confrontation with nature. In an article on Mira Grant's *Parasite* (2013), which was published in the *ISLE* special issue that Rust and Soles edited that you mentioned earlier, you express concern about this binary thinking when looking at ecohorror, and instead highlight the entanglements between humans and nonhumans ("Monstrous Natures Within"). Could you briefly elaborate on how that idea plays into your scholarship?

CT: Binary thinking is really common in ecohorror. If the animals are the enemy and we are separate from them or if the plants are the enemy and we are separate from them, that is worth paying attention to because it says something about how we see ourselves and our relationship with the natural world. Simon Estok's idea of ecophobia is useful for thinking about these oppositions and even for looking at examples such as how *Jaws* (1975) has had real-world impacts on the way people see and treat sharks. These binaries reveal our fears and how we respond to them.

However, if we only focus on this aspect, we ignore a lot of what's going on in ecohorror. After all, there are all these places where we are crossing the lines between human and nonhuman in much more interesting ways. To return to Rust and Soles's definition, the third point that they bring up is that ecohorror "texts and tropes […] blur human/non-human distinctions" (509–510). Sometimes that looks horrific. Think about a film such as *The Fly* (1986). When Jeff Goldblum's character Seth Brundle transforms into Brundlefly, that's not a good thing. The film blurs the lines between human and nonhuman, but it doesn't turn out well. And the movie does not want us to think that it's going to turn out well.

But then there are other texts in which things are more complicated. For example, in Mira Grant's *Parasite* series, the line between the parasites that get into the characters' bodies and the characters themselves is harder to see. The sense of self and personhood becomes really fuzzy in these texts. The article I've written for the *SFFTV* special issue you mentioned is about another text with a more complicated attitude toward blurring these boundaries:

Blood Glacier (2013), a film that didn't get a ton of attention. In short, the film is about climate change and glaciers melting in the European Alps. As the glaciers melt, a kind of bloodred microorganism is set free that infects other beings and creates mutant hybrids. Although this is really scary, part of the film is about embracing the mutant or the mutation. The film thus draws our attention to questions such as "What is our role in this?" and "Why do we think we're so special?"

These texts open up lines of connection even if, ultimately, a lot of these texts also close them down. There's a lot of that tension in ecohorror, where you start to think "maybe the monster is not so bad" or "maybe I sympathize with the monster," but then the generic structure requires it to be killed at the end. Stacy Alaimo has written about the "muddled middles" of horror movies ("Discomforting Creatures" 294), where we have sympathy for the monster. And that's where the emotional response is being generated and where the real work is being done. I have been very influenced by this idea because I tend to watch these films in this way, too.

MF: I am so glad that you've mentioned *Blood Glacier*. You know, the film is set in the border region between Austria and Italy and Austrians were involved in the production, from actors to the director, and I happen to be Austrian—and there is not too much Austro-horror around. Interestingly, what you were just saying also connects to the other interview that I had for our series, with Kyle Bishop on zombies, because, for example, a video game such as *The Last of Us* (2013) also suggests that the infection (with a parasitical fungus in that case) re-unites humans with nature. You first need to get over that gap between the human and the nonhuman before you can really embrace the nonhuman.

Let's turn to the volume *Fear and Nature*, which you co-edited with Carter Soles. The cover looks awesome, and you assembled a lineup of great scholars, such as Dawn Keetley, Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann, and Bridgitte Barclay. Could you tell us a little bit about the genesis of that entire project? How did it get started? Why such a volume now?

CT: Some of this is just because Carter and I are friends and we go to the ASLE conference every other year, and we end up presenting together and talking about ecohorror. At one of those conferences—maybe four or five years ago—we were just talking with Steve Rust and thought, "Maybe this should be our next thing?" You know, we were just hanging out, having dinner, and then it became a real project. So, some of it was just that we thought it would be fun. And I really enjoyed the process of co-editing *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* with Bridgitte Barclay, so I was ready to embark on another co-editing project.

Although there is a lot of work coming out about ecohorror and the ecogothic recently, when we started this project, there was less of it and there had not been any edited collection that focused on ecohorror. Indeed, ours will still be one of the first. There are a couple of monographs that deal with ecohorror and a couple of edited collections that have been really influential, and these are more focused, such as Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga's *Plant*

Horror (2016) and Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hållén's *Animal Horror Cinema* (2015). So, we saw a real opening for us to get something out there and to present our ideas about ecohorror. Carter and I are very much on the same page and have influenced each other on how broad ecohorror can be. We are really invested in looking for those places where we can connect that conversation to films or texts that might not be immediately obvious. And, as we note in the book's introduction, we're living in ecohorrific times. This feels like something we cannot escape—how frightening the real-world news is and then how popular culture takes up those fears in various ways.

MF: Great point. In view of "how frightening the real world is," Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland also note in their introduction to the latest *Gothic Nature* issue that we're living in an age of ecohorror: there are all the images of wildfires, there's COVID, there's biodiversity loss, etc. Without picking apart the concept or the term now, let's accept that we are living in the Age of Man, the Anthropocene. Part of the assumption of naming the current age the Age of Man is that humankind will vanish sooner or later. Human extinction is implicated in the concept of the Anthropocene. Returning to your point about the interconnections between sf and ecohorror and your interest in the Jurassic Park/World franchise, what do these films tells us when read as ecohorror, in particular in the current moment?

CT: I am obsessed with *Jurassic Park* (1993) and the whole series. And, in fact, dinosaurs and popular culture, generally. I am very slowly working on something bigger about that topic, but I also do have a chapter out about *Jurassic Park* and *Jurassic World* (2015) in *Fiction and the Sixth Mass Extinction*, in which I argue that *Jurassic Park* and movies that are very much like it address our fears about our own potential extinction by displacing them. And this is also another place where the genre issue comes up because *Jurassic Park* is both science fiction and horror. It is a creature feature, which is science fiction and horror combined. You have these elements in the film that are very science-fictional, which ask, "What if we could do this?" But then you have these elements that are very horrific: "Oh no! What if this happened?" So, there is this tension between the hopeful potential of questions like "What if we could bring back species after they're extinct? What kind of hope does that give us for the sixth mass extinction that we're living through or for ourselves in the future?" and the consequences of those questions. When we bring those species back, they turn out to be a real problem. We do not actually have as much control as we think we do, which undermines a lot of that hopefulness with fear and anxiety.

Jurassic Park is so fascinating to me because it's a big studio movie, it's very polished, and it seems like it should know what it's saying, but there's so much conflict in these different ideas about animals and about extinction and about human control and science that it ends up being one long argument inside of itself that never quite gets resolved. The role of sympathy, which I've mentioned before with respect to some of the other monsters, is really important, too. It's hard for me not to sympathize with the dinosaurs when I watch *Jurassic Park*

and all of its sequels. You see this coming through even more in the Jurassic World movies. There's a lot of room for sympathy for the dinosaurs—for example when we see cute little babies and, in *Fallen Kingdom* (2018), the scene in which a *Brachiosaurus* dies. This is a really interesting extension of that initial kind of argument that *Jurassic Park* puts forward.

MF: It's also interesting that in *Jurassic World* (2015), the *Indominus rex* adds a new dimension. You have a creature that's on the one hand this artificial creature—there's all of this discourse in the film that this is not a real dinosaur but something else—but on the other hand, it's an animal. And it's this creature that goes on a killing spree. And *Fallen Kingdom* then turns things around, with the *Brachiosaurus* scene in particular, as you indicated, evoking extremely strong emotions, sympathy. Of course, it's the magic of film—the way that the music accompanies the visuals and all—but it nevertheless works. I can definitely understand the excitement for the Jurassic Park franchise.

CT: *Indominus rex* is so interesting because it is set up as this monstrous villain, but at the same time *Indominus rex* gets kind of the Godzilla effect—yes, it's monstrous and it's going on a rampage, but Chris Pratt's character makes the point very early on that any animal would go a little insane if you kept it in the cage like this and didn't let it connect with anything.

MF: Again, the humans are to blame and the real problem. You mentioned *Jurassic Park* and *Jurassic World* as these big studio movies, but you recently finished a special issue on creature features, which are thematically sometimes similar but in other respects the polar opposite because these are usually B-movies. Of course, there are people who claim that *Jurassic Park* is just a big-budget B-movie. Anyways, what led to your interest in B-movies? Do creature features convey any particular messages pertaining to human-animal or human-nature relations? What makes them worth looking at for scholars in the environmental humanities who might not watch horror movies, let alone B-movies?

CT: Bridgitte Barclay—who co-edited the issue with me—and I have been fascinated by creature features for ages. In part, they are just fun—if you're into that sort of thing. They are not fun for everyone in the same way, but they are a place where you can just embrace a little bit of campiness and not expect everything to make sense and enjoy that. But this level also feeds into what is the more serious argument here: the distinction between B-movies and studio productions. B-movies are messier in pretty much every way, from production to the ideas and ideologies that they represent. In part because of this, they are more revelatory of the underlying ideas in a culture. There's not necessarily an effort to make a big argument in a B-movie—and if there is, it's pretty shallow most of the time. As a result, you can see the underlying assumptions and values bubbling under there. Thus, B-movies reflect cultural trends in a way that bigger studio movies sometimes have a harder time doing because they're more intent on polishing things up and figuring out how they'll make the most money.

Looking at, for instance, 1970s environmental science fiction and ecohorror, there is simply so much there, and a number of scholars have been writing about these movies. Each one individually may not be super-rewarding for film analysis (some more so than others), but when you get this kind of collection that we're editing, it shows patterns and also manages to connect these films to studio films.

I've got posters in my office for *Night of the Lepus* (1972) and *Frogs* (1972). These movies are not good, but they're fascinating and reflect contemporary anxieties and fears about pollution, the balance of nature, and all the changes in US environmental legislation that were ramping up at that point. In *Night of the Lepus*, the monsters are giant bunnies, and, in *Frogs*, it's a whole range of swamp creatures that don't fit together. Ultimately, the humans are revealed as the monsters because they created the problems. The bunnies are really likeable—they are just bunnies.

You can also see patterns in the early twenty-first century, such as Syfy Channel movies and films produced by The Asylum. What jumps out to me is the prehistoric. There are a number of films that ask the question, "What would happen if this thing had just been dormant for millennia or even millions of years or was revived?" Dawn Keetley's article for the *SFFTV* issue deals with that topic, as does my essay about *Blood Glacier*, and Bridgitte Barclay explores *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), which does something similar. It's a recurring theme.

And building on Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism*, I would argue that if we don't pay attention to these types of films, comics, video games, silly TV shows, and all the things that we don't think of as "high art," then we miss out on a lot of the conversation taking place in culture.

MF: Absolutely. Since you're teaching at a type of school that is not necessarily that well-known in Europe, what is it like to teach humanities, in general, and the texts that you teach, in particular, at that type of school? And since you seem to be interested in the connections between science technology and popular culture—has teaching at this type of school influenced your thinking in a certain way?

CT: Teaching humanities at a school such as the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, where our students are all studying science and engineering, is quite different from my previous experience, which was at a big state school in Texas. In part, the difference is that students here don't see themselves as writers or humanities people or as readers. Thus, some of my job is to bring them on board. Some of them are the stereotypical engineer types who really want the answer and it needs to be logical, who are like "You need to show me the steps." As a result, it's a little harder to have some of the kinds of humanities conversations that you might have at different universities. The flip side of that is that they're also really happy to be taking these classes because it's a break from doing math and building things. They enjoy getting into some of the stories and getting to think about these big ideas in a way that their

other classes don't ask them to. It's definitely an interesting experience, and I've found over time that there are some things that I would love to teach that just won't fly here. It's just not for them, but there are other things that I don't have to sell them on. Some of the texts that I love teaching and love talking about, such as *Jurassic Park* and *Godzilla*—they're all over that. If I can connect the text to what they're into, they're really on board.

As far as the second part of the question: honestly, not really. I was already working on feminist science fiction and feminist science studies in my dissertation. Maybe it has broadened my understanding of what I would like to include in these conversations, but what shaped what my research looks like more has to do with connections with people at conferences. Then I come back and try teaching these things, and my students help me think through some ideas—as they always do when you're teaching things that are related to your research. I think I came into this job because I was already working in that direction.

Open Q&A session

Trang Dang: Thank you very much for the fascinating talk. You mentioned the entanglements between humans and nonhumans in ecohorror and ecogothic and how these relationships in these texts are very much complicated. I wonder whether you could talk a little bit more about how films and literature complicate these relationships?

CT: I'm going to give a rather general answer because I haven't prepared an example: I'm building on the idea of trans-corporeality (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*). Stacy Alaimo argues that the line between human and nonhuman is not an actual line. Rather, we're embedded in the nonhuman world, and it's embedded in us. The useful thing about this idea is the recognition that this can be both harmful and helpful. Some kinds of trans-corporeality, some connections between us and an Other are damaging. For instance, Alaimo writes about different kinds of sickness, which are harmful, but other kinds of connections are helpful, such as organisms inside of us helping our bodies work; or connections with other creatures outside of our actual bodies that mean something to us and help us see the broader world differently and act differently. To return to *Blood Glacier*—because it's the freshest in my mind—some of the kinds of blurring the lines are very harmful. Some characters die horribly because of the mutations that are introduced by breaching that boundary between human and nonhuman. However, the film ends with the birth of a little mutant puppy sort of thing that is legitimately weirdly cute and there is some sort of an emotional connection established between some of the human characters and this mutant creature. However, the movie ends abruptly, which is why we don't get to see what would happen. Nevertheless, there is this sense that, maybe, this would create a different way of seeing the world and of being in the world.

TD: The quick second question is: you mentioned the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* and noticed how ecohorror texts often engage with images and figures of deep history such as Cthulhu or

mythical kind of figures. I wonder if you could talk a bit more about why ecohorror could engage with those kinds of figures?

CT: My answer will have more to do with dinosaurs than Lovecraft, but I think they connect. One of the reasons why we keep coming back to this is connected to my answer about *Jurassic Park* and our own fear of our own extinction. The Gothic is part of ecohorror, and in the Gothic the past often haunts the present. Environmental takes on the past tend to emphasize what we'll leave behind. So, this is about transferring what we already know about the prehistoric past, what's left, and what's lost into trying to imagine how we might be leaving traces or what might be lost. I highly recommend David Farrier's book *Footprints: In Search of Future Fossils* (2020) because he does that kind of work. He speculates about what marks we'll leave behind based on the knowledge we have now.

As far as the Lovecraftian element is concerned, when I think about Lovecraft in this context, it's less about deep time and more about the cosmic sense of confronting something bigger than us. The Lovecraftian dimension is very much connected to the Anthropocene and climate change in that it is something that one person cannot do much about, and it can feel overwhelming as a result. It's this big process that is ongoing. Similarly, Lovecraft's Elder Gods are something that just completely dwarfs humans. We can't individually do anything about that. So, it's a little bit less direct maybe than deep time, but there's a similar logic.

TD: Absolutely. I think that's what's happening—making us reflect on kind of our deep relationship with nature that we always have. Thank you very much for your answers. Very interesting.

CT: I found the most recent *Color Out of Space* (2019) adaptation really interesting to think through as an ecohorror film.

Sladja Blazan: I really like what you said about your teaching. I think it's super-important not to always preach to the converted and to talk to people who don't spend so much time thinking about the narratives that we tell each other and how they work. In part, we're probably in this mess because we didn't do that enough. I have a question about this sense that more and more narratives center on embracing the mutant and, connected to this, this sympathy for the predator—the dinosaur, for example. Is that social activism? After all, most of these narratives return to an original order—that seems highly problematic. Do you share this fear?

CT: Yes. I do share that fear and anxiety. And it's something that we tried to address in the introduction to *Fear and Nature* because ecohorror is not activism. It's not actually doing anything. Looking at, say *Jurassic Park*, yes, there is this sympathy for the dinosaurs and all that— and that's all well and good, but when the movie's over, it has this comforting effect of returning to your life, where you don't have to worry about this anymore.

I do want to believe—although I have no evidence for it at this point—that these patterns that I was talking about not only reflect the anxieties we have but could have an impact on what we think is normal. If we have enough stories asking us to think differently about our relationship to the nonhuman, over time those add up to something. However, looking at one movie, it's hard for me to see that as making that big of a difference.

SB: No, certainly not one movie. I was thinking in comparison to, say, the 1950s, where plant horror was a huge topic and there were all kinds of monsters that grew out of an anxiety about the then-current world order and pressing fears. Apparently, now we have environmental problems, so horror addresses this issue. Do we really tell these stories differently than we did in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s?

CT: I think that's an excellent question. Part of where I've wound up for right now is thinking that there's some hope for some change but maybe not incremental. Teaching is where you're more likely to have an impact than making these movies. There are some scholars, such as Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Alexa Weik von Mossner, who are doing empirical research into what kinds of impact these films might have. They are doing some really cool things, and I hope that we'll find more useful evidence about what makes a difference or what does not, to help people think through these things and actually change patterns of behavior.

Anna Marta Marini: When you were talking about *Jurassic Park*, I was thinking of movies such as *Splice* (2009), in which we construct another being for our own benefit and then it gets out of hand. *Splice* is very much about humans projecting their own needs, issues, and emotions onto nonhumans. So, next to this sympathetic, empathetic, and/or cute sense of human engagement with the nonhuman that you mentioned, do you think that these projections see the nonhuman in human terms? And does that contribute to the horror?

CT: Maybe. *Splice* is a great connection to make because it's a Frankenstein story—and so is *Jurassic Park*. Many of these stories are going all the way back to *Frankenstein*, in which you already have this tension between being sympathetic to the creature and being horrified by it. Who's the real monster here? All those kinds of questions have a long history in science fiction, the Gothic, and horror.

Just to stick with the *Jurassic Park* example, there are moments in which the film asks us to see humans and dinosaurs as being very similar, but I'm not sure if that's horrific in those in those moments or not. Some of them may be, such as the moment when the great white hunter is killed by the *Velociraptors*. It's horrific that they're clever—the *Velociraptors* are very scary because they can, for example, open doors. But then there are other moments. For example, I see the *T. rex* at the end in terms of mimicking human triumph—celebratory, standing up, and roaring in a "This is my island" kind of way. And they keep coming back to those

visuals. That doesn't seem horrific to me because the music is very like triumphant. A lot of these movies simply want to have it both ways.

AMM: I really like narratives that offer identification and then there's a twist so that the monster, in the end, does not behave the way that we believe it will. For example, in *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), in the end, she does what she wants to do because she is the vanguard of a new lifeform. She doesn't do what the humans expected her to do. That's scary. We assume that the non-/posthuman is going to behave in a human way, but then it doesn't.

CT: That points to one of the ideas that keeps coming up in my writing, which is human control—the human expectation of having control. We really want to be in charge. And we want the rest of the world to do what we expect it to do, but it keeps on not doing that. You're right—that's where a lot of the horror comes from.

I was thinking about in what ways they seem more human but in what ways do they behave as expected when they don't—yes, that is frequently set up as horrifying for the human audience because it undermines our sense of ourselves as the pinnacle of everything and the endpoint of evolution.

Alissa Burger: I love every single text that you talked about, so I had my own little bingo card here while I was listening. What I specifically wanted to ask about is the B-movie aspect of it. I have a chapter coming out that I co-authored with a biologist. We team-taught a course on the biology of monster movies and the biology of B-movies. What we ended up writing about was Syfy original films and all that ridiculousness. I'm wondering: is that a productive avenue? Now, the biologist I worked with is a very special biologist. He's a lot more fun than a bunch of the other scientists who would go, "No, I don't do that." But from your experience, both where you teach and with your own research, and going back to that question of how we can make a difference—is that maybe one way?

CT: Do you mean teaching the actual science behind it? Or getting science students to think about these things?

AB: Really any of that. The approach we took in our class was that we watched the films and I talked about horror from a cultural studies angle, then he gave them research questions, and they would have to research questions about how feasible the different things were and such. A lot of them were science students because it was a technical college, but a lot of them were also taking it as a Gen Ed. So, they were gaining research skills and scientific literacy, but the fun stuff.

CT: It depends on what you mean by "productive." In terms of getting students to think critically about what they're taking in and to do that kind of research, that sounds like a fun way to do that. I'd be curious to know how the students responded to it. Concerning some of the bigger questions about what kind of social difference might this make—that's always hard to answer. One thing I'm thinking about is whether it matters if the science is right in B-movies;

and if it matters, why it matters. I don't have an answer to this. My approach to B-movies has been "it doesn't matter—just do what you're doing and as long as you've decided what you're doing, we're good." Maybe the bigger question is about how people watch them: if people watch these movies and think that is how science works, then addressing that would be important.

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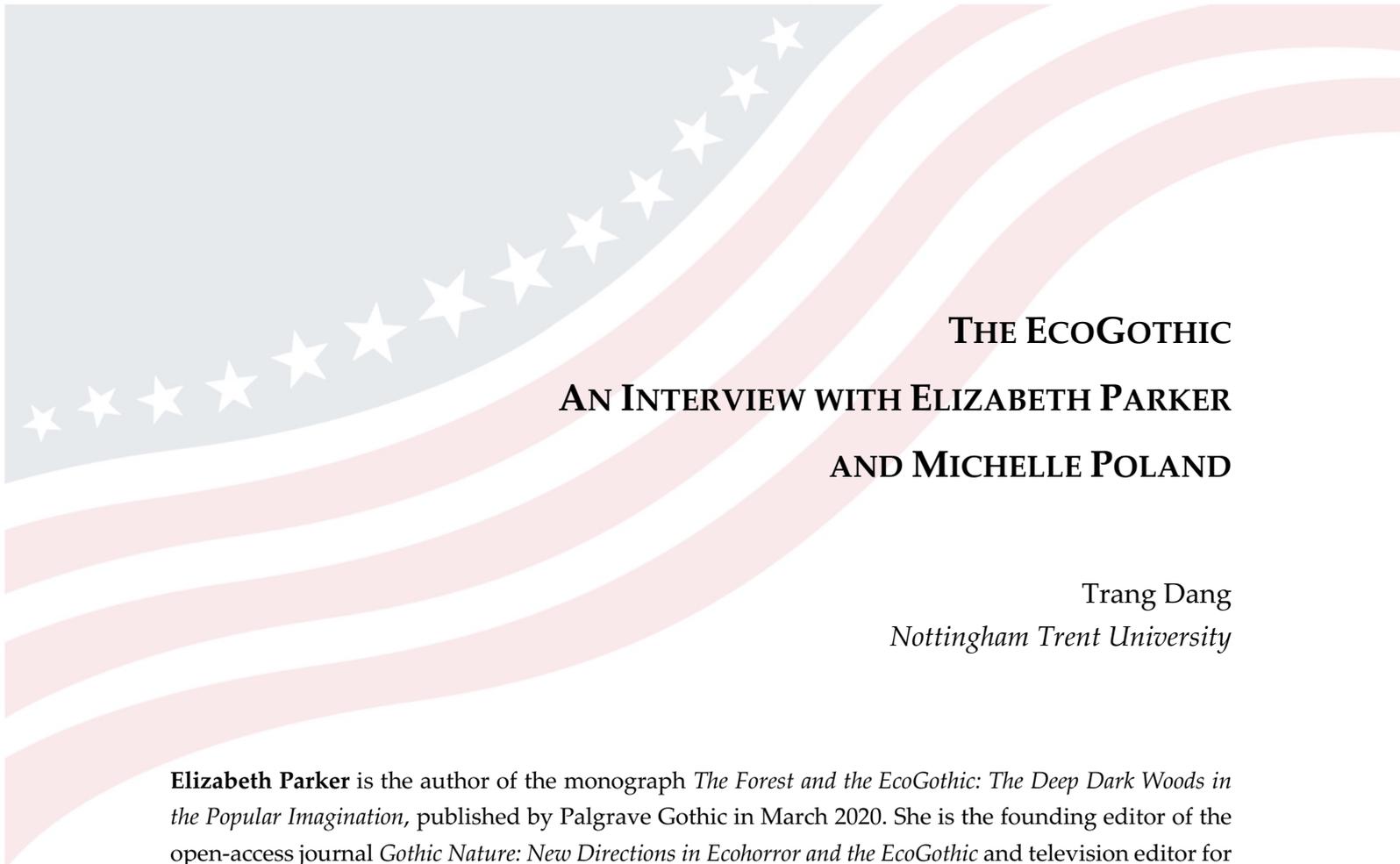
THE ECOGOTHIC
AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH PARKER
AND MICHELLE POLAND

Trang Dang
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Trang Dang: You mentioned in the introduction to the *Gothic Nature* journal website that you bonded over your fascination with "the realities and representations of the 'darker side of nature' and particular love of the Deep Dark Woods." Can you tell us a bit more about this

inspiration that drew you to establishing the journal, and about what you mean by the "darker side of Nature" and the "Deep Dark Woods"?

Elizabeth Parker: In terms of the origins of the journal, it all began with the first conference I ever co-organised—which was back in 2014 when I was a PhD student at Trinity College Dublin—called "Landscapes of Liminality." Noting the themes in the proposed papers, we started to group several of them, including my own, under the heading of "Gothic Nature": a term borrowed from Professor Tom J. Hillard. Seeing that there were a *lot* that fit this remit, I started to think to myself "this could be worth doing an entire conference on…" So, come 2017, with the support of my amazing supervisor, Dr Bernice Murphy, and a couple of other PhD students, this is exactly what we did with *Gothic Nature I*. We were delighted to find there was significant interest and we were spoiled for choice when it came to selecting our speakers and were lucky enough to have the conference headlined by Professor William Hughes, who amongst his many accolades is of one of the editors of the seminal collection *Ecogothic (*2013). It was here, amidst the buzz of this event and witnessing the real sense of community and excitement, that my idea for the journal took form. It was here, too, that Professor Hughes introduced me to Michelle—a brilliant speaker who was working not only on Gothic Nature, but on Gothic forests. Flash forward a year or so and I found myself in the editing stages for the first issue of the new journal, in need of more hands on deck, and I then had an idea to contact the person I remembered as "the lovely forest woman." And so I did—and the rest is history.

Michelle Poland: And I'm very grateful that you did! Working on the *Gothic Nature* journal is so enjoyable, and I am continually blown away by the quality and creativity of the articles, creative pieces, and reviews we receive. Trang, you also asked what Elizabeth and I mean when we talk about the "darker side of Nature," which is the overarching theme of the journal. Essentially, we're referring to the more frightening aspects of nonhuman world—both real and imagined—and human fears of or apathy towards Nature, a phenomenon coined by Simon C. Estok as "ecophobia." Ecophobia underpins our (at least those of us living in industrial-capitalist societies) attempts to control, destroy, silence, and oppress the nonhuman world, and is arguably the unacknowledged and sinister driver of the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch caused by the impact of human activities on the planet. We're really interested in critically engaging with these fears *of* and *for* Nature, and the way it shapes our perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and interactions with the environment. In the Western cultural imagination, there's a rich history of Nature being variously constructed as monstrous, spectral, sublime, and uncanny—as spaces, in other words, to be feared. Of course, the way that we conceptualize Nature, and the stories that we tell about it, have a direct impact on our attitudes and treatment of it. It's this relationship between our fears of Nature and anxieties about the Gothic-like environment we've unwittingly unleashed that interests us. The Gothic, which is a mode that deals in fear, provides the critical tools to engage productively with this subject.

TD: I'm glad you mentioned the idea of stories, and our fear of and relationship with nature, as that leads nicely to the second question. I'm curious about how you define the ecoGothic, and am particularly interested in whether your experience of running the *Gothic Nature* journal contributes to your knowledge of the ecoGothic.

EP: Let's start with the term ecoGothic. Because the term is really quite new, there's still a lot of discussion around its precise definitions. Something we want to flag from the outset is the fact that these definitions are evolving, our understandings are evolving—so while we have our opinions about what it is and what it is not, these viewpoints are merely a part of wider conversations. Furthermore, though the term "ecoGothic" is new, the ideas that it deals with are not. In other words, if you boil it down to its very essence—the imbrications between fear and Nature—this relationship is as old as humankind. Essentially, with the word "ecoGothic" what you have is two elements: the "eco" and the "Gothic". In its simplest and most central sense, then, the ecoGothic is about bringing together the words "ecology" and "Gothic"—and seeing what happens when we do this. It's about looking at this juxtaposition: how does it make us feel? How does it make us think? What does it mean? It invites us to ask ourselves in what ways is Nature already in the Gothic and how does it function? And in what ways do we "Gothicise" the more-than-human worlds arounds us? The ecoGothic is all about unpacking these rich and tasty ideas.

If you're interested in a much more detailed history of the term and its evolutions to the current moment, I'll give a shameless shout-out here to the second chapter of my book, *The Forest and the EcoGothic*, which provides this (and is hopefully rather more articulate than I am live!). The term's history is often said to begin with two essays: one by Simon C. Estok and one by Tom J. Hillard. Michelle already mentioned the term "ecophobia," which is from Estok's essay, and essentially refers to our fears of nature. Estok argues for the importance of addressing—and theorizing—our fears of nature. He contends that while we have much writing on our love of Nature and the bucolic, idyllic sides of it, we desperately need greater attention to, and interrogation into, its darkness in the cultural imagination. For me, and many others, this invitation to "theorize ecophobia" was a call to arms. Similarly, Hillard in his essay talks about ecocriticism, and how it's born from nature loving, and how it is astonishing that we haven't looked as much to the darker sides of our relationships to Nature and its shadowy underbelly. Hillard, too—to my knowledge at least—was the first to coin this term "Gothic nature," for which we are of course greatly indebted.

Andrew Smith and William Hughes, of course, brought out the important collection *ecoGothic* in 2013. In their introduction to the collection, they boldly state that the ecoGothic is not a genre, but a lens: it is a *way* of looking things, it is a mode of deconstruction. It is, as they state, about positioning the ecological "beyond the Wordsworthian tradition" (Smith and Hughes 3).

There have also been specially themed journal issues and various other publications devoted to the theme of "ecoGothic"—for instance, notable examples include David Del

Principe's guest-edited edition of *Gothic Studies* in 2014 and Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils' *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* in 2017. One final, but important note, is to credit a scholar named Suzanne Roberts. I stumbled across her unpublished PhD thesis online, which is a brilliant and accessible read, which is an early and intriguing exploration into gendered landscapes and the ecoGothic.

In terms of defining the term "ecoGothic," something that I find useful is to contrast the terms "ecohorror" and "ecoGothic." Are they similar? Are they different? If so, how? Something you will often see is the words "ecoGothic" and "ecohorror" used interchangeably. Finding this disorienting when conducting my own research, I deliberately spent a lot of time thinking about and trying to determine and unpack the distinctions between "ecohorror" and "ecoGothic." I started by considering "horror" and "Gothic" individually. I think of horror as something that is quite immediate: to me, horror is tied to a sense of *event*, something is *happening*, something that is plot-driven and bound clearly to storyline. Whereas the word "Gothic," on the other hand, makes me instead immediately think of *setting*, of *ambiance*, of *atmosphere*. I hear "Gothic" and I see castles, convents, tunnels, hallways, various wildernesses, mountains, the sublime—all of that—and so for me that's the really key part of the ecoGothic…that *environmental* element. I think, too, the fact that Gothic encapsulates fear *and* desire like nothing else is crucial. You get that interplay a lot with the ecoGothic, where you're dealing in binaries that may twist at any moment, where something is alluring and inviting, but it's also terrifying at the same time…

Ecohorror, on the other hand, is a little bit clearer in the sense that fundamentally you have this idea of *Nature's revenge*. With ecohorror, no matter how superficially, there is a sense of raising environmental awareness. With ecohorror, you're always going to have humans at the centre in some way: humans being attacked and being *punished*. This isn't necessarily the case in the ecoGothic: certainly, sometimes there are touches of ecohorror and Nature's vengeance, but we also have many texts in which it is the *humans* (rather than the nonhuman) that are backgrounded. I'm thinking, for instance, of examples like Algernon Blackwood's story *The Willows* (1907), Peter Weir's film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and Jessica Hausner's more recent film *Hotel* (2004). In texts like these, humans can seem almost entirely irrelevant and the "motivations" of Gothic Nature totally alien and incomprehensible to the human mind.

In a nutshell, the ecoGothic is something I call in my book a "flavored mode." I argue, in line with Smith and Hughes, that it *is* a lens, it is this *way* of looking at things, but at the same time it's important to recognize that it carries trappings of genre. For when you look at what exactly the ecoGothic often is used to look *at*, there's this commonality of themes….

MP: It also took me some time to clearly understand the distinctions between "ecoGothic" and "ecohorror." To echo Elizabeth, the most straightforward way to approach these terms is to treat ecohorror as a genre and the ecoGothic as a critical lens. Ecohorror refers to a branch of horror films defined by its various depictions and explorations of climate crisis anxieties, manifesting more often than not through Nature's vengeance on humanity. EcoGothic,

meanwhile, is most productively understood not as a genre but a critical lens through which we can examine our troubling relationships with the nonhuman world, particularly our fears *of* and *for* our earthly home. The ecoGothic provides us with the tools to explore the monstrous, sublime, spectral, and uncanny constructions of Nature—and, importantly, the significance of this. Critically engaging with ecophobia (with our fears of and apathy towards the nonhuman world) is crucial to navigating the complexities of the present ecological crisis, not least because many of our imaginings of Gothic Nature are, unnervingly, becoming a reality. You also find that science and media often adopt Gothic language to communicate the eco-social crisis, an area which is yet largely unexplored. The ecoGothic provides a timely and important critical tool to interrogate environmental anxieties and to examine both the ecology *in* Gothic and ecology *as* Gothic. The wonderful thing about the subject of Gothic Nature is that there is so much potential for interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and impact.

You asked a question about whether the journal helps us to better understand the ecoGothic. The answer is: yes, absolutely! One of the things it's helped me to notice is that there are at least four clear key areas of interest currently emerging. The first might be classed broadly as the "deep dark green," encompassing all manner of unsettling plants, trees, woods, and wilderness. The second is the "deep dark blue," including terrifying oceans to haunted shores. The third is the monstrous depictions of nonhuman animals, the body, and the horror of carnivorous and unsustainable appetites. And the fourth one is the uncanny future, wherein climate crisis is depicted as apocalyptic or dystopian. The discussions that sit in these spaces are rich and varied, but all are united in their ability to productively engage with the anxieties that arise from our realization that we co-exist, and are inextricably entangled with, the more-than-human world.

EP: I would also add, on the point of our experience running the journal, that one of the most exciting things as an editor is to see essays come in on topics that I never would have thought of or recognized as potentially being ecoGothic, but then being wonderfully convinced. For example, in *Issue II*, we had a standout essay from Kateryna Barnes, which was on Inuit death metal throat singing—and Inuit constructions of Mother Nature and how that rage comes out through music. So it's been, for me, the most exciting part of the journal, I think, celebrating different voices and broadening the discussions.

TD: I think you've given us very rich answers and ideas to think with, and it's definitely bettered my understanding of the ecoGothic because I was slightly confused about what it really means. Let's dig deeper into this mode of investigating the relationship between humans and nonhumans, particularly in the context of American literature. Could you comment on the origin of the ecoGothic in America, and perhaps, on some of the aspects of American culture and politics that brought about its emergence?

MP: Of course! As Elizabeth previously mentioned, the ecoGothic as a critical tool was coined in 2013 by Smith and Hughes in their *Ecogothic* collection so, in that sense, there isn't an origin

story of the ecoGothic in America to speak of. However, there is, of course, a rich history of wilderness in the North American imagination that's central to much current ecoGothic scholarship. Many scholars argue that early North American Gothic is entrenched in and informed by early European settlers' experiences with the New World and its "dark and howling wilderness" (Nash; Murphy; Keetley and Sivils). In *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), Roderick Frazier Nash identifies two key reasons why the early settlers feared the wilderness. The first is that wilderness poses a physical threat to their survival, from fears of attack by wild animals or Native Americans to the possibility that they might lose their sanity in an environment that they perceived to be unrestrained by civilizing rules of society. The second key reason is that, for many Christians, the wilderness had connections to moral vacancy and was believed to harbor heathens, witches, and various other disciples of the devil. Conquering the wilderness wasn't just a matter of profit or security, it was also about the civilizing light of Christianity overcoming the ungodly darkness of the woods.

Much early American Gothic invokes these early European settler and Puritan fears of the wilderness including, for instance, Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799) and Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1819). Nathaniel Hawthorne's work is particularly interesting because it both builds on North America's ecophobic past (and present) whilst simultaneously challenging it. Hawthorne had a great interest in transcendentalism and was acutely aware of the heavy deforestation that was taking place in New England during the 19th century, so he was not only exposed to early-conservationist discourses but was also witness to the destructive forces of ecophobia. If you examine closely texts such as "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" (1836), or *The Scarlett Letter* (1850), you'll find early examples of this tension between fears *of* wilderness and fears *for* the wilderness. This ingrained ecophobia and emerging sense of unease about the costs and consequences of anthropogenic activity is a tension that has become palpable in 21st-century America (and beyond). This, for me, is a particularly interesting springboard for ecoGothic analysis in early North American Gothic.

EP: If you want a quick two-hour or so introduction to the sheer awfulness of experience and fascinating nature of the wilderness in this early settlement period, I think immediately of Robert Eggers's film "The Witch" from 2015… (#livedeliciously!)

TD: If that is the mood and popularity of American ecoGothic literature in the past, do you think that the discussion about deforestation and ecophobia, this legacy, is still present in today's American ecoGothic literature?

EP: I think very much so, yes. The popularity of these stories and analyses is growing. We're seeing these ideas in different conversations and different avenues of popular culture as they become increasingly mainstream. There's almost a sense of "zeitgeistineness," and I think one of my favorite things about the ecoGothic is that once you start talking about what it is, wherever you are, *everyone* has something to say on it. It's not this niche, abstract idea that only a

few can connect with. I've found in social situations that it doesn't matter what people's backgrounds or interests are, everyone has thoughts, stories, and opinions on these subjects. People become animated and make me think differently…I think part of this popularity of these ideas, on a more depressing note, tied to a mass sense of collective guilt over our treatment of the environment. I think when you're talking about the mood of the ecoGothic now, I think it's grim in some ways, but I also think it's absolutely captivating—and promising—as well.

MP: What I've noticed most about contemporary North American Gothic is that it seems to have taken a step out of the deep dark woods and into the deep dark future. There's a definite contrast between, on the one hand, early North American Gothic which was preoccupied with and haunted by its ecophobic legacy, and, on the other, contemporary American Gothic which seems to express and explore explicitly our eco-anxieties and fears of living in this new human-caused but not human-controlled geological epoch. The most prominent examples of this are Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogies. There's also a novel that has just come through the post today for me, *The Cabin at the End of the World* by Paul Tremblay (shout out to Rebecca Gibson for drawing this to my attention in her article in *Issue II* of *Gothic Nature*), which I'm looking forward to getting stuck into. These texts are eerie and unnerving because the events that take place are rooted in, to varying degrees, reality and they simply ask: what if we were to continue on this destructive path that we're on now?

On a separate note, I think it's really important to stress that we're both acutely aware that the American texts typically examined within this scholarship need to be more diverse and that the ecoGothic needs decolonizing. Kateryna Barnes's essay in *Issue II* of *Gothic Nature*, called "Soundtrack to Settler-Colonialism," (which Elizabeth mentioned earlier) is a fantastic example of this. Barnes explores the music of contemporary Inuit artist and throat singer, Tanya Tagaq, and the way her music challenges dominant settler-colonial narratives about "survival against the hostilities of Nature" being key to the Canadian experience, most famously postulated in Margaret Atwood *Survival* (1972). Positioning Tagaq's music as a form of creative nonfiction horror, Barnes demonstrates how the true horror lies not in Nature itself, but in the monstrous violence of settler-colonialism on Nature and Indigenous peoples. As Editors of the *Gothic Nature* journal, our aim isn't to be gatekeepers of ecoGothic scholarship, but to facilitate and encourage diverse topics, discussions, and texts that inevitably strengthen this scholarship.

TD: In addition to American literature, do you think the ecoGothic modes are also manifested in American film? I'm thinking of the similarities and differences between American ecoGothic literature and film here.

EP: I think the very short answer is yes. How ecoGothic fears function, play out, and are structured, is in many ways very similar across literature, film, and television. But of course, your *experiences* as a reader/viewer/listener etc. are going to be different in terms of affect and how

you "read" environments—and in terms of analysis, as you consider narrative choices made by an author, as opposed to visual or aural choices made by creators of different mediums. There's a lot, for instance, that has been written on anthropocentrism and film. When you film Nature, you often film it as landscape from an overview shot. You see this perspective again and again in horror, and partly that's because it's creepy, it's vast, it's unnerving, *but* it also puts us, as humans, in the position of that *godly* figure—looking down, able to own and see it all. There's something interesting going on here…

I work a lot with film in my writing and what I did in my book was to take the landscape of the forest as an ecoGothic case study of sorts—so it was my way in to talk about the ecoGothic more broadly. When thinking about film and the "Gothic forest," we can immediately recognise a cliché—this idea of being in the forest and scared is something featured in innumerable texts. Something that I have found especially interesting, when thinking about the development of film and these themes and "clichés," is to examine the evolution of what I think of as the "forest giants" so I'm talking about "The Blair Witch Project," "Evil Dead," "Twin Peaks"— these massive, key texts that have really taken us into the depths of ecoGothic wilderness in America. Something that was really interesting and exciting to see over the last few years is that every single one of those forest giants got remade, revealing I think something in the current cultural and environmental moment, where people are *wanting* to go back to these texts and revisit them. There's a lot to explore when you compare how we tell that story now to how we told that story then—perhaps especially with "Twin Peaks," which almost cruelly denies today's viewers that "return"…

When the ecoGothic manifests in film and television, it's about bringing us back to that sense of bewilderment in the sense of the word's origins—of being literally *bewildered*. These texts immerse us, they allow us to lose ourselves, from the safety of our homes. Film is an incredibly powerful medium for achieving this. Think, for instance, of something like "The Blair Witch Project": very little happens—it's basically a lot of shots of trees and panicked torchlights—but it's very evocative…it's very bewildering. It captures that sense of viewing Nature as a *maze*, as something to be *lost* in—rather than Nature as something that we own and can control.

MP: On the topic of films that might interest those working within ecohorror and the ecoGothic, I think it's important to briefly acknowledge the recent crop of folk horror films including, for example, Robert Eggers's *The Witch* (2016), David Bruckner's *The Ritual* (2017), and Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019). Folk horror studies is a new, exciting, and relatively uncharted territory. There's a couple of essays in *Gothic Nature Issue II* by Dawn Keetley and Alexandra Hawk who critically engage with this new subgenre—from its unsettling ability to tell stories about devastating human impacts on the environment to how it can reveal and challenge the mutual oppression of women and Nature in patriarchal, anthropocentric systems.

TD: I have a special question for each of you, and I'm going to start with Elizabeth. In your book *The Forest and the EcoGothic*, you mentioned that because today most humans in the Western world live in towns and cities and predators that were once threatening to us are facing extinction, "there is little practical reason to be afraid of the woods" (Parker 2). Then, you go on to say that yet, "there is much evidence to suggest that we continue, indeed, to be 'terrified by the wild wood'" (Parker 2). This led you to pursue the questions of "why we evidently still fear the forest" and "what exactly it is that we fear, when we fear this environment" (Parker 2). What answers have you found in asking these pertinent questions? And what do your findings reveal about the relationship between humans and nonhumans?

EP: Thank you. Yes, in many ways, really this was my starting point for my book. When researching human fears of the woods I began by seeking literal, rational explanations. I asked, "Do many people die in the woods nowadays?" And the answer is no. When you start looking at statistics, you're much, much more endangered in a city than you are going for a walk in the woods. Yet, there is primal fear that still takes you over, even though we know that most of the predators are extinct because of us or in danger of extinction. In the years I spent looking at this, my whole apartment looked like the home of a serial killer, because I was scribbling and mapping everything, sticking it on the walls, linking it together with thread. I probably frightened a few landlords, but never mind…! The conclusion to this work is what became the governing structure for my book. I found there to be the seven *reasons* why we fear the forest, and three main *ways* that these fears manifest—which I will quickly outline.

I termed my seven reasons the "seven theses," in homage to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seven theses in *Monster Theory* (1996). The first is that the forest is against civilization. We fear it because we define civilization in contrast to the forest. Civilization has been built "out of" and in defiance to the forest. We destroy the forest to create the agricultural, the urban, the settled…You've got this sense of porous boundaries that are always being threatened, which is of course very much at the heart of the Gothic. I think with forest foliage, this is amplified in the image of something that is always creeping, growing, and encroaching…

Secondly, the forest is tied to the past. I think something quite important about the effects of the forest environment is that when you're in it, unless you're a trained expert in reading the signs, it's very difficult to tell what era you're in—there's no obvious reason to the common woman or man why it would look particularly different now, being dropped into the woods, than it would 500 years ago. This sense of timelessness is potentially quite eerie and we worry that in *getting back* to Nature, as though it is something *behind* us, *we* may at risk to regress.

The third reason we fear the forest is because it is a space of trial. This is something you see again and again in fairy tales, and fairy tales are very much tied in with our fears of the woods. An awful lot of particularly Western fairy tales are, of course, set in the forest, and often the trial, the task at hand—as seen in horror films too—is to survive, both physically and mentally. A film that demonstrates this beautifully is Jesse Holland and Andrew Mitton's

YellowBrickRoad (2010). Here, a range of psychological, cultural, and geographical experts are taken into the woods as pinnacles of society and—spoiler alert—they do not survive their trial…

The fourth reason is that it's a space in which we are lost—this is, of course, a big one. This is something that comes to mind straight away when you think of the woods: think Hansel and Gretel, Little Brother and Little Sister… think of that primal fear of being away from family, from settlement, from all that you recognize….

The fifth reason is that the forest is a consuming space. This is tied to the idea of being lost in this sense of threat that the forest is somehow going to consume or *eat* you—that maybe if you die, you will be taken in and imbibed into the very environment. There's an awful lot in imagery, in literature and film, of *mouths* of forests and mouths in forests coming to get us all, about massive monsters…

The sixth point is that the forest is tied to the unconscious. In many psychological works, the imagery of the tree, with its main form above the ground, but the roots concealed below, is a prevalent metaphor for our conscious and unconscious elements. You've also got a section in Freud's famous essay on the uncanny, where he at one point defines the uncanny as the feeling of returning to the same point in the woods again and again. You think you're walking in a straight line, but you keep coming back and you're walking in circles in the woods—exactly as in "The Blair Witch Project" and many other texts besides…

Finally, the forest is an anti-Christian space. There's this sense or fear that the forest is a space where there's either no god or the *wrong* god or gods—or even the Devil himself. There's also a big tie between the forest and paganism, and this idea of Christian terror of human sacrifice in the darkness of these revered wild spaces and blood-drenched groves.

A key point to note is that the forest—as with many key spaces in the ecoGothic—is a *binary* space and so for each of these seven reasons to fear the woods, there are seven reasons behind its enchantment. Every time you've got an example of it being Gothic, dark, and frightening, you've also got an example of it being light, inviting, and magical. For each of those seven theses, you'll also have counter examples, where you'll have the hugely Christian forest, which is God's domain, or a wood in which you *find*, rather than lose yourself, or in which you are rewarded, rather than tried. This duplicity is something that always haunts and enriches this environment—and many other Gothic environments too.

In terms of the three *ways* in which the forest manifests *as Gothic*, these are as follows. Firstly, when the wood itself is animate. There's a line in "Evil Dead," where after that famous scene in which one of our heroines is molested by a tree she runs to her companions and cries something to the effect of, "oh my god, the woods, the woods," and someone says to her, "what's in the woods?" and she says, "no, there's nothing in the woods. It's the woods *themselves*." It's really interesting to look at this idea of the woods themselves as somehow animate and filled with intent, and to explore whether it in fact *is* the woods themselves, or some other—often demonic, or human, and often female (!)—infection. The second way the forest

manifests as Gothic is as *home* to our monsters. It manifests through the dark, creepy things and creatures coming and getting us, chasing us, wanting to eat us… Then, finally, the third way 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 good, or at least a neutral space until we infect it and *make* it ominous.

In terms of what my work has revealed about human/nonhuman relationships, something that I found myself coming back to a lot was an idea from Smith and Hughes' introduction to *Ecogothic* about our fragmentation and estrangement from Nature and the emotions that come with this. We've gone from being "forest dwellers" to being "apartment-house-dwellers," as Jay Appleton (1996, 29) says, and though this is not everyone's experience, it's an idea that holds considerable traction in the popular imagination. There is that sense of loss and homesickness there, of being separate from something that maybe we shouldn't be so separate from. I was actually telling Michelle recently that I watched a documentary that some people might have heard of, called "My Octopus Teacher," recently on Netflix. It follows the story of a man who is suffering from depression, and he goes into the sea every single day, and he builds this relationship with this animal that we traditionally see as a monster, that we traditionally see as massively alien and "Other." I found myself getting really emotional watching it, and then, when I read reviews, lots of other people had felt the same—with some even deeming it "the love story that we need right now…" and I really feel that.

The last thing I want to say is that there is *hope* in the ecoGothic, in confronting and exploring these feelings of fragmentation. Fear is so important—and *promising*—because fear has the power to displace cynicism. If you're safe and at home and you're thinking a forest isn't particularly frightening, you're like, "oh, statistically it's not dangerous, it's fine," watch "The Blair Witch Project" and walk into the woods and I challenge you not to feel even a little uneasy. Fear makes us think differently about spaces, and so can make us think differently about *Nature*…so my biggest interest I think in the ecoGothic is the idea that maybe, just maybe, this is a way to reenchant nature and reconnect ourselves to nature.

TD: The next question is for Michelle. I'm interested in the intersection of the cultural debates on the Anthropocene with the ecoGothic. It seems that the language some contemporary scholars use to expound the concept of the Anthropocene invites a strong sense of horror, dread, and trauma. Timothy Clark (2015), for example, considers the Anthropocene "bewildering" and "destructive," and calls it a "crisis of scale and agency," "disorder," and "hopelessness." As a result, there is understandably a concern that this sense of overwhelmingness and despondency might cause either climate change denial or climate change paralysis, where you just don't know what to do about the ecological crisis anymore. Considering that the ecoGothic explores humans' fear and horror when encountering a dark and monstrous nature, do you think that the ecoGothic, in this context of the Anthropocene, might risk preventing us, in some way, from tackling climate change effectively?

MP: I think that's a really interesting question. Given that the ecoGothic is a mode that helps us to critically engage with our fears of and for the environment, I'd argue that the ecoGothic provides us with a unique set of tools with which to address the horrors of the Anthropocene, and therefore enhance understandings about how we can better live in this new world. Public understanding of and reaction to climate crisis is very slowly improving, I think, but to date, it can still largely be characterized by everyday denialism, inertia, inaction, overwhelm, be-wilderment, and paralysis—all of which are rooted in fear. If we can better understand how to connect the knowledge and skills of the Gothic Nature community to the "real world" by helping the public to critically engage with these fears, the ecoGothic has exciting potential to meaningfully contribute to mitigating the effects of climate crisis.

You mentioned Timothy Clark; his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015) completely changed my understanding of the Anthropocene and how we experience it. I'd absolutely recommend it to anyone, particularly those working within the parameters of Gothic Nature. Clark considers how the concept of the Anthropocene confounds our sense of time, space, scale, proportion, and, most unnervingly, ourselves. The sheer unreadability and unthinka-bility of the Anthropocene dislodges our anthropocentric way of thinking and goes part way to explaining why everyday denialism and inertia is so alluring. Clark argues—and I agree—that it's no longer enough for ecocritics to simply identify ecological tropes in literature and he challenges them/us to take up the seemingly impossible but hugely important task of in-terrogating these enormous issues. The ecoGothic is particularly well-suited to taking up this challenge. It provides a lens through which to critically think through the horror, terror, be-wilderment of the Anthropocene-related phenomena so that it is less horrifying, less terrify-ing, and less bewildering. By making issues such as climate crisis and mass extinction events more digestible, the ecoGothic might have an admittedly small but significant role to play in mobilizing the public into action. To echo Elizabeth, "there is *hope* in the ecoGothic."

TD: It's compelling to think of the Anthropocene and its impacts as catalysts for us to do something before it's too late. That leads me to the last question of the interview, which I hope to end on an optimistic note. Could you share your opinions on the future of the ecoGothic in terms of its popularity and impacts upon academia and the wider society. What direction do you think that the ecoGothic would take in the future, given the ecological and socio-political issues that we've been through for the past years and especially COVID-19?

EP: This makes me think of an essay in the first issue of *Gothic Nature* by Tom Hillard, where he compares our reactions to what's going on with climate crisis and the developments of ecocriticism to an ecohorror film. He basically asks what if we're in a film right now, what if our reactions to climate crisis are different points of the film—and if so, which point of the film are we up to? His essay is called "The Body in the Basement" because what he argues is that we're at the point in the film where we've been slowly feeling like something's a bit creepy about the cabin we're in, something's a bit wrong, and maybe we need to find out

what's going on… then someone says "there's a weird sound about in the basement". So we've gone downstairs and there's a body. We don't know, necessarily, how it's died, but we know it's dead and that we're probably next. Hillard contends that we're at the point in the movie now where we're looking at the corpse a bit dumbstruck, and maybe looking at each other, and—going back to what Michelle was saying about paralysis—this is where we are right now.

For me, this rings true. In terms of the future of the ecoGothic, I think part of what we're going to see is more and more texts, and more and more discussions, as this becomes increasingly mainstream and of interest and relevance to everyone. I do think it's going to get bigger, and I certainly don't think it's going away.

In terms of key themes moving forward, there are a couple I want to mention. You referenced COVID-19 there—and this is something that we talk about quite a lot in the introduction to *Issue II* because there's obviously huge environmental factors when you're talking about COVID-19. I think with the pandemic, it's a really interesting one because in some ways it's really specific, and in some ways it's terrifyingly vague. Of course, fascinatingly, there's something very Gothic about all the rumors of where COVID-19 came from, with the idea of somehow ingesting the *bat*, an animal that's something of an icon of the gothic mode.

Secondly, and I know Michelle's talked about it very eloquently already, I do want to emphasize this point that we really do need to decolonize the ecoGothic. This is something I really want to see happen and something that I'm throwing out into the universe is the fact that we're very interested in having some guest editors come in and do a special issue of *Gothic Nature* on decolonizing the ecoGothic in future. The diversification of both content and contributors working in these exciting fields is something we really are keen to support.

MP: I wholeheartedly agree. To return to COVID-19, I think there's an intriguing relationship between the pandemic and the ecoGothic, particularly the origins of the virus. COVID-19 emerged out of the shadowy borders of civilization and is a product of the hazardous intermingling between people, livestock, wildlife reservoirs, and zoonotic disease that characterizes the environments of illicit wildlife trades and markets—if that's not a Gothic environment of our own making, I don't know what is. The tale of COVID-19 is filled with all sorts of other ecoGothic tropes, from exposing the porosity and "trans-corporeality" of our own bodies to the horrors of excessive carnivorous consumption (bat soup, anyone?) (Alaimo).

There are a couple of things I'd like to add about the future direction of the ecoGothic. Firstly, I think the direction of travel is that it's going to be increasingly interdisciplinary. The new wave of ecocriticism is inherently interdisciplinary and is effectively engaging with research coming out of the environmental humanities and sciences. I think the ecoGothic will similarly evolve. To echo Clark, it's no longer enough to simply reiterate well-known assertions that the Gothic challenges Romantic ideals of Nature. The recent *Gothic Nature* publications and events are testament to this new direction of travel; they often add original contributions to scholarship by effectively demonstrating the value of an ecoGothic perspective to

all kinds of literary, historical, philosophical, scientific, and political discussions of the current eco-social crisis.

The second new and notable direction that I hope the ecoGothic will take—and somewhat related to this potential move towards increased interdisciplinarity and collaboration—is to consider how the research coming out of the Gothic Nature community can make meaningful difference in the world beyond academia. For example, how might we improve conservation policies for traditionally feared and "unloved" Gothic animals, such as toads, insects, and bats? (McKee). In what ways can we help to protect the dwindling "deep dark woods" that are not only essential to our ecosystem and quality of life but to our cultural history and heritage? How can we share the critical tools of the ecoGothic to help the public to engage with their engrained fears of, and explicit fears for, the environment? This, for me, is the future of ecoGothic.

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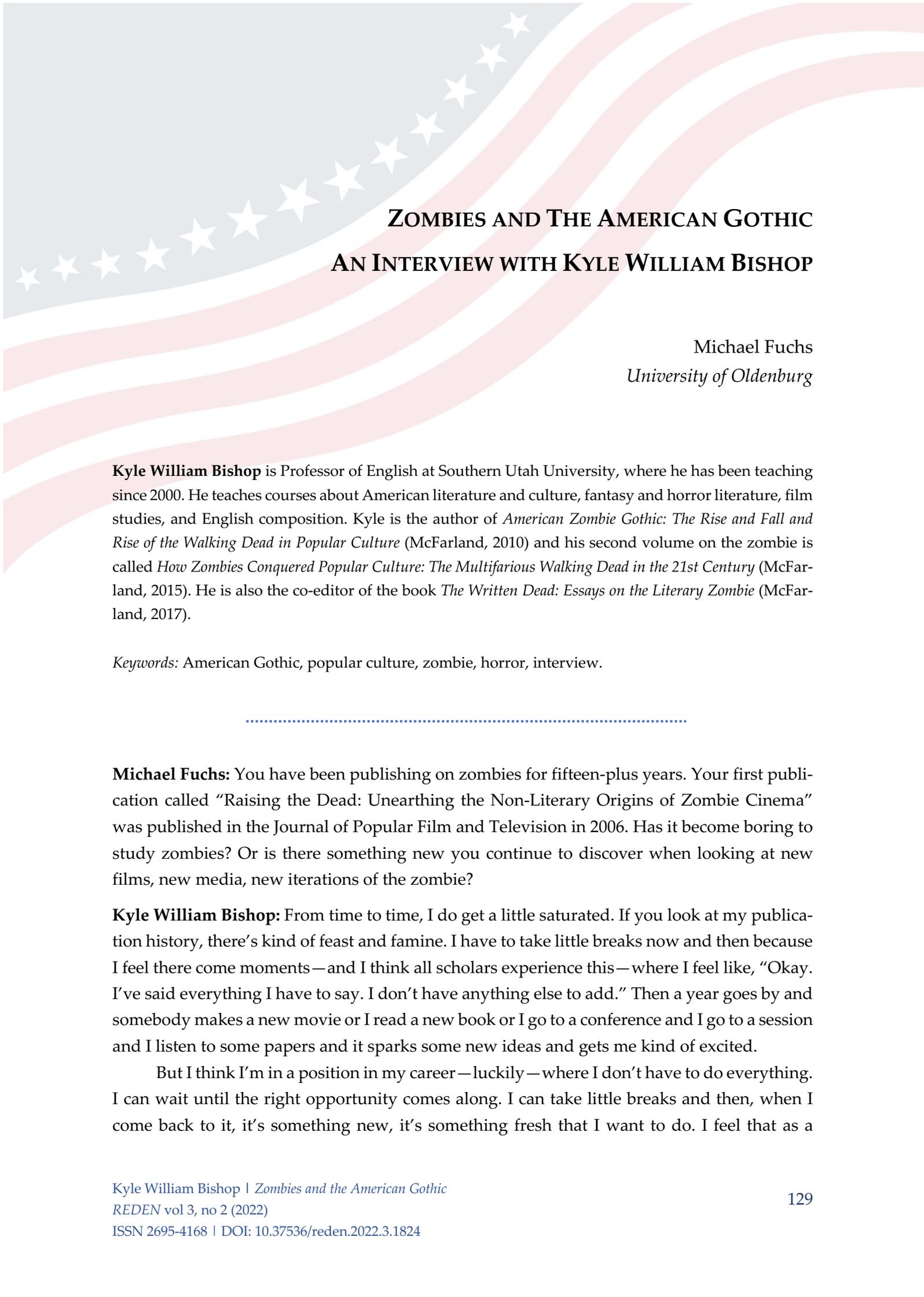
Zombies and The American Gothic

An Interview with Kyle William Bishop

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Michael Fuchs: You have been publishing on zombies for fifteen-plus years. Your first publication called "Raising the Dead: Unearthing the Non-Literary Origins of Zombie Cinema" was published in the Journal of Popular Film and Television in 2006. Has it become boring to study zombies? Or is there something new you continue to discover when looking at new films, new media, new iterations of the zombie?

Kyle William Bishop: From time to time, I do get a little saturated. If you look at my publication history, there's kind of feast and famine. I have to take little breaks now and then because I feel there come moments—and I think all scholars experience this—where I feel like, "Okay. I've said everything I have to say. I don't have anything else to add." Then a year goes by and somebody makes a new movie or I read a new book or I go to a conference and I go to a session and I listen to some papers and it sparks some new ideas and gets me kind of excited.

But I think I'm in a position in my career—luckily—where I don't have to do everything. I can wait until the right opportunity comes along. I can take little breaks and then, when I come back to it, it's something new, it's something fresh that I want to do. I feel that as a

scholar who's entering into the latter half of their career, my obligation is a little bit more on the mentoring and editing side of scholarship than the writing side—the first line of scholarship, if you will. I have been invested more as a general editor with McFarland in trying to assist new scholars putting together new works. Just this morning, I received a proposal from someone who has a book manuscript on *The Walking Dead*. So, there are still things to say, but I'm very comfortable with the fact that I don't have to be the one to say them all. I can just be involved in the process.

That said, I did write something new for a conference this year. I was a little surprised because I didn't know if I had anything new to say, but thanks to some new films, I have a new idea. It just has to work that way from time to time.

MF: So, what's that new idea? Do you want to say a few words about your recent work?

KWB: I'm really invested in the portrayal of fatherhood in zombie fiction. For years, parenting took a bad rap in zombie movies. Parents were often horrible: they killed their children or their children killed them, and films didn't explore the underlying issues. As I grow a little bit older, and being a father myself, I've become more interested in fatherhood and issues of paternity.

In the last few years, we've seen a dramatic increase in heroic father figures, not only in zombie films but post-apocalyptic narratives more generally. My thesis is that more and more of the creators of these narratives are fathers and that's what they're invested in. But I think there's a little bit more to it than that. I do like the heroic father in horror films as something of a counterpoint to the monstrous mother, which has been very thoroughly established over the decades. So, I'm teasing out what that means and if these zombie films have something to teach us beyond "shoot him in the head." It would be nice if this genre that I love so much had some value beyond entertainment.

MF: You've already hinted at the fact that zombies and monstrous mothers are these embodiments of horror. This interview is part of the session on gothic bodies—bodies in relation to Othering and the Gothic. Can you elaborate a little bit on the significance of zombies, or zombified bodies, to the Gothic and horror? Why are they so important as particular gothic bodies and particularly horrifying bodies?

KWB: Of all the literary and movie monsters that we celebrate, zombies are the most gothic, even more so than vampires and ghosts. Even though ghosts have the longest pedigree in terms of the Gothic, zombies are so gothic because they present their antiquation; they don't appear as they did in life, they appear as they do in death. Often, ghosts appear in some kind of idolized or idealized form or they appear as they did the moment of their demise. Vampires are so idealized, especially recently, where they become almost angelic or god-like. Zombies are corpses. They remain corpses and in a lot of the narratives, they continue to rot and to

decay. So, it's this ever-present, unavoidable reminder of mortality that is at the heart of so many gothic narratives. The zombie then incorporates the key concerns of the Gothic and presents them in a way that cannot be mastered. Zombies have this deadness to them.

Of course, that works in Freudian terms—and I use a lot of Freud in my scholarship—because zombies are literally the return of the repressed: they are the dead that come back. We don't want to think about death, so death returns to us. Now, vampires do that, too, but vampires do it in a way that reminds us of our bestiality, our mortality, our sexuality, but not so much our corporeality and not so much this the sense of the grotesque, which is often key to the Gothic. The zombie is grotesque.

I prefer manifestations of the zombie that are visibly dead. Another piece that I'm working on right now is about zombie passing. Zombie passing is interesting because of the parallels to the racial tradition of passing, but those types of zombies aren't as gothic. If they can pass as living humans, they don't have this tangible quality.

The other key feature is that the zombie becomes so atavistic, so ferocious, so feral. This is another thing that the Gothic reveals: the fantasy that we as humans are civilized. A lot of post-apocalyptic narratives—notably Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), any of the Road Warrior films, etc.—explore this question that when push comes to shove, we are monstrous creatures: we will tear, rend, and bite and fight for survival just like animals will. Because zombies, particularly post-Romero zombies, are presented as cannibalistic flesh eaters, it reveals this repressed secret. In terms of Jerrold Hogle's understanding of the Gothic, particularly in terms of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, that's what the zombie really is: it's an antiquated body that reveals the repressed truths of our mortality and our monstrosity. It puts us on a stage that reveals anything. Indeed, zombies can be whatever they need to be. The whole premise of my second book is that they are metaphorical monsters—like all monsters, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reminds us—but they get to do it with a little bit of flexibility that the other monsters don't always enjoy. That flexibility is always gothic at its heart.

MF: That's a very important point—the deadness that's embodied by the zombie confronts us with our mortality, more so than other gothic creatures, but zombies are also "flexible," as you put it; they reflect their times. These are topics that reverberate through both of your monographs: your first book focuses more on the history of the zombie up to the twentieth century, and the second book on the zombie surge that hit us post-9/11. As a matter of fact, you open your first book by stressing that all cultural production speaks to a given society's dreams but also its anxieties and that the Gothic plays a very particular role in this context. Could you maybe list three key American zombie texts and what they tell us about the cultural moments that they emerged from?

KWB: I think everybody in zombie studies would agree that *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is where George Romero shifted everything permanently. Prior to 1968, zombies manifested in narratives that were true to their origins in Haiti, where they were enslaved. They were

servants of other, more malevolent powers. They didn't do a whole lot and so the fear wasn't *of zombies*, the fear was *of becoming a zombie*. By fusing the zombie with a little bit of vampirism and a whole lot of Middle Eastern ghoul mythology, Romero came up with his ghoul, which others retroactively named the zombie. It created this creature which was more than just a kind of a postcolonial figure of racial enslavement and became the embodiment of unchecked modern desire; an empty desire, which is key.

Romero was responding to a cultural anxiety that had been brought to the fore because of the Vietnam War (not exclusively, but primarily). Vietnam was the first war that was televised. The American people were seeing images of death and destruction on a level that they never encountered before. Romero drew on existing narratives such as *The Birds* (1963) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and he created a creature that would remind people of their mortality, of their fragility, but also play on current social issues and concerns about the literal assault on the family—the assault on the traditional home—and also to engage in issues of race and racism and the shifting attitudes towards race in the United States. Romero went to his grave saying that he never intended it to be a film about race relations, but by casting his lead as a Black man, he irrevocably did just that: he had a Black hero, but he had a Black hero who didn't always act particularly heroic and simultaneously confirmed and overturned racist assumptions about a Black man. The film became a touchstone moment and a turning point in horror narratives because it was so raw and so basic; at the same time, it made so many sophisticated comments about society in 1968—not coincidentally the year the United States Production Code was retired and filmmakers were allowed to really push the envelope. Romero had people eaten on camera. It was pretty revolutionary and pretty shocking.

That film changed the zombie for the next 40 years. Most of the zombie films you see in America and a lot of the ones you see in England and in Italy followed Romero's lead, with these infectious-like vampires, cannibalistic-like ghouls, but a new type of zombie that continued to explore the idea of loss of agency but did so in a much more visceral way.

The next one that we have to really look at is *The Walking Dead* because *The Walking Dead* is a huge phenomenon that has transcended Romero's humble intentions. *The Walking Dead* was a successful comic (2003–2019), but when it became a TV series on AMC (2010–), it just exploded—it broke records left and right. It was the type of narrative that most would have doubted would ever succeed in a public forum. Up until that point, the zombie was a B-movie, VHS-watch-it-in-your-basement, late-time television creature, but with *The Walking Dead*, it really went mainstream. It gave birth to video games and spin-off shows. This whole world of *The Walking Dead*, this apocalyptic world, is a Romero world. The zombies are Romero zombies. They're flesh eaters, they're contagious, they're slow-moving, and they're only dangerous in large numbers.

What really is important about *The Walking Dead* in terms of building on Romero is that the true monsters of that franchise aren't the zombies. The zombies are helpless victims. They're doing what comes naturally; they're animalistic, they're atavistic. What's really scary

about that gothic landscape are the humans, the humans that will do anything to survive. A zombie has no sense of morality because a zombie has no agency; humans do. The humans in *The Walking Dead* are really terrifying: they're ferocious, they're vicious—both the protagonists and the antagonists, which is what makes the narrative so compelling. Because what you would have to do to survive that scenario is you would have to become a monster yourself. I've written about that referencing Nietzsche—this idea that the one thing you want to avoid when fighting monsters is becoming one yourself. *The Walking Dead* shows that that's impossible. True monstrosity can only be confronted by equally severe monstrosity.

Here, it's important to note that *The Walking Dead* really took off on the heels of September 11—national trauma, televised violence. It makes sense that we get this first big bubble of the zombie with Vietnam and the zombie renaissance on the heels of September 11.

Now, you asked for a third, and this is where I want to be a little bit more unexpected. I'd like to talk about *Maggie* (2015) because *Maggie* is a movie that kind of got ignored. It's an independent film. What makes the movie so interesting is that it stars Arnold Schwarzenegger—and he did this film for free. He loved the script so much that he wanted to give it a shot because it does put him against type he's supposed to be. He plays a simple small-town farmer who isn't a juggernaut like the Terminator; he's not a highly trained military offensive; he's just a dad. He's a dad who's trying to survive in a new world in which a zombie plague has ravaged society. It becomes a movie that is much more about family and it's much more about individuals than it is about the apocalypse. It's a pretty quiet film with a small cast and you only see a handful of zombies throughout the entire movie. Of course, the point is that the title character, Maggie, played by Abigail Breslin, is a zombie. The scenario of this film isn't so much Romero as kind of a *28 Days Later* (2002) situation where zombieism is a plague. It's an infection and the zombies spend weeks transforming. It takes about six weeks for someone to fully die from the infection and to come back as a zombie. So, society has set up a quarantine system, they've set up detention centers, and they've come up with a system for euthanizing the dead before they become a threat for the living.

These issues resonate perhaps more so now than when the film was made because we do have a plague and we do see the mistreatment of those who are infected and we do see the incarceration of the innocent. All of that really resonates and perhaps *Maggie* is a more important film now than it was when it came out. But at its heart, it's a film about a dad who loves his daughter who's terminally ill and who refuses to accept that. It's a touching film; it's quiet, it's sensitive, it's sad, and it's not an action-adventure horror film like so many of the other zombie movies. It's important because it represents the types of narratives that the zombie figure can tell.

MF: You've raised two points in your answer that I'd like to continue with: the zombie renaissance and the meaning of the zombie in our pandemic times. Let us first focus on the first couple of years of the twenty-first century. As you indicated, the national trauma caused by

9/11 definitely had an impact on the proliferation of the zombie figure in the United States; were there other reasons for this zombie revival? In particular, the zombie spread across the globe in the early twenty-first century, so what happened in addition to 9/11 to allow the zombie to become this global phenomenon?

KWB: 9/11 really helped kick off the viability of these narratives. You do get a number of films right out of the gate and then a lot more to follow and that did expand a little bit more globally with the War on Terror that the United States perpetuated.

Curiously enough, horror films and zombie films are not only catalyzed by warfare, they also appear during economic hardship. So, the 1930s—definitely in the United States, but you get to see it on a global level, as well—were a huge decade for horror. It wasn't because of war; it was because of economic depression. The Great Depression did resonate worldwide and did have a global impact. The United States film industry started making a lot of horror films because—in super-reductive terms—when times are tough, you want a narrative about people for whom times are tougher. It kind of makes you feel better; it's very cathartic. One of the things that really kicked off the zombie renaissance was the global economic collapse.

Of course, we also have become a much more global world than we were in the 1930s or in the 1960s and 1970s. That's one of the reasons why zombies were able to proliferate so quickly: everybody was kind of struggling in the first few years of the twenty-first century and because of the internet, because of globalization, it was much easier to share stories. It was much easier for people to access the films of other countries, to access comic books, and video games. The video game market is hugely important to the zombie renaissance because zombies have been flourishing in video games since the 1990s. They make such a great foe because you can shoot people and not feel guilty about it.

But we also got really nervous about infection because right after 9/11, we had swine flu, we had cow flu, we had avian flu, we had weaponized anthrax—all that happened in just a couple of years. We had problems with immigrants, we had problems with refugees, we had militarized conflicts all over the place, and that level of diverse trauma and anxiety came together to produce a potent world for a horror revival.

Ignoring zombies for a moment, it's interesting to me that almost every major horror film from the 1970s was remade during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The time was right and it was the parallels to the 1970s: the economic hardship, the warfare—it really came together again.

What made the zombie particularly essential for this moment was its versatility. Vampires are still around, but vampires had shifted. Vampires are still monsters, but they're more often than not romantic heroes, if not superheroes. The zombie is also on that trajectory, but initially in the twenty-first century, it was the figure we could use for whatever we needed to use it for. That's really the thesis of my second monograph—the idea of the zombie as a multifarious monster. It's a meaning machine that can mean whatever the filmmaker or author or video game designer wants it to be.

I've been thinking a lot about zombie films as a genre but the fact that the zombie shows up in other genres makes me think that maybe it isn't a genre at all. It's an element, it's a monster, it's a trope, it's a thing that can be added to almost any story, genre, or tradition. If you look at what we've gotten over the last twenty years, you still mostly have zombie horror films, but you see zombie crime dramas, you see zombie action-adventure films, you see zombie superhero comics, you see zombie sitcoms, you see zombies that are mostly political satire, you see fan films on YouTube that are better than Romero's first movies were. The zombie shows up all over the place now and you see really great zombie films outside of the United States.

As I've been trying to survey the key zombie films of the last two or three years, the majority of them are not from the US, which is really great and really important. Frankly, the best zombie films right now are coming out of Asia and a number out of Australia for reasons that I haven't quite figured out. US zombie production is still going strong but there's a lot of recycling and there's a lot of riding the *Walking Dead* horse. Internationally, we're getting more interesting zombie films and they're evolving because the zombie is like any other animal—it has to evolve and adapt or it's going to die.

I do talk about zombies in terms of Darwin a lot. They need to be able to be more than they are. The zombie gets to do that easier than other monsters because they don't have hundreds of years of tradition. They don't have a gothic literary tradition the way that the vampire does. To me, "zombie" has become a shorthand. Everybody knows what a zombie is, so anybody who wants to tell a zombie story can start there. But since zombies aren't real, they can go any direction they want to and audiences will buy it. I just finished *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017–2019), which I had put off because I didn't think I'd like it very much. I loved it! It's not a particularly gothic version of the zombie, but it's a great use of that creature to tell a certain story. That's why I'm excited that we're still seeing new original creative works to explore global issues of anxiety and fear but also catharsis.

MF: You just provided a perfect transition: global issues, global anxieties. We're experiencing the first truly global pandemic in a century—a pandemic that was, according to quite a number of scientists, long overdue. Do you see another zombie boom coming up in the next couple of years, triggered by Covid?

KWB: Yes. I think we're going to see a surge in all infection narratives. In so many ways, at its heart, the zombie story is an apocalyptic story. It's a viral narrative. I can imagine that there's a number of screenwriters and authors who've been quarantined who are looking out their windows, who are looking on the TV, and they're seeing real-life plot elements and story devices. I think we're going to get a Covid version of the zombie. At the very least, people are going to be more invested in these narratives because they're going to feel like they've been through it. Now, obviously, we haven't because the coronavirus isn't a zombie virus. The death toll is nowhere near as high as in most post-apocalyptic narratives, like *The Stand* (novel

1978; miniseries 1994; miniseries 2020), but it's enough that people have woken up to our fragility as a society.

It's a rough time to be a citizen of the United States because we entered this pandemic with such arrogance and now, we're the country that has been hit the worst. We're the country that has the most fatalities because we botched it. The amount of death people have experienced, maybe not firsthand but definitely second- and thirdhand—pretty much everybody in the United States knows somebody who died and that's similar in other countries around the world—you can't have that kind of national and global trauma without having art reflect it. If we saw a surge in horror narratives because of September 11, what are we gonna see from this, where the death toll is astronomically higher?

Starting in the next year, once productions can start to work again, once people can go back to work, we're going to see a ton of these: we're going to see a post-apocalypse, we're going to see infection narratives, we're going to see exposés, we're going to see docudramas that are going to try to reveal what went wrong, and we're going to see zombies. We're going to see lots and lots of zombies, and I'm pretty excited about that. If we can do it differently, if we can do things that are new and exciting and change the script a little bit. It's now Americans' turn to take cues from other countries and to do more than just remake foreign films but to actually make new films with new narratives. I'm feeling pretty optimistic that the zombie isn't done. We have a collective global trauma that needs therapy and horror films are the best therapy out there. Horror narratives are there and so people are going to get to work if they haven't already.

MF: And, of course, we will read past horror films and zombie narratives in a different way, as well. Since you have already been speculating about the future of horror and zombie narratives: you mentioned that you expect filmmakers to take new paths and do things differently in the future, but let's turn to the scholarly side. Especially in your role as editor of the Zombie Studies series for McFarland, where do you see the field of zombie studies going in the next few years? Is there something particularly exciting that you see emerging?

KWB: This is such a great question because I wish I had all the answers. I don't know if I have another zombie book in me, but I definitely know that zombie books are continuing to be pitched and promoted and developed. I was an external reader for a zombie monograph last month and, like I said earlier, I just received a proposal for a manuscript today. As we continue to get more and more zombie narratives, we're going to find new ways to approach those. As literary production increases, so does scholarly interest. Having been a graduate student twice, I know that grad students are always desperately trying to find something new to do, something new to say, and they're going to increasingly look at contemporary trends and contemporary narratives. So, for example, as you just said, reconsidering existing zombie narratives through the lens of a post-Covid world is going to afford a host of different readings, as scholars will ask, "Okay, but what happened when it really took place?"

People are going to continue to try to explore the zombie from new critical perspectives. Race has been done substantially in terms of zombies, but not much on gender, not much on parenting, not much on queer studies or disability studies. In particular, the zombie as a disabled body—that's going to become increasingly more relevant. But it's globalization that I think is key. The Italian zombie tradition is fascinating and very extreme and that hasn't really been done. There's so much happening in Asia that hasn't been explored thoroughly. The idea of the zombie surfacing in previous colonial nations like Australia hasn't been touched too much. Zombie-like folklore and mythologies hasn't been developed very much. I've written a little bit about the opti gånger in Norway, but not a lot has been done with the draugr up in Scandinavia. Not much has been done with some of the Chinese or the Japanese versions of the zombie. We're going to see more. There's more to be said. There's more to be explored: globalization, the international exploration, the folkloric origins—there's still a lot to be said. People still have things to say about the *Walking Dead* as a specific text. And I think there's still plenty to be said about the zombie as a whole.

Probably the most important thing to me right now is zombies as protagonists, zombies featuring in comedies, zombies that are more sympathetic and more emotional—these are the things we haven't explored as much. I'm fascinated to see what other non-horror zombies are out there and what they mean because the zomedy can be just as important for cultural study as the horror zombie—although scholars generally discount comedy, anyway. Zombie comedies are saying things that are super-interesting that could be explored in more depth. I don't know if I'm going to do it, but hopefully somebody out there listening will. Send me and McFarland a few manuscripts to check out.

Open Q&A session

Mónica Fernández Jiménez: I'd like to ask you a question, trying to link your talk to my interests. You mentioned the Caribbean origin of the myth and the creature. I was wondering if you have looked at artworks from the Caribbean, by Caribbean creators.

KWB: That's a great question. My friend Sarah Lauro's *The Transatlantic Zombie* (2015) is *the* book on the Caribbean zombie narrative. She is an amazing scholar. She's quite much smarter than I am. She travelled to Haiti to do a lot of research firsthand, which I haven't done, and she's been able to explore a literary tradition that's a little bit richer than I think any of us initially thought.

With my work, I did touch on it a little bit, but I kind of worked on a kind of secondary level, through the scholarship of Zora Neale Hurston and some other key Haitian scholars, where I did look into the origins of the idea of the zombie and Haitian life. The zombie is kind of a misinterpretation of voodoo culture and voodoo rituals, but I mostly looked at how that was translated into the cinema of the United States. I have looked at some of those short stories but there are more and they're more recent that deal with the Caribbean zombie and the zombie as a victim of a nefarious agent. I don't feel super-qualified with it and that's why I've

stepped back a little bit. And then when Sarah published this book and I read it, I kind of said, "Well, I'm out because I can't compete with that." But I don't think that she's done all the scholarship that remains to be done. And there are narratives that could be explored through the lens of zombie scholarship, such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which could be read as a type of zombie narrative—not a literal zombie narrative. A then other, more overt zombie stories that have come out of the Caribbean, particularly out of Haiti, but also in places like Florida and Louisiana that have a strong Creole culture. I am not super-well-versed in it but if you haven't read *The Transatlantic Zombie*, read this and it will give you a launching point for stories to read, authors to follow, and new scholarship to produce. Since Sarah wrote that, I'm pretty certain there have been a number of those types of narratives produced and published.

MFJ: I was really thinking about *Wide Sargasso Sea*—it maybe takes a different form that we can analyze through zombie scholarship. Thank you very much.

KWB: Awesome. The zombie is used as a metaphor so often that I think zombie scholars need to embrace that and zombie scholarship can be about more than just zombies. The metaphor is so widely reaching, it's a reason why we call things "zombies" that aren't. I think that the scholarship can go that direction, as well.

Anna Marta Marini: You talked about different kinds of zombie narratives and I, for one, really enjoy what I call "incognito" monster narrative. I really like it when monsters need, want, or can hide their monstrosity and pretend that they are "normal," which happens more often with vampires, but it happens with zombies, too. I really liked, for example, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (novel 2014; movie 2016). I binge-watch series like *iZombie* (2015–2019) and *Santa Clarita Diet*. I'm thinking maybe *The Glitch* (2015–2019) and *The Returned* (2015–) also fall into this category. So, do you think that there is a change in the zombie or undead narrative/dynamics/messages when the zombie or the undead is, to an extent, passing as human?

KWB: I think that's a cycle that we get with monsters. It's all building on the vampire tradition because even if you go back to Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), the power of the vampire as a monster is its ability to pass as a human, to walk among us—and that's what's so terrifying about Dracula: the idea that this Eastern European monster would dare invade Europe and that it could walk the streets with impunity. For a long time, the zombie was so markedly visually different from the human that there was no mistaking it, but that narrow focus on the zombie limits the stories that can be told.

You're absolutely right, in the twentieth century, we didn't have the passing zombie at all; in the twenty-first century, we've shifted because people love monsters and then they love monsters so much that they don't want to Other them; they want to become them. They want to embrace the monster and they want to be able to love the monster more. the zombie is following in the footsteps of the vampire, particularly as treated by Anne Rice where we're

going to make the zombie a little bit more identifiable, more sympathetic; give it more access to the human experience.

When I first started my research, I did not like that trend and I really resisted it because once you give a zombie a voice, once you give a zombie consciousness and agency, that seemed fundamentally opposed to the origins of the zombie as depicted in Haitian mythology. But I've changed my mind. All the texts that you just mentioned are really fascinating: *iZombie* explores a lot of interesting ideas about what would it take for a monster to be human, to retain humanity, and to function within society and how do you differentiate between monsters that are monstrous and monsters that are trying to be less monstrous. I really enjoyed *Santa Clarita Diet* because the passing in *Santa Clarita Diet* is easy. It's probably the easiest of the narratives because once they arrest the decomposition, they still look and act human. They just have this kind of secret side to them. The best narrative that has explored this is *In the Flesh* (2013–2014), where zombies have the ability to pass but have to confront whether or not that is right for them. The resistance to passing is perhaps more interesting to me than the passing itself, but I think that's where we're going to get some really interesting stories because then we have to ask ourselves what is monstrosity.

Human monstrosity can be manifested in zombie narratives by the uninfected humans. You can get narratives in which the zombies are, in fact, more humane than the humans. And then you get the narratives where there are different types of zombies. That's one thing I haven't mentioned yet: increasingly, we're getting stories where there are at least two very different types of monsters. You get it in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), you get it in *Warm Bodies* (2013), you get it in *Girl with All the Gifts*, which is amazing—it's a fascinating narrative where the book is much better than the film; but the film also has a lot of interesting things happening in it. So, the idea of the monster-monster versus the human-monster versus the human-human monster, I think that's super interesting and I think there's a lot to be said and I think there's a lot to be done with the zombie-vampire comparison. You usually don't get both in the same story; you do sometimes but you rarely get them together. Crossovers would be worth investigating.

AMM: You know, that would have been my third question because there are a few crossovers were you don't really know if they are zombies or vampires. They act a bit like zombies, a bit like vampires—is that a trend?

KWB: It's a trend, but it's also the origin because *Night of the Living Dead* is an adaptation of *I Am Legend* (1954). Romero was working with vampires conceptually when he started. Romero accidentally invented the zombie, but he started with the vampire. What he did is he's like, "The communicability of the vampire is super-cool and the idea of a monstrous apocalypse is super-cool," but drinking blood wasn't enough for Romero; he wanted them to eat everything—which is the ghoul. The lines are being blurred increasingly. When you look at the most recent version of *I Am Legend* (2007), with Will Smith, they're basically zombies but they're photo-sensitive like vampires, which brings us to *Minecraft* (2011), where the zombies

don't act like zombies at all; they act more like vampires. I don't know why the skeletons are photo-sensitive, but that's another issue. We are going to get more crossover.

We've had vampire-werewolf crossovers since the Universal days. It would be interesting to see whether zombie-ism is vampirism. How are they similar? How are they different? In a lot of ways *iZombie* is a vampire narrative, not a zombie narrative. Those zombies are vampires. They have to eat to survive, they have to eat to stay young, or to look normal, to maintain their humanity, but it builds on the John Russo version of the zombie, which is brain-eating only; vampires are blood-drinking only; in *Santa Clarita Diet*, she eats everything with gusto. Are we going to see different variations like that? Absolutely. The more monsters fuse and cross and meld, the more interesting things get. The taxonomy of monstrosity is going to become increasingly challenging, but you see the same thing in genre. Genre is increasingly difficult to identify. Monsters are going to become the same; they're going to follow the same trajectory, which is cool for scholars, but it's even cooler for fans.

AMM: Moving to a rather different question: You mentioned Italian zombies. Why do you think they're so extreme? I've watched so many and my favorite Italian zombie movie is *Cemetery Man, Dellamorte Dellamore* (1994). It's so weird and quirky. What do you think about the Italian zombie tradition?

KWB: Italy had the cannibal film tradition. Italy was not limited by the Production Code restrictions the United States was limited by. So, some of those early Italian cannibal films are just shocking. That was the foundation upon which they built their zombie tradition. And the second thing is Fulci. He ripped off *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). He made an unofficial sequel to it by calling his first zombie film *Zombi 2* (1979), which is hilarious. But he was building on an established Italian cannibalist tradition. Fulci wanted gore that substantially transcended Romero's gore. Even after the Production Code, Romero had to make films for a US audience which was limited by the MPAA rating system. Fulci didn't, and Fulci had a built-in audience that expected gallons and gallons of blood and flesh-ripping and all these horrifying moments. Back in 2006-2007, when I watched all the Italian zombie films I could get my hands on, it was pretty shocking. There was a learning curve for me to accept that different paradigm. That would be my short answer: it's the pre-established cannibal film tradition in Italy followed by Fulci's single-handed vision of where the zombie would go. Other filmmakers in other nations have followed his lead more than Romero's, as it is this sense of true grotesque barbarism and an embrace of the atavism that you get from some gothic narratives. The Italian gothic is different from the US gothic in many ways.

Laura Álvarez Trigo: You briefly mentioned the role of zombies in comedy movies. This is something that we've seen for several years, with films like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), but also more recent movies like *Anna and the Apocalypse* (2017), which is not only a musical but also a Christmas movie, and also *The Dead Don't Die* (2019). I was wondering whether the zombie is a monster that lends itself to be used in these ways of dealing with fears through comedy,

through laughing? These movies are not necessarily less scary or less gory. They're very dire; many of these comedy zombie movies have very bad endings—everybody's going to die. The comedy doesn't mean that they're happier in any way.

KWB: I think it's a great question. I'm glad you mentioned *Anna and the Apocalypse*, which is a really great film because it tries to be everything; it's every genre at the same time. Comedy and horror are so closely related because fear response and humor response become manifest similarly. We cry when we're scared, but we cry when we're happy. We can laugh when we're scared. The zombie comedies, the zomedies, can still say important things and they can still help us wrestle with anxieties and fears. They can still be gothic. The gothic comedy isn't new to zombies. This idea of "we're going to turn it on its head and we're going to explore it through comedy." What is essential for any comedy is familiarity and that's why early zombie films weren't particularly comedic or early zombie comedies weren't particularly successful. In order to parody something, you have to have an audience familiarity with the rules and the tropes and the conventions that you can turn them on their head. While there were comedies in the 1980s such as *I Was a Teenage Zombie* (1987), which is not great, and *The Return of the Living Dead* films (1985–1993), and they're pretty comedic, but they're still in the Romero tradition. Then you get something like *Dead Alive* (1992) by Peter Jackson, which is just off-the-wall, no-holds-barred, and then you get to *Shaun of the Dead*.

Shaun of the Dead is probably the first really sophisticated zomedie because it plays with the expectations, it plays with the tropes; it's able to make jokes because the audience knows the joke is inside. But the ending of the film is tragic, it's awful, it's traumatic, it's traditional. Narratives like *Anna and the Apocalypse* are the same way: the first half is a comedy, a musical comedy, and it's funny, and it's silly, and we make fun of the zombies, and we make fun of the people surviving, and we may even make fun of the people who get killed. But the second half of that film is pretty dark and it turns relatively tragic and the music shifts. The musical quality and the subject matter shifts. Frankly, I was a little surprised because I thought it was going to be pretty silly up until the end, but it had a bleak ending. To me personally, the final musical number missed. It's hard to maintain what it was trying to maintain.

The zombie comedy is really an essential part of the creature's development. We're at a point where enough people are familiar enough with zombies that we can make fun of them but not in a way that's dismissive. We can make fun of them in a way that we'll laugh but also think about it; and we'll maybe think about it for a few days later. Comedy has tremendous power for cultural awareness and cultural therapy and cultural change, but in a lot of ways, it's harder. A zombie horror film's easy. I've seen a bunch of them, low-budget ones, uninspired ones; they're still effective; they're still scary and startling. Zombie comedies are hard because sophisticated comedy is hard; otherwise it's just jokes. It's the satire and the irony and the sophistication that we need to see more of. Not a lot's been written about zombie comedies, so that's another area where scholars have more work to do.

Paula Barba Guerrero: I am particularly interested in the role of nostalgia in post-apocalyptic fiction. I was wondering if you could comment on the relation between the zombie and this almost mythical return home, which is particularly relevant when thinking of trauma and memory. Is the nostalgic zombie a thing? Right now, I can only think of Colson Whitehead's stragglers in *Zone One*, but I am sure there are other examples of this type of return to the familiar home, which in a way humanizes the zombie.

KWB: That is a great question. Nostalgia is essential for gothic narratives. The Gothic is all based on nostalgia. Walpole was nostalgic to a fault—that's what gave rise to the Gothic originally. But there is a nostalgia in zombie films that's really tragic and it's really painful. On the one hand, Romero has always explored the idea of nostalgia among his human survivor characters; the idea that the people trapped in a zombie apocalypse are understandably longing for the pre-zombie world. Think of *Dawn of the Dead*, where they so meticulously try to recreate normal life inside that shopping mall, as they make a home; they build a house, essentially. They have fun, they play, they do all the things they normally would do, but it's only the men. Francine gets that it's not going to go back to that; it's not going to be normal again. We get that increasingly in zombie narratives where people try to hang on to normalcy, to hang on to the past.

But the point you raise, which is so great, is this idea of the zombie as the nostalgic figure. Colson Whitehead explores it quite a bit; the *Girl with All the Gifts* film does an interesting play on it, with the zombies going about their business in tragic ways—I'm thinking of the woman who's pushing her baby coach. It's just gut-wrenching and really sad. Some more recent films have played around with it quite a bit, as zombies talk. In the film *Alone* (2020), which is the US version of the South Korean film *Alive* (2015), the zombies just wander around and make noises and they repeat phrases from their existence, which I find really disturbing—this idea that even though they're dead, they can't quite let go of the life they once had. *Cargo* (2017) is really disturbing, as well, because you have zombies that are infected to the point where they lose their cognition, but they still kind of go through the motions. It's an important thing to explore—the idea where the dead can't be completely freed from their existence. We're seeing more of that.

I Am a Hero (2015) is a great Japanese film that I really like; a lot more than I thought I would. They speak and they act but they can only do what they had when they died. They hang on to this last moment of existence. That's where the zombie becomes such a powerful metaphor for modernity. How many of us are doing it, particularly with Covid? We just go through the motions, hoping that things will get back to normal at some point. I find myself doing that at work—"well, time to grade the papers." With Zoom and with everything that we're coping with, we're all zombies to a certain extent. We all suffer from substantial nostalgia right now. "I just want to go out with my friends." "I just want to see a movie in a movie theater." We miss the simple things that all sufferers of an apocalypse end up missing. The

goal is to re regain some semblance of that lost life—whether we're human survivors or whether we're zombie victims, we want to reclaim that.

Nostalgia is the motivating factor of zombie movies—you nailed it. *The Walking Dead* is about nostalgia: "Let's rebuild the government," "Let's rebuild civilization," "Let's rebuild trade and diplomacy," "Let's rewrite the constitution." What's interesting to me is the zombie narratives that say "Let's return to what was" versus the zombie narratives that say "Now is our chance to build something new" because too much nostalgia is dangerous. We're going to see in our real world that life is not going to return to what it was before the pandemic, nor should it. Nostalgia also always has to be tempered with pragmatism. The zombie narrative allows us to explore those risks more safely.

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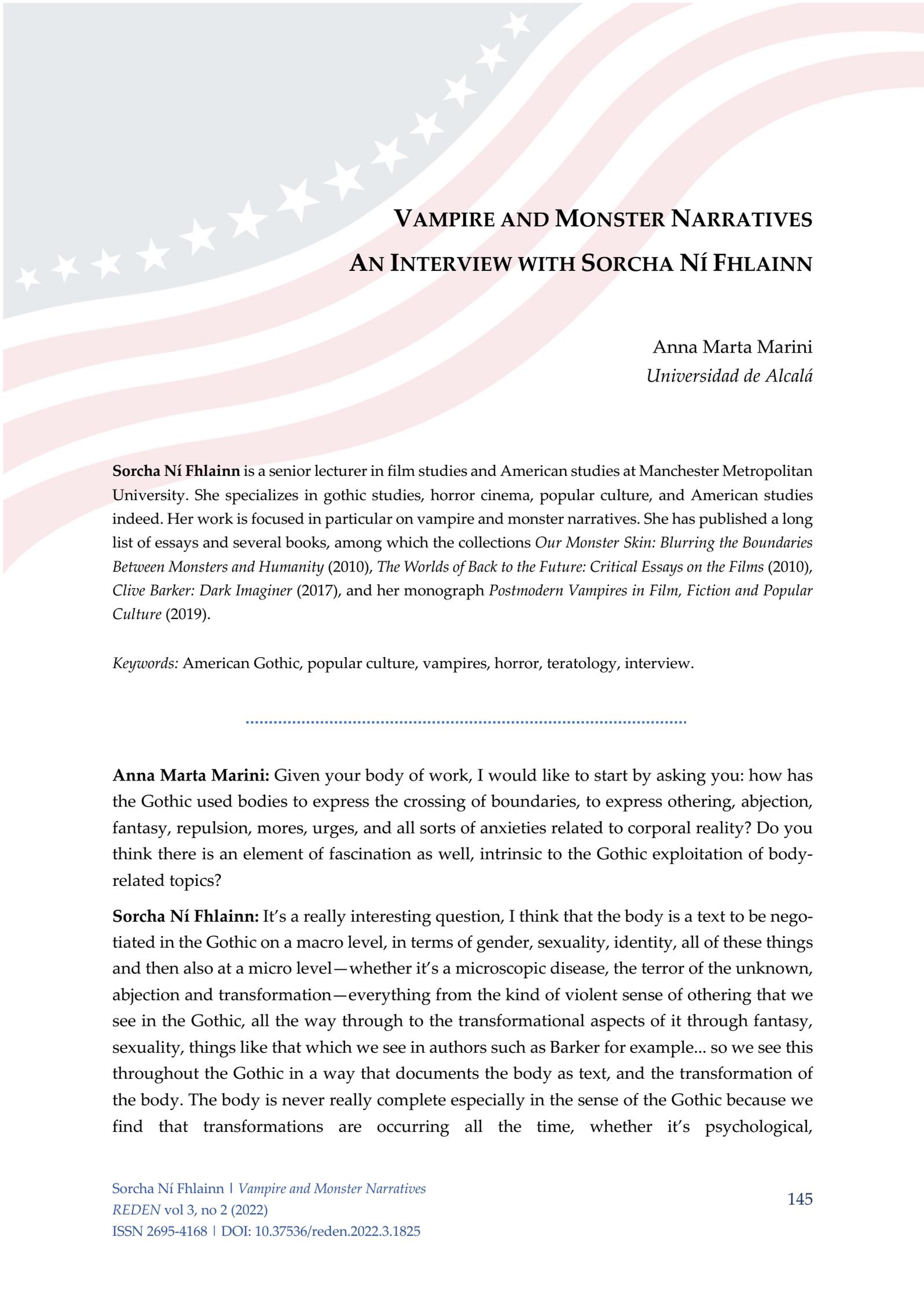
Vampire and Monster Narratives

An Interview with Sorcha Ní Fhlainn

Anna Marta Marini
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Sorcha Ní Fhlainn is a senior lecturer in film studies and American studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. She specializes in gothic studies, horror cinema, popular culture, and American studies indeed. Her work is focused in particular on vampire and monster narratives. She has published a long list of essays and several books, among which the collections *Our Monster Skin: Blurring the Boundaries Between Monsters and Humanity* (2010), *The Worlds of Back to the Future: Critical Essays on the Films* (2010), *Clive Barker: Dark Imaginer* (2017), and her monograph *Postmodern Vampires in Film, Fiction and Popular Culture* (2019).

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Anna Marta Marini: Given your body of work, I would like to start by asking you: how has the Gothic used bodies to express the crossing of boundaries, to express othering, abjection, fantasy, repulsion, mores, urges, and all sorts of anxieties related to corporal reality? Do you think there is an element of fascination as well, intrinsic to the Gothic exploitation of body-related topics?

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn: It's a really interesting question, I think that the body is a text to be negotiated in the Gothic on a macro level, in terms of gender, sexuality, identity, all of these things and then also at a micro level—whether it's a microscopic disease, the terror of the unknown, abjection and transformation—everything from the kind of violent sense of othering that we see in the Gothic, all the way through to the transformational aspects of it through fantasy, sexuality, things like that which we see in authors such as Barker for example... so we see this throughout the Gothic in a way that documents the body as text, and the transformation of the body. The body is never really complete especially in the sense of the Gothic because we find that transformations are occurring all the time, whether it's psychological,

psychosomatic, sexual... The body is something that is never fully finished and there's something always a little bit disturbing or a little bit abject about it, a little bit undone. I think because of that the text—the body as text—is always a site of fascination to which we return and that can be whether the body is very beautiful or other, or strange. It can be vampiric or zombie-like. You find it's always on this level of spectral where this arc of change, I suppose, and it just depends on how far-reaching and how horrifying this body presents itself. So, when we see this in terms of monsters, in particular, it's always about how we identify or find the limits of their bodies or how their bodies differ from what we imagine is the 'normal body', our own body, our own experience of the world. So you can see that the body is sort of the foundational text for us all - whether it's skin and surfaces, you know, or as I say sexual, sexual reproduction or asexual reproduction, we find the Gothic is lurking somewhere at the edges, to challenge us and our perceptions of it. The Gothic is always in dialogue with various other aspects of bodily expression—as I say—corporeality, sexuality, and indeed that idea that there's always this tension between the idea of evolutionary advancement, development or change, and how that is so psychologically challenging for us.

AMM: You have been working in the field of monster studies and monsters are often used as symbols of horror, interfering with concerns and issues related to science, technology, metamorphosis, and the impossibility to control oneself. So, why monsters? How does your interest in monsters raise?

SNF: I suppose it goes back a long time as all these things do... every Gothic scholar will tell you that something happened to them in their childhood, in some way they encountered a book or they came across a story that just changed their point of view and for me... I was not a child who loved all monsters. I was always interested in different points of view, I always loved the fact that there were different ways of looking and reading perspectives like the Rashomon effect. There were various ways to tell a story from different points of view (as is the case in the larger landscape of history) and so that was my "gateway experience" into gothic studies because there's an instability—a core instability—there; who is the true monster depends on who does the looking and who tells the story. So if you're looking at something classical you might have the band of vampire hunters who are seeking out to destroy the vampire because he's a vampire... we have to kill him, that kind of thing... but from the vampire's perspective, he's been persecuted and he might not see himself as a villain... we don't see ourselves as villains in our own stories, we see ourselves as heroes. When you switch that and the subjectivity changes, you get fascinating variations or different versions of the tale. So, who is the monster and who is the hero always depends on the position of the storyteller, or what subjective position is privileged in the tale. So, for me, when I was starting to read vampire fiction in particular as a teenager, what always struck me was that the "monster" was the storyteller... so that to me was immediately fascinating because they're always much more interesting than the human protagonists. The human protagonists are generally quite normal,

bland, usually patriarchal, usually upholding particular sort of privileges and points of view, but the monster didn't—s/he was transgressive and alluring. The monster had that violation of power, so that's what captured my imagination pretty much from the get-go. We see this in post-modern literature, essentially, and we find that there's so much more depth and so much more breadth in the perspective of the vampire, the zombie, and so on. It is much more interesting than rooting for Van Helsing, you know, as we know what Van Helsing's up to anyway. I've always been tied to that concern around subjectivity, because again we have, at some time in our lives, all experienced the sense of being outsiders. Whether that's in primary school, whether that's in cliques or communities, or whether it's because we feel it's to do with our politics or our accents or our skin color or whatever it might be. We've all understood that sense of othering—it's a very human feeling so we all can identify with the feelings of the monster at some capacity, and then we can all—especially with the way it's constructed in cinema and literature— empathize with the monster. There's a pathway for many readers and viewers. I think that that's very seductive and very inviting in the Gothic, as we are all both heroes and monsters in our minds one way or another and we all can understand and have that empathy.

AMM: Could you maybe illustrate a few examples of fictional monsters, either your favorite or the ones that you think are more relevant or archetypical.

SNF: The one I would always go to—my go-to one—would always be vampires because I think that when you're looking at a case like Dracula's, a really good example of a monster that's hunted down, and is never fully understood. He's always represented in the novel at least as something that is monstrous and stands in for so much of the anxieties and the fantasies of the *fin de siècle*. But when we're looking at revisions of Dracula that come later, in the 20th century, or indeed even concerning other vampires... I'm thinking of the Anne Rice vampires for instance, and various other iterations, we see that we are positioned to align ourselves with the monster. The monster is much cooler, much more interesting, usually much sexier, and definitely—as we get to the end of the 20th century—sympathetic in a way that monster hunters tend to be represented as zealots in comparison. These vampires are not necessarily purely evil, but rather complex characters who are in some way gothically informed whether they're immortal or they drink blood or whatever it might be. I'm not saying they're free from guilt or free from their own sense of transgression. But there's definitely a sympathetic edge and that's a powerful transformation at work. Vampire cinema overtly sympathizes with the vampire. It overtly shows that vampires can be monstrous, but they indeed can be damned and in that damnation, we can empathize with that sense of guilt and the horror of having to live through pain and self-afflicted pain. Similarly, the zombie's gone through that same transformation—even though purely sort of as a cinematic trope or cinematic character—where we initially see them as the abject horde. We initially reject them for that reason but then when we start to see what they represent about our own sense of our lives—whether it's that we're

all living under varying degrees of capitalistic enslavement—then we start to see that we are in actuality the zombies. We are the drones, we're the ones who are forced to work, and the true horror of it is that even death doesn't release us. We're going to be working even after death. So, there are these ways as I said, subjectivity really helps us kind of identify through that sort of monstrous nature. Teratology makes you feel like you are always looking out for the person who's most subject to the machinations of capitalism or the machinations of those in power.

AMM: And what about a monster like Frankenstein's?

SNF: Absolutely! The creature, in particular, I think, has been so sympathetically recouped. Particularly in the novel when you see sort of the horror with which Dr Frankenstein treats him, but then we see that it's the innocence of the creature, the lack of understanding of the consequences of what he does, but also the fact that he is just left abandoned entirely, we get this sense that how we are perceived by others can make us monstrous, even though we do not see ourselves in that capacity. He is a creature completely of sympathy and I think usually—particularly in terms of queer and sexuality studies—a lot of people identify with Frankenstein's creature because he is not necessarily deemed acceptable by others even though he knows no different. So, he challenges concepts of the boundaries of 'normality' or the boundaries of an 'acceptable' existence. The novel and films also address anxieties about science, about how can you be a "god" or what's your position as a human who dares to steal the Promethean spark. When you give life to something, of course, it's always scary, isn't it? And I think the fact that it's done irresponsibly— for the sake of being able to experiment on it — is highly unethical and to abandon it when your progeny needs you the most, there's something unspeakable about that. All of our monsters are very much extensions of our psychological understanding of the world because we've all gone through variations of these very deep-seated and often cathartic emotions.

AMM: Your work has delved in particular into vampires in the American imagination and popular culture. How would you explain the topics related to the representation of the vampire through history in American culture?

SNF: I must say from the outset that when I was conducting my study, my research on vampires, the most plentiful source of Anglophone vampires originated in the United States. When I started to undertake the study a long time ago I noticed that most of the vampires—once they started to speak, once they had that subjectivity—what they said and stood for mapped on very closely to a shift in American cultural understanding of and suspicion on the president of the United States. One thing I discovered was that the second vampirism started to go global (through a British-American production, *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, directed by Roman Polanski), it started to flourish outward and spread across nations; it broadened our understanding of vampires being everywhere as opposed to just being in the castle in

Romania. You have Hammer in the UK, which started drawing to a close because it was still stuck in replaying that older sort of adaptations of the Gothic texts, Polanski's film reimagines those trends by satirizing those tropes and conventions. The American vampires of the 60s and especially the 1970s contemporize the vampire, so you get these new vampires that come out as vampirism spreads and becomes popular. You have Rice—her 'articulate vampire' co-hort—then you have George Romero's classic film *Martin*, and you have other reinterpreta-tions of *Dracula*, and they all deal with anxieties around American political discourse... whether it's stagnation in the economy, whether it's the president and the lies of Watergate and uncovering Nixon as this sort of arch enemy of the people.

Other times, it's the idea that sexual liberation, drugs, and rock and roll are great now and it might lead to a viable and promising future for women and minorities... and you have all these new vampire texts that kind of negotiate this terrain: again *Blacula* does this during the Blaxploitation period, through to the comedy *Love at First Bite* in the disco era. So, we see the vampires then start to embody and take on anxieties of the age and do this in a way whereby we can see it etching itself onto their more frail and often mortal bodies. Vampires start to look sick, they start to die, especially in the 1980s... they get younger because again the financial impulse in the 1880s is of course through MTV and youthful audiences. So, you know, we get rock star vampires like Timmy Valentine and Lestat who articulate the economic edges of 1980s culture. Overall, it's a very bad time to be a vampire under Reagan; a lot of vampires tend to die off or explode or are punished and must go to ground... no vampire survives the 80s unscathed. By the 1990s, they start to split apart and multiply, so it finds purchase in the two-faced nature on display in 1990s American culture, with Clinton's public disgrace (among many others), we literally see this... and then this doubling in *Buffy* through Spike and Angel, and Louis and Lestat in the film version of *Interview with the Vampire*. It starts to take on this cultural echo and it works its way through the vampire narrative, whether they speak it or whether they embody it. Vampires also display more openness towards LGBTQ+ rights and radically move beyond embodying an AIDS narrative in the 1990s. They are very accurate cultural barometers.

AMM: And I guess, the vampire—as you were saying for example the 80s vampires—there is an underlying theme of corruption as well.

SNF: Yes, the vampire starts to die because their body corrupts, they are frailer than before. I'm thinking in particular of *Fright Night* and in *The Lost Boys*, we see this sort of explosiveness and fragility in some capacity. With *Near Dark,* it's more of a tragedy, that they're a lost tribe that cannot be sustained in contemporary America, whereas I think with the nuclear family structures that you see in *Fright Night* and *The Lost Boys* there is this rule that if you trans-gress—whether it's sexually or morally –the sin is etched into your body or taints your soul. So, it functions as a warning, and has very serious consequences in terms of declaring "you

will not be worthy of inclusion in any kind of hopeful future for the country." 1980s vampires bear the brunt of Republican political policies.

AMM: How does the vampire connect specifically with sexuality and themes that are related to sexual anxieties?

SNF: The vampire occupies this lovely duality between sexual desire and abjection. They bring forth or indeed act out or upon repressed sexual desires within the culture—whether that is any kind of LGBTQ+ expression, or forbidden trysts outside of marriage or patriarchal control—it's always about offering that gothic encounter with something or someone seductive yet dangerous and transgressive. If you transgress beyond the realm of fantasy and you cannot be recuperated either morally physically or whatever, then this damnation will happen to you. If you fully transgress over to the "dark side"—whatever that might be, such as drinking blood or same-sex relations— once you transgress too far, you're lost to a Gothic and dangerous existence in these texts. This is a conservative reading, of course, and that's not to say that characters do not or should not relish in their Gothic desires. Contemporary vampires are more beautiful than anyone could compete with, that's the point. The point is they offer the realm of fantasy and escape, they are in some ways beyond the limits of sexuality. I'm thinking in particular of shows like *True Blood* for example, that definitely foregrounded this position. Vampire sex in *True Blood* can be read (as is often presented) as both monstrous and magical, as dangerous and fulfilling. They can offer you everything and this is the point - but do you really want the fantasy of the eternal immortal boyfriend who is also incredibly beautiful looking and just has that nasty little habit of not being able to go outside in the daylight? The point is that it's a fantasy but it's dependent upon what desire is being served. It's a balancing act. I think that vampire sexuality onscreen has become a lot more explicit and is becoming more inclusive in terms of LGBTQ+ relationships and representations on screen, and long may that continue! Vampires now have to find another way to express their transgression. they'll have to find another way to represent that gothic intrusion because we recognize that inclusivity is just and right so that can't be a marker of excess anymore because it's normal. However, it's likely that vampire bodies will still engage in horrifying modes of dying and disintegration.

AMM: Thinking of the presence of vampires in popular culture in recent years—and let's say maybe from the turn of the century up to the present—how have the vampire archetypes and tropes been adapted to the current times?

SNF: We've had a continuation of adaptations and texts coming in from the 20th century into the 21st century, with interpretations of *Dracula* for example. We have vampires who mourn their position in the world or wish to be accepted and integrated especially if you're looking at something like *True Blood*. The most interesting vampire texts I can think of in the last 20 years or so look at vampires overtaking the world … I'm thinking for example of *Daybreakers*,

which was a really interesting film because it looked at the vampire as a completely capitalist body draining the global economy to the brink. The fact that the vampires are running out of blood is well situated as a commentary on our petro-future, of running out of oil, and natural resources. So, it has that ecological anxiety that we naturally would expect in the 21st century, which isn't new but it is something that is done in a very interesting and timely articulation, nearing an end state that we can no longer survive. So, all of us are vampiric in our consumption practices in the contemporary world. Vampires are always up to date. In some recent examples then we find there's no catharsis, that there's something quite banal about being immortal for 500 years. So we're getting closer to the vampire but we understand that their allure is a mirage, so I think that's very interesting to see how the next turn in the vampire narrative will occur. That said, I'm enjoying the fact that there are so many sorts of "interviews with vampires," today like *What We Do in the Shadows*; that film and TV series in particular is very savvy and aware of vampire history and at the same time they represent the fact that they're showing different types of vampires across film and literary history. They are updating representations of vampire women too, which deserves more scrutiny. In *What We Do in the Shadows*, I think Nadja is one of the most interesting characters I've seen on screen for years in terms of female vampirism. There are lots of ways that they can bring together all these gothic tropes and make them exciting in contemporary culture.

AMM: Often vampires have been coupled with werewolves. In recent years there have been examples in which vampires crossover with zombies, as it happens in the TV series *Van Helsing*. So, how does the vampire stand next to other monsters that are so present in popular culture, you think?

SNF: The vampire will always stand on its own. I think this is the case because the vampire is foundational in gothic fiction going back to Polidori and oral traditions before that. And that goes back to oral history, goes back to the narratives around the wandering Jew who disappears and reappears, the terror of the stranger in the village, or the undead revenant who returns after death. There are loads of different ways we can articulate vampires as they've remade themselves across the centuries. It's interesting that you bring up zombies because I think contemporary vampires and zombies owe an enormous debt to Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* from 1954. The text is about a vampire plague and is superb, an absolutely incredible and very influential novel, but then gets adapted into a zombie text under George Romero… and that brings us those images that we're so used to, of zombies acting as a terrifying, all-consuming horde. Vampires very rarely act in large groups, they don't tend to like each other, they tend to be quite self-centred and full of their own opinion… so the fact that Matheson's vampire hordes are transformed into all-consuming zombie hordes works much better as a metaphor for the masses. Again, this is not only because of that capitalistic impulse they voraciously feed, but also because they're not subjective—at least not at that point in their visual history—they are consumers and they are there to literally force back any sort of sense

of progress beyond consumption and fleshy appetites. I think a lot of credit is owed to Matheson in that respect, and Romero's update of the zombie makes it feel very contemporaneous. Vampires are subjective, and, despite being deeply abject creatures, they still have the veneer of beauty; it is easy to identify why we may want to be vampires, rather than zombies - I don't want to have my abject state written all over my body announcing my decay, nor that I'm still working beyond death or that I'm enslaved in some capacity beyond death. Whereas with vampirism you kind of go "well they usually tend to be the more privileged of the Gothic monsters," they've access to time, wealth, power, influence. They can travel. There's a hell of a lot of good to be said about the vampire existence in comparison, I think.

AMM: And of course—as you were saying—there's this kind of vampire romance that it's already present in the gothic text of the past centuries but it has evolved in the past two decades, thanks to transmedia series such as *Twilight* and similar texts.

SNF: Vampire romance—especially in the vampire literature sense—goes back a lot earlier and in particular it underwent a huge renaissance in the 1970s… if the vampires are not romancing each other or in thrall to a specially chosen human—or quarrelling with each other in the case of Rice's sprawling Vampire Chronicles—you also have characters like Saint-Germain by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro in her *St Germain* series—and that again is a huge sprawling series whereby Saint-Germain is a traveller across human history, partaking in human affairs before he disappears again. Essentially, he's intervening and saving women and is a potent and fabulous lover, he's also a gemmologist, he's a specialist in diamonds… so really he had it down long before we got Edward Cullen on the scene. Edward Cullen just physically embodies it, in that he literally has got diamonds in the skin or at least the reflection of it as such, so he is the embodiment of that wealth… whereas Saint-Germain shares his wealth and knowledge. So, there's a very interesting romance around being provided for, being made safe, and then of course the sexual safety of that, while also enabling women to access their sexual desires both unabashedly and fantastically through vampire literature.

Open Q&A session

Laura Álvarez Trigo: My question really builds upon many things that you've already mentioned and I was thinking specifically about the ethics involved in watching these vampires, in terms of how we empathize with them. So, on the one hand, there's these things that you were mentioning—as the dichotomy between the Spike type and the Angel type, or Louis and Lestat, and this kind of the "good vegetarian vampire" type of character—but there's also *What We Do in the Shadows* that you've mentioned… these characters have zero empathy, zero interest in humans, but we still—as audiences—we like them. So my sense is that maybe we really are fooled by this sexual attractiveness and this richness, and we just completely overrun all kinds of morality as audiences… and is this something that specifically happens with

the vampire for some reason? Is this a monster that we tend to empathize and like more for these reasons?

SNF: I think that with something like *What We Do in the Shadows*, the one thing I should have mentioned earlier as well is that vampires tend to look like us [except for their teeth] and—unless they've transformed into something abject and horrifying by the end of the third act—they usually tend to look like us. So, they're easier to empathize with on that level or to be seduced by. We're not seeing tentacles or anything that's too confrontational, certainly not early on anyway. There is that seductive element and I think that that makes it easier for us to either be seduced by it or indeed to empathize with it on some level—they are driven by very human emotions (love, lust, greed, fear, power, etc.). It depends of course on how far-reaching their transgression is because if you start killing children and puppies on screen no one's going to empathize with you no matter what you look like. So, there is a certain element of the seductive charm and being able to draw you in as a viewer, but in terms of seeing what they're like up close or, you know, in texts like *What We Do in the Shadows* we kind of still want to be like them. Maybe it's not falling in love with them so much as we are led to consider, "that looks like tremendously good fun to have those kinds of powers, that kind of disregard for human nonsense that rules our lives, the proprietary boundaries of rules that govern our behavior," and that limiting sense of having to give in to social expectations… they don't have that and that's a very freeing thing. We see this as a sort of a sense of gaining a new form of freedom, because what are the consequences, really, when you're immortal? I think that's the secret element we enjoy, and some monsters give it to us more than others or they represent those possibilities more than others.

LAT: The fact that it plays morally with how we would actually like to just be able to kill someone because we are vampires and we have that type of freedom.

SNF: Yeah, it's a frightening question to us. This has been answered to a certain extent already in horror cinema, when you think of something like *The Purge* films, for example. It delves into this idea that even if murder was legalized for 12 hours in a year… how many people would actually do it? I think a lot of people would if they thought they could get away with that. I think that's quite frightening how far-reaching that desire may be.

Mónica Fernández Jiménez: I'm thinking of the European tradition of the vampire transplanted into the American hemisphere, as one of the most famous works about vampires, *Dracula*, has been analyzed under this idea of the return of the colonized. So, I was wondering if there's something like this related to vampires or all the kinds of monsters in the context of the American hemisphere, related to this sense with the European entrance into the Americas. Are there any sort of anxieties in any American works dealing with the return of the repressed? Or the early colonization of the American hemisphere, anything of that sort that you can think about?

SNF: I think that there are two ways to look at it… one way is that, you know, looking at *Dracula* the novel for a moment and seeing it as it's written by an Irishman moving to England at a time when Ireland is under the rule of the British Empire. At the same time, the novel is published during a profound period of cultural change and innovation alongside a renewed push for Irish freedom, which is eventually secured. So, we have the Anglo-Irish context that you can definitely read into the novel *Dracula* because Stoker didn't go anywhere near Transylvania… so this novel is a superimposed reading onto another national context. Concerning the Americas, though, what's interesting is that *Dracula* as a text migrates to the United States through Stoker's play and film adaptations, so it's really through German expressionism, through *Nosferatu.* So, it goes in through the arts and this is something that happens with several artists escaping persecution in Europe, creative minds that brought their stories with them to the United States and informed the American cultural experience of the United States.

The return of the repressed often erupts in vampire stories as powerful vampires often originate elsewhere, and wreak havoc as immigrants in the American heartland—it enables the US to tackle ideas about having porous boundaries and borders while also addressing the fact that America is a nation founded on immigration. Films such as *Cronos* deal directly with Mexico's Spanish history and then contemporizes its Dracula/Frankenstein tale as a cross-border conflict with the United States while examining the supernatural origin of its vampirism as part of colonial expansions, first from Spain and then the neo-American colonialism expressed through corporate power. We have this tension going on in the American imaginary between the supernatural that shouldn't exist and then, at the same time, the rational doesn't go far enough to explain what's happening. This tension is there, but the vampire tends to wander in through cultural reproduction and film devices to articulate the unsayable and to address the horrors of anxiety about the past and its eruption in the present. So I see it as assimilation into the American melting pot, which includes the history of European culture and different European forms of art, stories and colonial history. But usually, the vampire stands in for something that does need to be addressed and excised from the national imaginary (representing that which is deemed unacceptable and must be abjected), then it slowly finds its way back in… then we start to sympathize with the vampires and start to hate the rules that we live under, again around the 1970s, because we realize those who rule us are corrupt. This is how we change that shift and we start to believe in the vampires' narrative and subjective account more than we believe in the American president.

Sara González: My question was more along the lines of what Laura asked before, sorry to make you switch topics back and forth like this. I was wondering, maybe not as much in a gothic line, but I was wondering what you thought about this shift that we've been seeing lately in these romance stories featuring monsters other than the vampire. So for example I was thinking about *The Shape of Water*, or also in some video games that you romance perhaps aliens or even zombies, other creatures like this. I was wondering what you thought about

that and if you think this also goes kind of along the lines of this sort of fantasy that you mentioned before, or if you think it works differently because the monster is also different?

SNF: We can kind of push vampires to one side for a second because I think they have their own internal rules and logic, and they do tend to look a bit like us. I think in terms of other creatures it's more about empathy, isn't it? It's more to do with the idea of emotionally connecting with the character, I mean, certainly in *The Shape of Water* it's about empathy and suffering and being silenced. In the case of the creature, it's the fact that it's something to be captured and studied and to be treated with cruelty rather than to be empathized with… something that's human and lost so, again, the human impulse on the audience is to empathize with that. To me, it's about finding a shared or a kindred spirit, even if that necessarily is not of the same species as you. There is a sort of love and I suppose the love is more of a found and shared understanding. Only a couple of weeks ago I was teaching *Aliens* and you know, the alien queen to me is the most incredible, beautiful, gorgeous creature on the screen. I mean it just because she represents a sort of a matriarchal power that, in your most fiery feminist self, want to see on screen. In that sense, she is considered archaic and monstrous, but to me onscreen she is beautiful because I want to understand and promote that sense of feminist power. So, that's more aligned with the idea of the ideological drive. Again, like all cultural readings, it shifts from text to text, but I can see what you mean…, I always think zombies are a bit troubling because they are us rendered nightmarishly abject, whereas the alien queen never looks like anything other than what she is—she's the queen of the species! The vampire is very clean and closed off, they don't tend to putrefy or anything, they tend to heal immediately (or die quickly and horribly). But zombies once they start to putrefy and fall apart and we get beyond the comedic point at which they fall apart, there is something troubling about it because we are confronted with the image of abject death. Was there an example you had in mind?

SG: Maybe—when I mentioned the zombie—I was thinking about *Warm Bodies*.

SNF: Yeah, it was kind of like a *Twilight* sort of a thing but it featured a zombie instead of a vampire, he is so beautiful, he does not change throughout the movie at all. There was a chewing gum commercial, I don't know if this came out in Europe but I remember it was huge in Ireland and in the UK in which the gothic aesthetics of the vampire and the zombie were mixed up—you'd kiss the zombie guy/girl after they have had a breath-freshening chewing gum because they are still gorgeous—so undeath is aestheticized as something that can linger on and be infused with capitalist and sexualised impulses quite openly. But then that shifts again when you think of *Walking Dead*, it's very abject and very cruel in some respects… but I think something like *Warm Bodies* and *Twilight*, they render undeath it a lot safer than a lot of the texts do.

Mónica García Morgado: I remember that when I was 16 and I was watching *Twilight* or read the books and then *The Vampire Diaries*, I always felt a disgendered side of the narrative, seeing female vampires being concerned with motherhood instead of men. Is that changing at present or do you feel it's still maintained? I'm thinking of *The Vampire Diaries* for example, when Caroline is transformed into a vampire she thinks about motherhood, something she desires and she thinks she will never attain and at the end of the story, well, she becomes pregnant but it's not really a biological pregnancy. Is that still something present in contemporary narratives, this is concerned with motherhood or is it changing?

SNF: That's really interesting. I'm thinking again of *What We Do in the Shadows* where we have a baby vampire but not the idea of caring for it. It's more just that you're spreading the influence or spreading the vampiric power to somebody else, but you're not necessarily taking on the role of motherhood so you're creating but not caring for your progeny. The other problem as well—and this is something I have to say—is that I noticed a lot of vampire texts are associated with and focus predominantly on male voices and male experiences. It was only after I had completed the study did I fully realize there weren't that many female vampires that articulated any overt political thrust in this study I did. Female vampires and reproduction depend entirely on where they source their power. If you look at something like *The Hunger* it's about the idea of outliving your spouse or your sexual partner and continuing on your lineage without them. High-society vampires are typically very solitary, and they're not looking to necessarily make more of anything because that threatens their sense of wealth and security. They like to have their own sense of using up someone else and moving on, especially in the case of *The Hunger*. I don't think making vampires, making babies, and the reproductive cycle of vampires is always consistent… a lot of them seem to mourn the loss of being able to make a child when they're turned as the process of being transformed into a vampire is largely concerned with death and fearing one's own end. I haven't seen much in the way of vampire women longing for babies outside of a particular text or two. I know, for instance, if you forgive me as it's not a direct source for vampire progeny, but I remember the thing that kind of struck me the most was if you got to the very end of *True Blood*. The very last shot of *True Blood* in the TV series was when Sookie is seen with an unknown person whom we never know and she is heavily pregnant. So, the idea is that all this sex with undead bodies that she thoroughly enjoys for the seven seasons of the show, it's ultimately a dead end and reproductively null and void. There's no human life, no vitality in those relationships (beyond her own sexual awakening), so for her to have some sort of human future, the show positions it so that she has to be with what we assume is a human man. Vampire reproduction can be seen as a perpetuation of a more capitalism, more need, more procreation and hunger. Is there another example you have in mind or are there any other examples you can share with me?

MGM: *The Vampire Diaries* case I find it quite interesting because motherhood is constantly appearing for the female characters. Besides Caroline, there is Hayley, she's a vampire and she only becomes pregnant because she's also half a werewolf, so she can be a biological

mother. I know there's a new series now called *Legacies* about the baby that is now grown up I was just wondering that because when I was 16 I was always getting these messages somehow about how women have to be upset about not having the option of becoming mothers. That was mainly the root of my question if it is changing or not.

SNF: You've made me think of it differently—some male vampires are desperate to have progeny, but they can't find a way for it to work. And there are loads of examples of this but one of the ones that I think is very interesting is Poppy Brite's *Lost Souls* novel where sex with a vampire and a human woman results in just the most horrific destruction of the female body. So, there is this sense of vampire progeny cannot be borne by humans because it destroys them. And again we saw that in *Twilight* didn't we? So, we have that kind of sense of monstrous pregnancy, monstrous reproduction. But then also going back to the vampire romance for a moment, in the 1970s we have this reclamation of the female body and reproductive rights… we have the pill of course in the 1960s and of course, its use being normalized… and then we have Roe vs Wade in the early 1970s in the United States, you tend to find that it is more focused on bodily and sexual autonomy. You can just have sex and enjoy yourself. There's this idea of liberation from the role of motherhood and that becomes a choice rather than a potential trap for some people. So, it does enable female liberation too.

MGM: The impression is that male vampires want a legacy, right? They want a continuation of their power but in these teenage-focused narratives, I feel like women are not as concerned about legacy or the continuation of their names, but rather the private individual motherhood.

Taryn Tavener-Smith: Would you mind providing your insight into the move towards metaphoric vampires who do not drink blood, for example, but who are parasitic in other ways? I'm thinking in particular about David Mitchell's *Slade House* vampires, who drank victims' souls to maintain immortality.

SNF: I confess I have not read *Slade House* yet, and it has been on my list for some time! Some vampires do consume other things other than blood. One of the most interesting metaphorical ones I have come across in recent years—and there was a good film adaptation of it actually—was the sequel to *The Shining*. The book, *Doctor Sleep*, looks at the idea of evaporated souls that you are consuming the souls of children in pain. This idea of being able to torture the soul out of a small child and then this older group of people can literally inhale this life force… and this is how they live, it's a really interesting update on it. It's most certainly back to that vampiric narrative and it kind of combines elements of *The Shining*, the previous novel, but at the same time you have little elements of *Salem's Lot* coming out from King's other work. So, it brings it together in a way where you eat souls and consume things other than blood to maintain your immortality. That is something that I think is quite exciting, especially when we think of drinking blood as something central to vampirism. It's nice when you see a little bit of difference, I have to say, and I like the idea of metaphorical vampires in the sense that

you have energy vampires—Colin Robinson for instance and *What We Do in the Shadows*—who leave you depleted or robbing your vitality from you, and we have all met people like that, haven't we? So, you know, there are lovely ways that it works itself out beyond the literalization of blood-drinking; for example, there are other vampires that drink tears in African lore, or that drink away sickness in Asian culture. So, we have the sense of vampires exist and morph and change with the cultures they inhabit, but they do move beyond drinking blood alone. There is repeated anxiety around blood and bodily fluids (whether they are consumed or are considered scarce and dry up) when it comes to vampires—your bodily fluids are integral to your existence as a human and yet, in our gothic folklore, it can also sustain something else in an immortal fashion. It's a deliciously abject note to end on!

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African American Gothic and Horror Fiction

An Interview with Maisha Wester

Paula Barba Guerrero[1]
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Maisha Wester is an Associate Professor in American Studies at Indiana University. She is also a British Academy Global Professor, hosted at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on racial discourses in Gothic fiction and Horror film, as well as appropriations of Gothic and Horror tropes in sociopolitical discourses of race. Her essays include "Gothic in and as Racial Discourse" (2014), "Et Tu Victor?: Interrogating the Master's Responsibility to—and Betrayal of—the Slave in *Frankenstein*" (2020) and "Re-Scripting Blaxploitation Horror: *Ganja and Hess*'s Gothic Implications" (2018). She is author of *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (2012) and co-editor of *Twenty-first Century Gothic* (2019).

Keywords: African American Gothic, horror, Black bodies, race politics, ghosts, interview.

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Paula Barba Guerrero: In your article "The Gothic and the Politics of Race" (2014), you explain that the popularity of the gothic genre is, in part, because of its function "as a discourse on the terrors of racial otherness and racial encounter" (157). Specifically, you argue that gothic novels operate at different levels, sometimes producing discourses of racial otherness that serve to "shore up the normative" (157), but, other times, countering those hegemonic views via their depiction of horror (168). Could you perhaps comment on the uses of Gothic Horror with regards to race politics, especially considering the treatment given by law enforcement to both Black Lives Matters' protestors and, more recently, to Capitol rioters in 2021?

Maisha Wester: I think you actually provided the best example of how Gothic Horror has really impacted racial politics and the treatment of racial minorities in the Black Lives Matter movement, where people were peacefully protesting and officers showed up fully armed to the tooth and dressed as if they were entering war territory in contrast to the capital rioters who were clearly armed and prepared to take hostages and who were escorted into the capital by far less equipped police officers, and so there is a clear sense of how not just African Americans, but even those who are fighting for the rights of African Americans are read as not just disruptive but as violent, aggressive, hostile, monstrous as it were. But this is not the first time we have seen this; for instance, we also saw this back in the 1960s, with social groups like the Black Panthers and the "snicks", the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)— the name stresses non-violence—, and yet they were deemed terrorists, which is, in America in particular, a very pertinent and impactful kind of monstrosity. Meanwhile you had explicitly violent white nationalist groups like the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) going around lynching people left and right, even attacking white Americans who sided with African Americans, and they were not termed terrorists. There still is resistance to terming them terrorists. So, historically, this kind of inequity and the ways in which the idea of Black monstrosity leads to it, even if it is not spoken, is so inherently a part of our ideology that it produces a profound disparity in treatment. And, thus, by the time we start thinking about individual Black subjects, we can look at the kind of Jim Crow violence and lynching that African Americans were subject to. African Americans could not pursue any kind of judicial recourse for the violence they suffered. Instead, it was deemed justified. But, what kind of person do you have to be to justify such an egregious and excessive assault on the body? When we talk about lynching we are not just talking about murder, we are talking about, usually, torture, murder, dismemberment, occasionally a bonfire. That suggests a level of monstrosity, because if you think about your stereotypical horror monster, you cannot just kill them once; you do not just stab Michael Myers and call it done; you do not just set Freddy on fire and be gone; you have to subject them to a process of torture and assault. So, to see African Americans subject to this suggests a similar kind of thought process. And I talked about this in terms of Jim Crow, but we should consider the ways in which contemporary assaults on Black bodies by law enforcement and by private citizens are a continuation of that lynching ideology and treatment. What Ahmaud Arbery went through in Georgia is just mind-boggling. And, so, yes, what we are seeing today in terms of race politics utterly exemplifies the ways in which we have been unable to think of minorities, particularly African Americans for this discussion, but minorities in general, as more than Other, as monster looming at the margins waiting to gain access.

PBG: Considering how these events show us where we stand in terms of racial justice and, as you just mentioned, how contemporary racial politics are partly impacted by some dismissive gothic conventions and negative stereotypes of traditional Gothic Horror, one could easily jump to conclusions and assume that the genre is not a suitable medium to call for intervention

and revision of our social performance. Yet, in the aforementioned article, you warn us against these simplistic assumptions, upholding the impact of the African American Gothic. You explain that whereas traditional gothic fiction imposes racial demands on those deemed Other—often turning them into monsters—, the African American Gothic articulates terror and, broadly, gothic tropes as counter-discourses, calling for a revision of the genre (168-170). Examples of this could be Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), novels that illustrate the ambivalence and horrors of being Black in the US. Yet, you also mention writings by Richard Wright or Alice Walker, *Native Son* (1940) and *Meridian* (1976), which some may not recognize as purely gothic. Could you elaborate on these genre revisions and their overall impact on minorities' representation; on the ways in which the genre and its most traditional tropes are reworked in some of these and other contemporary novels by African American authors to vindicate a historically discriminatory treatment?

MW: We can go all the way back to the slave narratives with this, as I do in *African American Gothic*, but these early authors really use gothic tropes, stylistic tropes, in a genre that otherwise might have been considered literary realism. So, for instance, if we look at your average plantation master overseer or slave catcher in the slave narratives, we have a kind of nightmarish villainy, a villainy that seems omnipresent and omnipowerful. It is just inconceivable how much authority they have to disrupt your life, how much control and power they have over you as an individual. You will also see the use of closed dark spaces. So, for instance, in much of Bigger's flight through Chicago (even though it occurs across the cityscape) he emphasizes the darkness and the cloistered nature of the city; that it is not the space that is contained, not in terms of actual structures, but because of surveillance. But you also see this again in Ann Petry, in which her home, her apartment becomes a gothic-like maze. It is super dark, the hallways are narrow and dim, and she is easily captured there and cornered there by any man that would assail her. You also see endless escape capture cycles in these texts. So, it is on the one hand kind of literary realism, but when you look at the tropings, it is also a gothic nightmare. It does not depend upon the supernatural. And to some extent, even if you look at *Get Out* (2017), a film as recent as this, there is a similar sense of realism to that film. What is unrealistic, or seemingly unrealistic given the times we are in, is the excessive nature of that violence. The medical procedure they use is excessive, but not impossible. This is very possible to some extent. So, then, these early writers were in many ways talking about the ways in which horror is based on reality. They are simply taking what was subtextual in the genre and making it textual, and saying "no, we do not have to add a layer in order to make this terrifying, the reality itself is terrifying."

Later writers, like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, use more traditional gothic tropings, but not as the point of horror. So, if you look at Walker and Morrison, they have hauntings, they have people that suffer madness—well, the violence of rape is not just gothic, that is unfortunately and historically real and contemporarily real—, but these traditional supernatural trappings really provide more of a contrast to the horrors of real life. They act as a

measuring ruler to stack up what is happening in reality. One of my favorite points about much of Morrison's work is to call out how often ghosts appear in her stories and we do not pay attention because the reality she is depicting is so much more disrupting and terrifying that the ghost is. It is just kind of not bothersome, the least of our concerns. By the time you get to later writers like P. Djèlí Clark, who is author of *Ring Shout* (2020), Tananarive Due, or Matt Ruff, you find that they all embrace the notions of the supernatural terror as a source of fear. But, really, even here the supernatural communicates what is equally illogical and incomprehensible in real life, like the degree of the power and protection which white privilege grants. There was nothing like watching the white police officers in *Lovecraft Country* (2020) and thinking, well, no, that is just the workings of white privilege, and it does really seem like there must be some magic to make that degree of protection possible. But this takes us back to the Capitol Hill Riots, which was surreal in and out of itself. And, so, watching that was a gothic moment for me as a person of color thinking "how in the world do you have that much power? Are you one of those magicians from *Lovecraft Country* that you managed to make it to the state of Florida unmolested and are now left free walking about the country, though you try to kidnap statesmen?" So really the supernatural just makes manifest what is already illogical and bizarre in our actual world. Because, in some ways, to think about the kind of violence which the KKK is capable of, you have to wonder if they are not some sort of supernatural beast to be able to do that. And, so, these authors make that leap because it is what we were already wondering.

PBG: To expand on this idea of the supernatural as a genuine representation of historical horror, I would like to discuss the ways in which the gothic genre can confront racism and reclaim historical experiences while correcting its own complicity in some racial institutions. I am thinking, for instance, of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), which adapts gothic tropes and introduces them literally—in the form of a speculative, literalized underground railroad—to retell the history of slavery through the eyes of Cora, the protagonist. In this sense, I wonder if gothic and horror fiction can also reverse tropes traditionally ascribed to racialized bodies, which have consistently defined Black individuals as threatening and feared monsters. You explore this in your book *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (2012), as well as in the aforementioned article (2014), where you speak of the "fear of racial others" and the fear of losing the integrity of the white body both literally and figuratively: as the protagonist's corporeality that is sexually threatened in, say, *Frankenstein* (1818), and also as the State that becomes allegorically *contaminated* by othered bodies, as is the case of some contemporary horror films and shows where racial bodies are portrayed as supernatural parasites—zombies, for example. In your work, you explain that this correlation is the result of the adoption of some gothic traditions by contemporary horror fiction (*African American Gothic* 168; "The Gothic and the Politics of Race" 1-32), offering a chronology of debts and inheritances that explains the continuation of xenophobic discourses in both genres. In which

ways is the representation of the racialized body relevant for the revision of the US gothic tradition and of horror fiction? Why the body? And how can it be reclaimed as a site of vindication?

MW: Well, because the body is the primary site which we understand as impenetrable. We assume there is a degree of unassailability about the body. It is definite borders. There is clearly what is inside and what is outside, and we choose what to let that is outside into the body. It is our primary point of power, of maintaining borders. And, thus, any assault on the body then really threatens our sense of power and control over other borders in the world, such as for instance the home, the domestic space. We also like to assume we have a degree of authority over who comes in and who comes out of that border. It is not permeable. And, yet, what the Gothic does time and time again is remind us of the permeability of bodies, borders, and boundaries. The question then is when should those boundaries be disrupted and permeated? And, to some extent, I think, when we think about minority Gothic, the horror is on insisting upon the rigid boundary and the rigid border; of saying that there is always going to be an Other; that there must necessarily be a place of population that cannot access the norm, the center; that there must always be an inviable body that we do not accept; and that this is natural. And, so, it is that notion of "the natural" that, I think, especially minority authors become concerned with, because in talking about the nation as a body, you may wonder to what extent won't you go to in order to protect its boundaries, its borders. Because, if the nation is a body, then, it should not be readily entered into. You should have ability to invite and reject, instead of thinking of the body as something which is ultimately permeable. I mean, we are living in the time in which bodies are clearly permeable and it is a source of horror, but there are times in which that boundary must be breached. This is what ideology is. And so, for minorities, that resistance to permeability becomes a source of terror because we are not just saying "well, there are clearly contagions that will destroy," but there are also different ideas which now we want to read as contagions; ideas that are disruptive. There are different cultures and populations which we are going to now read as disruptive and contagious because they can destroy.

So, if we look at, for instance, the work that *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) does—and I would like to read the original *Birth of a Nation* as a horror film—, we see that it was a horror film for white audiences up to a point where the Klan enters and then, suddenly, it stops being a horror film, and becomes just a horror film for Black folk. But part of the reason it was a horror film was because of this idea of bodily permeability taken to a national level. The body, the national body, was in trouble at the beginning of that film. What did we need to do? We needed to cleanse it of its minority contaminants, we need to exile them, essentially attack them, have our white cells attack them and re-marginalize them into an oppressed position. And so that was a film that very much also played with the notion of the literal body and the national body. What you see happening in the film, literal bodies are constantly under attack in the states of disrepair, in states of illegibility. And this is what made especially those bodies

which were eligible horrifying. And, so, we needed again to fix our borders. This, I think, is one of the reasons why the body is so significant, especially when we think about the racial Gothic. Not to mention the ways in which the body is our primary signifier of racial difference, the reason why we say "oh, well, we're going to arrest you and beat you on the way to arresting you" or "yeah, sure, you're going to kidnap a couple politicians, no biggie."

PBG: Speaking of racial boundaries, what about immaterial bodies, like those of ghosts? Disembodied, racialized specters are not a definite border either. They are permeable and liminal but can also claim and occupy space. They are haunted and haunting. You tackle this ambivalence in another article entitled "Haunting and Haunted Queerness" (2007), where you argue that there is a connection between the need for boundaries and containment, and the processes of cultural identity formation and memory retrieval. You claim that in novels such as *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), the grotesque is embodied as a haunting mechanism that allows Horace—the protagonist—to re-appear as a specter, forcing his community to overcome ostracizing ideologies (1051). Similarly, Morrison's *Beloved* introduces the ghost as a figurative representation of the haunting memories of slavery. In a way, then, the haunting specter breaks taboos and opens difficult yet much-needed conversations. It functions as a legitimizing and reparative force. Nonetheless, spectral and monstrous presences in contemporary horror films often vilify the Other, introducing them as violent and deadly, led by a desire to transgress boundaries and take control of space. This is conspicuous in films such as *JD's Revenge* (1976), *Candyman* (1992) or *The Amityville Horror* (2005), where the racial Other is depicted as an evil specter capable of possessing bodies and occupying intimate space; a ghoul that needs to be hunted down. This could also be true of *The House Invictus* (2019), where the spectral qualities of the ghost are transferred to the house and its inhabitants that restrain the protagonists' movement and force them to mercilessly confront a deadly history. In these films, the specter haunts and is also h(a)unted. So, focusing on the h(a)unting/haunted dyad that the spectral body seems to bring forward, would you share your thoughts on gothic specters in contemporary gothic and horror fiction? In which ways does the spectral body correct or bolster official narratives, histories, and ideologies? Which boundaries does the ghost trespass? And how does it differ from the supernatural materiality of the monstrous body that we have discussed before?

MW: I think, especially in terms of their place in history and culture and the absence they might signify, that what these spectral bodies are really showing us are the ways in which we are still unable to confront our history. And, so, in a lot of cases the ghost also becomes an aspect, a component of the monster. So, for instance, the best example I have of this is *The Amityville Horror*, where you have these Native American ghosts haunting the place and they are a product of this supreme villain and haunter Jeremiah Ketcham. Even though they are his victims, they still are a component in his monstrosity and in the horror of the location and so what we see about these girls is that they are not figures of sympathy or empathy, they're

figures of terror. Why? Because they are reminding us of a history that we really do not want to think about, and that we are still not ready to think about. And, in that case, it just really points to America's difficulty with dealing with history. But I cannot just say it is America. We see it in the UK, we see it in a lot of Western countries. This inability to grapple with the villainy they committed in order to achieve their current position, to say that our leaders were both virtuous—they did some really good things—and then they did some really awful things to get us here. How do we resolve that? And, then, how do we address those that have been the victims of our previous villainy? And, so, the ghost, then, even when it is a victim, also becomes a point of terror, especially when it is the ghost of a racialized body. Another example of this is *The Skeleton Key* (2005), a movie I have been hating on for a long time, partly because of what the director said in the extras about presenting the story of the lynching of two of the Black characters, who are the primary ghosts in the story. Again, the entire horror stems from the fact that they will not let the history of their crime go, that they insist that we remember and deal with it. That is one of the problems with them. But he terms their lynching a "small crime" and I do not know how you look at any lynching and think of it as a small crime, considering its components. But that really just alludes to the ways in which we are not ready, or perhaps do not want, to deal with history and recognize it in its full ugliness and its murkiness.

At the same time, when we think about minority films, the ghosts are also a way of refusing silence and subjugation. They are that memory that says "hey, hey, nah, nah, we're not cool, don't think we're all progressive, don't even think about calling us post-racial or color-blind society. We still got some stuff that you refuse to talk about much less recognized. We can't get to a point of equality until you recognize the previous sins and begin to atone for them, because until you recognize them, you are going to keep doing them in different ways." And, so, the ghost is a memory that reminds us that we have some stuff that needs fixing. We got some reparations to make—and I say reparations not in terms of payment, but in terms of fixing systems. So, I think, this is what *The House Invictus* is really doing as well because it is talking about the ways in which—and again this is drawing back to about your previous question about the body—it is not just a house as a haunted space, but the body as a haunted space. Because that film is about the ways in which a group of, in the film, Black men but, in general, African Americans are haunted, have been contaminated by this white supremacist ideology, which makes intra-racial oppression possible, so that we do to each other what races have done to us historically for generations. So, then, now what we are seeing are the ways in which the individual becomes haunted. It seems to be in a haunted house, but ultimately it is about what is going on in that person's mind from the get-go. But the haunting can also be a way to disrupt, to say that there are other ways of thinking about and experiencing history. So, if you look at a book like Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata* (1998), we see that her haunting allows her access to history in a way that those who are not haunted do not have access. Haunting, then, is not a point of terror. It is just a point of difference. And the problem, the source of terror, is that

other people refuse to accept her ability to embody and re-experience that history in ways that they cannot and insist that history needs to stay dead and gone, not something that we continue to contend with. So, the notion of the ghost really is complex. It can be really radical and revolutionary in its potential, but it really depends on how you use it.

PBG: Haunted houses, ghosts, monsters, all these representations of the Gothic across media that we have been discussing suggest that there is plenty of room for new horror figurations dealing with those historical events that continue to be unspoken. They attest to the fact that the gothic genre is all-encompassing; that it allows us to consider plenty of situations, experiences, and stories from a different lens. So, in your view, what is the future of the genre and of its depiction of these racial politics of otherness? Where do you see the future of the African American Gothic compared to that of more traditional Gothic fiction?

MW: I definitely see African American and ethno-Gothic in general are becoming far more popular. You are going to see more series like *Lovecraft Country* (2020). In fact, *Them* (2021-) comes out today. You are going to see more Black graphic horror novels, such as John Jennings's *Box of Bones* (2018), as well as voodoo culture. You are also going to see more blending of Gothic and other genres, like music and Afrofuturism. So, most of us are really familiar with Childish Gambino's amazing video "This Is America" (2018), which is highly gothic in its depictions. Less well known but equally gothic is "Bonfire" (2011), in which he is actually positioned as a ghost, re-experiencing his own lynching, but experiencing it as a narrative of entertainment for later campers. But, then, you are going to see more musical genres, I think, incorporating the Gothic. You are going to see more songs like Clipping's "The Deep" (2017), which is a blend of Gothic and Afrofuturism. It is gothic from a Lovecraft point of view, so you belong to some ancient, underwater society and you are coming back to stage a much-needed war on the surface dwellers. That is terrifying if you are not on the right side, but it is still necessary. So, who is the monster here? You are going to see a lot more, I think, in terms of Afrofuturist Gothic. Afrofuturism has long held a gothic component thanks to authors like Octavia Butler, but I think we are going to see more authors like Nalo Hopkinson, Linda Addison, and Chase Burke coming to the forefront. I think we are going to see more independent Black horror thanks to new technological access by folks like Uche Aguh, the director and writer of *The House Invictus*, but there is also Mariama Diallo, who created this amazing hilarious short horror film called *Hair Wolf* (2018), of interest to those working on the politics of appropriation and gentrification. There is also Frances Bodomo, who is another short film director, of *Everybody Dies!* (2016). So, I think you are going to see more independent Black horror and, hopefully, more non-minority writers, like Matt Ruff, trying to correct the racial dynamics in the genre. You will see them moving away from the likes of Lovecraft and Stephen King, to a more corrective Gothic, a more corrective vision of what it means to be American, not just white American.

Open Q&A session

Paul Mitchell: I just want to pick up when you mentioned a couple of things that I am really keen on myself: *Get Out*, the movie, which I just think is one of the greatest movies made in the US ever, and Childish Gambino's video "This Is America." I just wanted to talk to you about those two. I do not know if you have come across the work of Sheri-Marie Harrison, who has talked about the "New Black Gothic" (2018)—I think she works in Missouri— and, basically, she sort of said something really interesting which I just wanted you to respond to: she sort of says that there is a kind of interesting new weapon in the New Black Gothic which is humor, and you just mentioned there at the end like a couple of examples, and I was just wondering your opinion on that, the use of humor actually as a weapon within the Gothic as a way of coming back and a way of subverting some of those gothic ideas.

MW: I think humor is actually really important in in terms of African American existence in general. So, for instance, the notion of "laughing keeps from crying" is one that has been long present African American tradition. It is best, perhaps, exemplified in Smokey Robinson & The Miracles' "Tears of a Clown" (1967), which is about the tradition of laughing at that which causes agony. I mean, in many ways and think of it as a gothic trope, but also as a real mechanism for surviving horror. It becomes a way of not letting horror destroy you at your soul; to be able to say that there are things here that are so ridiculous even as destructive as they are, you just have to laugh at it. It also becomes a way of intervening in the power of the supreme antagonist, the villain; and, if we think about this in terms of the ideology, of white dominance, especially in terms of the notion of differential treatment (that because of white privilege you get to be sir, always, and you get to be treated a certain way), then, of saying well, I am going to laugh at whiteness, because even as it is a point of destruction, it is stupid, it is ridiculous. This becomes a moment of seizing power, of saying you do not have complete agency over me, you do not have control over how I respond to you, you do not have such power that I can only quiver in terror, but I can choose to reject you and to call you out for what you are which is a silly child. I do not have to only react in ways that ultimately can reiterate your authority because, even in acting, responding solely in terror, we are still reiterating authority, it is just a violent authority. When we laugh at someone, we completely dismantle that authority. We say that you too can be critiqued and deserve critique. So, I think that historically laughter has a very real and significant point in African American community that is now being reintroduced to horror. There is a reason why it is only now just being reintroduced and that is because of how Blacks have historically been the comedic points in horror films. So, this is one of the problems with the *Scary Movie* films (2000-2013), that they reiterate that notion of Black death and violence to the Black body as a point of humor. But if you go back to these earlier 1930s, 1940s horror films, the point of relief from terror is always some excessively terrified Black body who is acting in comedic ways. And, so, there has been a hesitance to return to reintroduce comedy because of how fraught that relationship has been in horror previously.

Alissa Burger: You were talking about contagion and permeability of the body and, of course, we are all sort of wrapped up in this whole COVID-19 post-, and, of course, one of the things that I think we have all had to grapple with is that the response to it is not equitable at all. It is definitely having more significant impacts on marginalized populations and I know, for instance, that when my school went online, there were some students who had access to Internet and they were able to just keep on keeping on and other ones where it was a huge issue. We know that the availability of the vaccine is not equal across the world. And especially when we look at these things in parallel to other stuff that is going on racial justice-wise, other conversations that we are having—social justice conversations, political conversations—I think there is a really interesting, potentially gothic narrative moment, because there is not a lot of art being made right now. There is not a lot of filmmaking or television-making, so we are engaging with the gothic narrative maybe in real time, in real ways or different ways through news and coverage and those kinds of conversations, and I was just trying to figure out how might that sort of conversation fit with the contagion and the permeability and the parallel racial justice conversations.

MW: The horrors of COVID films always feels like "no, too soon. We are still in it. I just can't." But if you look at racial horror films, what we see is that there is not necessarily "too soon," especially when we think about minorities that have been under literal systemic and bodily attack. And, nonetheless, we see them producing horror films that are just about grappling with this issue, even as we are in the midst of it. And, so, I think we can actually learn from ethno-gothic films on how to grapple with something that feels too soon, but which needs grappling with, because you are absolutely right. And if we wait on dealing with the disparity in terms of access to the vaccines, in terms of access to important, now life-sustaining, technology, it is because only those in need of these technologies would put their lives in danger going out to seek human contact. If we do not start to grapple with that so this is a conversation, that is quickly going to go away. We are going to see it quickly disappear in the post-COVID celebrations because I cannot imagine how joyful it will be once we are like "oh, come, it's just a flu." We are very willing to focus on the good stuff and just completely forget any of that bad, that any of these problematic components existed, especially in the US. I think you are going to see it dealt with in terms of historic context because again this is not the first time African Americans have been lower on the totem pole when it comes to receiving treatment and having their lives saved through medical industry. I think you are going to see a complicated representation because, especially when we talk about Black hesitation to be vaccinated, there is also that awareness of how Blacks have been historically abused by the medical industry, how habitually this industry produces cures that ignore conditions that are prevalent in minority communities, like "oh, you have high blood pressure and diabetes, we kind of forgot to look for that while we were developing this. Sucks for you. You can't use this." So, you are going to see some commentary. I do not know if it will be in film. Actually, P. Djèlí Clark just came out with a short story called "Night Doctors" (2020), which literally deals with

the question of medical abuse of Black bodies historically. I think he is thinking about that within a COVID context: what does it mean to be a Black doctor and then how do you remedy this history of medical injustice towards the Black body as now a soul Black physician? What do you do? Do you just know it and go on do you provide differential treatment? Or do you enact vengeance? What do you do? I think we are going to see some interesting things coming out. I do not think Black filmmakers are going to be silent on this, and I know Spike Lee is looking to adapt one of Lovecraft's texts for a film coming up. Hopefully, he remedies his gender issues and hopefully he also thinks about what that narrative has to say about life mid pandemic for minorities.

Anna Marta Marini: As you were mentioning *Hair Wolf*, *Vampires VS. the Bronx* (2020) just came to my mind. And I was thinking, do you see renewed use of gothic tropes, like the vampire, in the production of Black popular culture that is also applied to issues such as gentrification? Most notably, there was a Black vampire and there were already some cases, but do you think that now it has been used to address some issues that are very current and impending?

MW: Well, on the one hand, it has already been used to address issues, and my best example of this is *Ganja and Hess*, which is a Black vampire film that does not ever use the word vampire, but it is entirely about the idea of social economic vampirism and the willingness to live as a capitalist essentially, which is to feed off the life of others, the labor of others. I think you are going to see more use and more turns to the supernatural and the notion of the monstrous. For quite a while, I think, depictions of monstrosity in Black horror were quite fraught because, again, when we call someone monster is to set them up for destruction and label them a figure for assaults. And there are so many ways in which African Americans have been consistently called monster throughout socio-political history. And, so, trying to figure out how to appropriate tropes of monstrosity without that consequence, how do you reclaim the monster from its damned place as a figure to be destroyed? I think we are seeing more of that coming out. In terms of thinking about how behavior informs monstrosity, the best example I can give is actually from Nalo Hopkinson's collection *Skin Folk* (2001). She has a short story that I love to talk about called "Greedy Choke Puppy" and it is the story of a *soucouyant*. But, while it seems to be the story of a single *soucouyant*, it turns out she is actually a descendant from a family in which all the women are *soucouyants*, including the grandmother who is there taking care of her now. So, clearly, they have managed to live and participate in community. What we discover in the story, though, is that what makes her a monster is not her difference, but her behavior, which is explicitly Western consumerist, privileging beauty ideals of youth and whiteness. That is what makes her a monster, not the fact that she is a *soucouyant*. So, by the end of this tale, her grandmother says to her "you know, the way to live, the way to do this is by loving others, loving your community, loving your grandmother, loving your work. Love is the answer." She was very Beatles "love is the answer." This practice of continuing to

consume that you have been told is what you are supposed to do, that you have been told is who you have been told you are, is not the truth. And, so, I think that we are not going to escape the notion of monstrosity. We cannot ignore it. It is a label that is going to follow us. How do we appropriate it? How do we twist it on its head? How do we show that difference is not monstrosity, that it is behavior that is monstrosity? Jewelle Gómez, author of *The Gilda Stories* (1991), is another excellent example of this. She has an amazing lesbian vampire, who is pretty much a vegetarian for a vampire. She is super humanistic in her vampirism, but she is encountering humans that are far more monstrous than she ever could be or imagine being. And, so, in that case, her vampirism is a way to estimate, like, look you have something that has literally been about being a monster in traditional Gothic and that is not the problem here. So, what do we make of the real problem? How horrifying is that? I sense that you are thinking a bit about Guillermo del Toro's *The Strain* (2009) because that is another excellent example where it is the behavior. Because you do have hybrid vampires that fight on the right. You also have humans that are horrible. One of the primary vampires in *The Strain* in particular used to be a Nazi general and so he was a monster, and, if I recall, in the book Setrakian notes that he was a monster before he ever became a vampire. So, I think you are seeing more emphasis on the behavior. Difference itself is not marked as the source of terror. Difference is just difference. We do not have to ascribe hierarchy or status to it. It is how you act—if you are normal, if you are mainstream, if you are the different, if you are the Other—, it is ultimately how you act that defines your monstrosity.

Laura Álvarez Trigo: I was thinking about the British movie *His House* (2020) almost all the time that you were speaking because many of the themes that you brought up connect to this idea of movies about these immigrants from South Sudan, if I am not mistaken, that immigrate to the UK and they are haunted by this demon/specter from their past. And I wanted to ask you if you could elaborate a bit on how these inspectors sometimes can represent their own identity—of this non-white people—when they immigrate to a white country, how did it represents their identity and they are haunted by it in the sense that they want to go back to their identity but also they want to keep it a little bit away maybe so they get integrated better or they are sort of passing in a sense. I was thinking also about *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), which also brings this idea of the passing with white Americans speaking, and there is also some horror in that movie. So, I was wondering about how that horror, the specter, and the hunting comes from this struggle between going to my identity and trying to keep away from it to fit better in the system.

MW: *His House* is wonderfully complex. It is not just about identity, it is also about the trauma: what do you do with the trauma it took to get here? It is an indictment of the social health system and the mental health system here, because clearly these are people that will obviously be suffering from PTSD. Why don't we get them immediate help when they arrive? There is so much to do with that film, so, I think, especially when we think about the creature that is

tracking them, it is a question that creates an embodiment both of gilts—because its promise is that if you let me have this body, I will return you, I will resurrect this lost person that you wronged grievously—and legacies—because it is also a question of what you bring with you, what you choose to bring with you and how you hold on to it. So, in terms of dealing with the ghosts of the young daughter that drowned, a question of "are you mourning? Are you melancholic?" arises. There is a real sense of the ghost illustrating the need to be a mourner for that culture which you have had to leave. That is not lost, but, in leaving it, you can still survive. Because one of the important elements of that film is that at one point the wife says: "well let's just go back," and it seems that maybe that is how terrible the horror is, how excessive the attacks are, and how ill-fit and unwelcome they feel here. But, at the same time, there is also this sense of "I have lost something integral to my bodily and spiritual integrity that I cannot exist without. And, having lost that, I am threatened with disintegration. I must reclaim it." So, it is very much also about moving through and learning what it means to mourn and let go without utterly losing. So, in some ways, the ghost is a lesson in the difference between the supposed threat of assimilation versus acculturation. You do not have to assimilate and entirely lose. You can remember where you came from. You can practice the food culture. You can speak the languages. You can acculturate, but you do not have to lose who you were in making this move. You do not literally have to shed your skin. And I am thinking of that scene where, offering himself up to the demon, he slits his forearm open so that you can see the tendons and nearly the bone. That, for me, suggests a sense of utter bodily loss. I implies that, in coming here, I am falling apart. This place is literally pulling me to pieces. But what is also pulling me to pieces is the memory of what I have suffered, what I have been through, and what I have done to get here. That movie is just a study in psychology and social services. Ultimately, it is the ways in which they are still nonetheless forced to reckon with this. They are trapped in this space. They are told that they cannot leave the house, which feels very COVID-like. But, the film is also alluding to the injustices of the society they have immigrated to, because now they have been told that they can only exist there, as contained subjects, ignored and left to their own monsters. There is a kind of supreme villainy there, for that as horrible as the demon is, there are witnesses that could intervene and who refuse to do so. For me, that becomes one of the supreme sources of villainy in the film, and it is a very passive-aggressive felony. I think that is, perhaps, one of the horrors, because: do you attack us with passive aggressive systemic institutionalized violence?

Elizabeth Abele: I was thinking about the figure of the ghost. You probably have many examples of this happening, but, in *The Shape of Water* (2017), you have at the forefront this mixed-race, mixed-species couple but, then, hidden in the subtext of the film is what was happening in Baltimore at this time. So, again, we find this otherness where race is very important to what is being talked about while it is not being explicitly talked about. Could you elaborate on the relevance of silences and absences?

MW: So, I think what you are seeing, especially when we think about *The Shape of Water* is a way to talk about how earlier films have guided us in rejecting otherness, any kind of otherness. I am seeing it as a supreme kind of alienation, but also, particularly about Guillermo del Toro, as the ways in which he also plays with notions of stereotypes to suggest that there might be some truth in the stereotype, but that it is more complex than what we reduce it down to. There is far more to it than it we can get in our little snippet. I think that he is also marking the ways in which we still fail to really fully contemplate even the place of the racial minority in history, their contributions in history, the ways they have always been historically present, contributing to American society—even as we are constantly vilifying and demonizing them. I think that what he is also doing in terms of thinking about racial history is teasing out the ways in which race produces violence among whiteness. One of the things we do not think about are the ways in which whiteness itself also suffers from this history of systemic racial oppression because of how it teaches individuals and systems to read bodies as objects, as disposable. We tend to think about it primarily in terms of race, but you can think of it—especially when you think about *The Shape of Water*—as status in terms of disability. Are you a different? I am thinking about the time when you would have had the eugenics' movement popping along, which would have said that she, as a mute person, does not get to have a job or a family, be gainfully employed, or entirely independent, because we do not want to reproduce this incorrect or broken whiteness. So, again, that idea of people who do not speak. I think he is calling out a large swath of whiteness that does not allow lower class, impoverished or imprisoned individuals to speak. You cannot speak if you are from the wrong gender or sexuality. Then, in what ways has this history of racial disenfranchisement produced you as an Other as well? Who is also been defined as less than suitable, less insufficient, child-like? So, that is a really interesting film to think about, but del Toro himself is just a really interesting figure to think about in terms of what it means to think about not just the minority within communities, within dominant American culture, but also what it means for dominant American culture to refuse and reject what we do and say. "If you do not utterly assimilate, you do not get to be one of us." What are we losing? What is at stake that we are not really thinking about or seeing at all?

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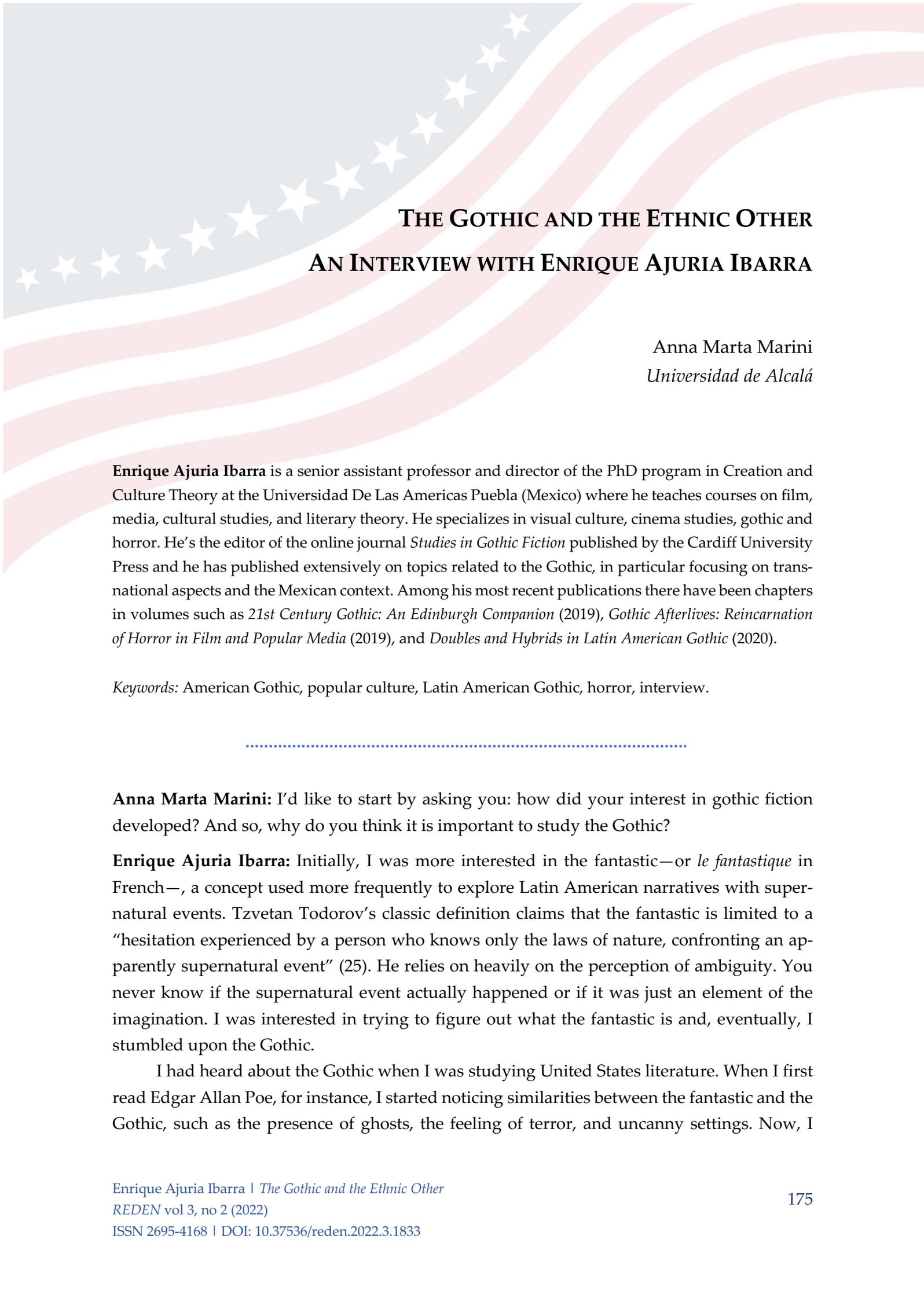
THE GOTHIC AND THE ETHNIC OTHER
AN INTERVIEW WITH ENRIQUE AJURIA IBARRA

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Anna Marta Marini: I'd like to start by asking you: how did your interest in gothic fiction developed? And so, why do you think it is important to study the Gothic?

Enrique Ajuria Ibarra: Initially, I was more interested in the fantastic—or *le fantastique* in French—, a concept used more frequently to explore Latin American narratives with supernatural events. Tzvetan Todorov's classic definition claims that the fantastic is limited to a "hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). He relies on heavily on the perception of ambiguity. You never know if the supernatural event actually happened or if it was just an element of the imagination. I was interested in trying to figure out what the fantastic is and, eventually, I stumbled upon the Gothic.

I had heard about the Gothic when I was studying United States literature. When I first read Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, I started noticing similarities between the fantastic and the Gothic, such as the presence of ghosts, the feeling of terror, and uncanny settings. Now, I

prefer to use the term fantasy from a psychoanalytical standpoint. Defined by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis as "the stage-setting of desire" (28), fantasy suggests a narrativization of desire impulsed by any form of expression that arises from the unconscious, and can thus admit anything supernatural, as an enticing wonder or as a revelatory terror. Fantasy allows me to navigate the Gothic and the fantastic, and additionally, helps me acknowledge magic realism too. What these three keywords specifically refer to in relation to the supernatural is very conflicting.

Magic realism has been the preferred term by Latin American scholars when addressing these specific narratives. Its literary origins can be traced to Latin America, but the term was first used to understand the tensions between reality and the imaginary in Post-Expressionist German painting (Parkinson Zamora and Faris 7). Magic realism is typically associated with the real marvelous, a term coined by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. He claims that faith in the marvelous is already inscribed in the cosmogonies that frame the perception of reality in Latin America (86-87). The American continent is in itself full of wonders that have been assimilated in everyday practices and beliefs. Therefore, any supernatural occurrence that could be perceived as supernatural does not elicit surprise or wonder in a Latin American person. In this sense, magic realism becomes the literary and artistic expression of a cultural sentiment. In her comparative analysis between the Gothic and magical realism, Lucie Armitt argues that Gothic experiences happen mostly at "the personal level," while magic realism encompasses "a broader cultural or national narrative" (231). In this sense, the former can be easily associated with the anxieties of the individual mind and the latter with the myths that conform the discourse of identity of a community. Nevertheless, Gothic can also be politically and socially engaged. It does not exclusively have to address the terrors of one single subject, but also of bigger social groups. If we incorporate elements of community trauma—which I have already written about on *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), directed by Guillermo del Toro—then the Gothic becomes an effective tool to address collective memory and social history, with "the insistent permanence of traumatic haunting" (Ajuria Ibarra, "Permanent Hauntings" 69).

In the Latin American cultural and historical context, it is important to establish a distinction between the fantastic and the Gothic. The revision of classic works of Latin American fiction through the Gothic lens can therefore be quite revelatory. For example, Juan Rulfo's classic Mexican novel *Pedro Páramo* can be perceived as magic realist or fantastic, due to its supernatural elements. When you look at it through a critical perspective focused on the Gothic, it reveals an obsession with the convoluted past of one single man, but that extends itself to a general historical and cultural *malaise* of the Mexican nation. The novel is about the dead speaking in a ghost town called Comala, and recurs to the gothic trope of the insistence of the past—or the past not letting go. The narrative questions the idea of the *caudillo*, an authoritarian man who rules a region or a country, and is sometimes a war veteran. The protagonist, Pedro Páramo, refuses to let go of his own obsessions, even after his death. His spectral

desire rules Comala, turning it into a town of ghosts. Whoever arrives is trapped there, suffocated by the weight of the past. The narrator, Juan Preciado, speaks of the lack of air due to the summer heat, paired with the strange meetings he has had with the townspeople during the night (117). The terror during this scene is derived from the oppressive environment and the pervasive feeling of death that looms over the place. The air feels heavy, and Juan Preciado dies of suffocation. I wonder how much of that heaviness in the air also has to do with the idea the ghost town. The past suffocates any living person who arrives to Comala. With an example like this, I can see how the Gothic has allowed me to think of other ways of understanding issues of identity and of our past history, particularly with Mexican works of fiction, mostly film and literature.

AMM: You have worked on the relationship between the Gothic and travel fiction, and the intrinsic crossing of borders and boundaries. Boundaries that can be both metaphorical and material. So, how is movement—according to you—a key element in the gothic texts that you've been analyzing?

EAI: Movement is essential to the Gothic. We often associate the term with entrapment and claustrophobia, expressed in specific settings, such as the haunted house or the medieval castle. Chris Baldick calls it "the Gothic effect," characterized by "a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space" (xix). Time comes back to creep up on you and it affects your own perception of reality, of your environment, of your own self, of your own identity. The effect is heightened if you feel trapped in an old and run-down building. However, it is worth noting that there is a strong relationship between the gothic romances from the late 18th and early 19th centuries and travel writing. For example, Ann Radcliffe, informs through travel how her characters perceive other environments, other countries, and other people. Her novels, such as *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* feature characters traveling across various regions in Southern Europe, contemplating valleys and mountain ranges and staying at medieval castles and ruined abbeys. Travel is an intrinsic part of the Gothic. Therefore, I see the Gothic as a confrontation between stasis and movement. You either have to get to the haunted castle, or the horrifying or threatening thing will come to get you.

We can also notice this in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Jonathan Harker travels to Transylvania, he gets eventually trapped in Dracula's castle, and then Dracula travels to Great Britain. Stasis and movement that can be easily associated with life and death, and the past, the present and the future. Travel also involves an activity where you move from one location to another during a specific range of time. Gothic makes use of this action to contrast it with moments of entrapment. Gothic fictions may feature a sense of being watched in an enclosed space, but also the idea of being followed. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the titular character is chasing his own creation across the Arctic Circle in his attempt to destroy it. The novel features several travel sequences, as Frankenstein himself pursues his own personal desires

or is harassed and followed by the creature in order to fulfil his promise to create a partner for him. In Frankenstein, movement is associated with paranoia, a persecution that is based the effects of scientific hubris.

Likewise, there are horror films in which travel and movement feature prominently. Directed by Victor Salva, the film *Jeepers Creepers* (2001) features the road as the main setting. The plot focuses on a brother and sister who are traveling across the country, and are suddenly attacked by a mysterious looking truck. Most of the action happens on the road, where a horrible creature wakes up every twenty-eight years to feed on the humans it hunts down here. The monstrous creeper survives on a repetitive cycle where human lives are being used up for nourishment. The film works with several spatial layers in terms of setting. The creature inhabits the basement of a church. The siblings decide to explore this church because they see the truck that was harassing them on the highway parked there. The brother climbs down to the basement and discovers the mummified past victims of the creeper laid out in a macabre tableau on the wall. The creature itself harks from a very ancient time, possibly a pre-recorded one, so it has no name. It is something unnamable, before our history. It hides underground, among the foundations of a building that symbolizes religion and faith. In this sense, how does the film narrative challenge the idea of faith when this ancient creature is there to consume you and devour you? If they had kept on moving all the time, if they had not stopped at the church to investigate where this creature came from, they would have reached the end of their journey and still been alive. Instead, they made stops along the way to ask for help, prompting the creeper to kill more people. The narrative development is focused on stasis and movement and stasis is clearly associated with the monstrous encounter, horror, and death.

Travel also helps us think about landscapes, how we configure them in fiction and what their purpose is in a narrative. Making a foreign land look exotic enough for the purposes of Gothic and horror is something I have already explored in the film *The Ruins* (2008), directed by Carter Smith. Here, a group of American tourists decide to explore a Mayan ruin off the beaten road, they end up trapped in the pyramid fighting off a flesh-eating plant that starts devouring them one by one. The film contrasts the safety of a beach resort with unexplored territory. While Scott Smith's novel of the same name is located in an abandoned mine, the film chooses to shift location by setting it in an area where the American tourists would feel mostly alienated. The people they come across in the rainforest speak Mayan only, so they are unable to understand each other. The characters end up isolated due to this lack of effective communication. The locals fail to get the message across, and the tourists never fully understand the real horror of the abandoned pyramid until they experience it in the flesh. In this case, the tropical setting, devoid of any inherent gothic characteristics, becomes gothicized through travel, movement and stasis to deliver a horrific experience of isolation, heatstroke, and being eaten alive by a plant (Ajuria Ibarra, "Gothic Re-Constructions" 134).

Travelers can also bring their own fears and their own assumptions about othering. This way, they can exoticize and "other" any place. They can fill it with their own fears and terrors.

It is what happens in *The Shining*, by Stephen King. Jack Torrance brings his own demons into the hotel, and they resurface when exposed to the evil nature of the Overlook Hotel. This is what elicits the horror in the novel. In this sense, the idea of movement represented with travel makes us think critically if a setting is inherently gothic or if characters bring their own gothic concerns into these locations. Furthermore, the gothicizing of a setting also discloses anxieties about the other. In *The Ruins*, the Gothic becomes part of the strategy for othering in this tourist nightmare. Nature is truly monstrous.

AMM: And I think this leads us to another question. Gothic fiction has also been used to delve into—as you were saying—transnational context and relations. So, how borderland—or south of the border—settings have been used to produce the US gothic narratives. How in film in particular there is this border-crossing theme for which the characters cross to danger, to the unknown, then maybe they—or at least some of them—will manage to go back home, to "civilization." So, how do you think this has been used in general in US gothic narratives?

EAI: There is an obvious relation between travel and borderlands. What you mention about the dangers of the unknown, and the idea of home as civilization, can be identified in certain works of American fiction. In Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, the main character known as the kid travels across the Texas region, New Mexico, and the borderlands with the US Army and later on with the Glanton gang. When the kid arrives with the army in Chihuahua, Northern Mexico, the Captain and his soldiers express very clearly how they view Mexicans. They see them as people who are not civilized, as people who are "behind" socially. The text describes the city of Chihuahua as this desolate place with very little evidence of prosperity. Based on their homeland, the army believes that their actions are rightful: "We are the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land," says Captain White (37). Throughout the narrative, characters cross the US–Mexico border most of the time without realizing it. The idea of othering is not defined by a visible line. Instead, people who travel away from home bring the other to unfamiliar locations.

Ray Bradbury's "The Next in Line" reveals the fear of being stuck forever in Mexico. An American couple are traveling through Mexico and they arrive to an unnamed town that resembles Guanajuato. Here, they visit the cemetery to see the mummies on display—and the woman is terrified. She is afraid of what would happen to her if she died and was left there, drying up and forgotten. She starts to get anxious about staying in the town while her husband is enjoying the picturesque place. Then, the car breaks down and they cannot leave. While her husband keeps feeling at ease with the locals, she isolates herself in their hotel room, feeling more anxious each day. She finds comfort in reading American magazines that she purchased at a fountain shop. Eventually, she dies of utter fear, but this fear is derived from the expectation and anxiety of being completely forgotten. In the end, she fades into darkness, constantly feeling suffocated. The following scene is just the husband driving alone on the Mexican countryside enjoying himself after the car has been fixed. Again, this short story deals with stasis

and movement: of vitality represented in movement, and the fear of being left behind, of not moving, of dying. It is suggested that she may have been interred in the town's cemetery and if the fees are overdue, she eventually would become a mummy, abandoned and on display.

A clearer example is the film *Borderland* (2007), directed by Zev Berman. The plot is loosely based on true events, the Matamoros killings that were done in the latter half of the 1980s by a drug lord called Adolfo Jesus Constanzo. The documentary on the making of the film provides footage of the border police interviews when they were investigating the murders. This required a cross-border collaboration because a lot of people were disappearing on both sides of the border. Constanzo developed a cult with elements of voodoo, palo mayombe, and some pre-Hispanic motifs as well. They began sacrificing people to obtain good luck and success with their drug trafficking. Many of the bodies were buried close to the border. When they were interrogated by the police, Constanzo's people acted very calmly, confirming without any shock that they had participated in sacrifices that also involved cannibalism and in the burials.

The documentary reveals this idea of demarcation that geographically points to the United States as the civilized and safe place. Here, there are rules that need to be followed. The fictional narrative acts as a warning: be aware of the country south of the border where there are no rules. The plot focuses on a group of American friends who decide to cross the border to Mexico in order to engage in activities they would not dare do in their home country, like drinking and having sex. The film displays a stark contrast between American and Mexican landscapes. The Mexican town they visit lacks effective law enforcement. Even though there is a police corps, officers are rarely seen on the streets and the characters notice no one does anything at the police department when they report one of their friends is missing. This friend has been kidnapped by the drug cartel, and his fate is to be sacrificed and to be consumed by the members of the cult. The main protagonist finds his friend's mutilated body and recurs to violence to survive. Everything happens in Mexico. The narrative suggests that, once you cross the border, you are not only in the land of the other, but you can other yourself too. The protagonist asks himself if he would be able to kill another human being, but, given the circumstances, he must kill to stay alive. The geographical demarcation—which is completely symbolic and political—does not distinguish one country from the other, but it does have an impact on our sense of national identity.

Borderland chooses to represent Mexico very specifically in terms of the production design. The shots are edited and tinted with very warm and rich colors, like gold and sepia, giving off a harsher and hotter climate. This is enhanced by high contrast illumination, suggesting a consistent dry, desert landscape across the land that ignores the various ecosystems within Mexico. A similar setting can be seen in previous horror films, such as Robert Rodríguez's vampire splatter-gore film *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996). In this film, two American serial killers kidnap a family and cross the border into Mexico. They spend the night at an (in)famous bar managed by blood thirsty vampires, and they struggle to come out alive. At

the very end of the film, there is a panoramic shot of what lies behind the bar: it appears to be a Mayan pyramid. This ancient structure delivers a gothic element to the film. Even though the two American serial killers are violent men who do atrocious things, there is something more violent, more ancient, and more horrific on the other side of the border. The characters become prey to this supernatural evil. As the characters are killed off by the vampires, they turn into vampires too, threatening their own kin and their own families. This horror does not happen in the United States.

AMM: I absolutely agree, I see there is a pattern for which the American character crosses the border... there they can be violent, they can be uncivilized, but then they eventually go back to their home, and they go back to righteousness and order. And sometimes it's also a crossing with some White savior trope, the American protagonists are going to save Mexican characters, and then they go back to their land of freedom and "civilization."

EAI: It is this idea of the American male character having the higher moral ground, yet he is tempted on the other side of the border to resort to violence to survive, just like it happens in *Borderland* and *From Dusk till Dawn*. The foreign land is portrayed as morally different, something that happens commonly in the gothic romance. For example, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* is about a Catholic monk who becomes corrupt, and lives in Madrid, where the hot weather partly instills his moral downfall. The gothic romance establishes a certain geographical standing that justifies the actions and choices of the other, whether they are monstrous because of their own proclivity to perform questionable deeds or because they are supernatural monsters and exceed the laws of man and nature.

AMM: Changing topic, definitely Guillermo del Toro is one of the most known Mexican directors in the United States. His extensive work can be taken as an example of how gothic modes can infiltrate different genres, how they can really be pervasive and the versatile, transnational, cross-genre, cross-media qualities the Gothic can have. Can you explain a bit how the Gothic is present in his work?

EAI: Guillermo del Toro has always confessed his interest for anything related with pop culture, the supernatural, and monsters. He has also been concerned with the process of othering. Del Toro is really well versed in horror and speculative fiction, from many sources, mainly literature, comics, graphic novels, and film itself. I think he is one of the few film directors that has managed to incorporate aesthetic elements and formal aspects from across different narrative and media forms, and this is one of the reasons he is so popular.

His film *Crimson Peak* (2015) explores the narrative structure of the gothic romance, and showcases his in-depth knowledge into this popular form of fiction. *Crimson Peak* is primarily inspired by classic gothic novels, such as *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, and *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë, and by *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, by Ann Radcliffe. I can also identify a few nods to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." The list of references is longer, but

this is Del Toro's film homage to the Gothic. Ideas related to sanity, faith, illness, and death stand out in *Crimson Peak*, and these are themes that we can also find throughout the rest of his work. Del Toro claims that he is a lapsed Catholic, which means that he was raised in a devoted family environment. As he grew up, he started to question religious doctrines, and has projected his own concerns about them in most of his work. For example, in his first feature-length film, *Cronos* (1993), protagonist Jesús Gris symbolizes messianic resurrection. With the aid of the cronos device, he achieves immortality: he dies and then he comes back from the dead, but only as a ravenous, vampiric creature that must drink the blood of other humans. Ultimately, reason rules over his more intuitive cravings, and sacrifices himself to save his family. He gives up his immortality and perishes with daylight. A final white fade-out suggests this body and spiritual cleansing for the sake of his wife and his granddaughter.

In *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), the orphanage has a chapel, but the people who run the orphanage are republicans. Both Carmen and Casares speak strongly against Roman Catholicism. They keep all religious figures and statues down, but every time someone decides to visit them, they have to keep up appearances and have the boys uncover and clean the figures for display in the chapel. In one scene, the children carry a big Christ on a cross and explain to the newcomers that they have to set it up again, so any supporter of Franco that shows up does not believe they are heretics or communists. Del Toro is particularly interested in questioning Roman Catholicism and its longstanding influence on identities, both individual and social.

Likewise, Del Toro also enjoys exploring the haunting return of the past, as we can see in *The Devil's Backbone* and in *Crimson Peak*. It features prominently in other films, such as *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), and *Hellboy* (2004) too. In this latter film, the eponymous protagonist is haunted by his own origin and upbringing. The narrative focuses on a personal issue: is Hellboy going to become that monstrous creature who is going to bring about the apocalypse and the end of humanity? This is a very good example of del Toro's own notion and understanding of monstrosity. When monsters are involved, he presents us with well-rounded, complex supernatural creatures. He shows us a different side of the monster, one that is more human and vulnerable. Conversely, his films disclose the cruelty of men, and this proves to be more horrifying. In *The Shape of Water* (2017), antagonist Strickland is the one who sees the creature as something completely other; it is not from this world since it goes beyond our notions of reason and science. The story is set during the Cold War, and Strickland's strict upbringing reflects a very heteronormative and modern thinking that results in hideous violence. Through his behavior, Strickland ends up being the monster. Del Toro had worked on a similar character development before, with Captain Vidal in *Pan's Labyrinth*. Vidal is obsessed with time and death, and his military training has reinforced a sense of masculinity bound by strict obedience and demonstrations of strength. He feels entitled to do atrocious things because of his rank, like when he crushes a peasant's face with a bottle of wine, leaving the boy unable to breathe and chocking with his own blood. This sequence is a form of horror that reveals the

other side of human nature, a monstrous one that stands in stark contrast with the supernatural creatures that feature prominently in this film and in the rest of his work.

In *The Shape of Water*, the creature appeals to the characters that are othered. Elisa cannot speak, and is thus other. Her neighbor Giles is gay, and he is shunned at work and at the ice-cream shop when he attempts to flirt with the bar tender. Giles is also othered and marginalized. This film summarizes many ideas that del Toro has been developing about monstrosity and that we can notice since the beginning of his filmography. With *Cronos*, it is the anxiety of being other with the gift of immortality. In *The Devil's Backbone*, it is gothic haunting. Ghosts, remnants of a traumatic event that happened in the past that keeps affecting the present, inhabit the orphanage. The bomb in the courtyard could be considered a ghost too. It did not explode and remained as something that could have happened but did not. It looms in the center of the courtyard to remind everyone of the civil war that is being fought outside the orphanage walls. From a Roman Catholic upbringing to his concerns about monstrosity, del Toro proves with every film that Gothic, horror, and the supernatural are powerful devices to speak about human nature and otherness.

AMM: Mexican identity in the United States and its cultural production are characterized by a few recurrent uncanny aspects and archetypes, which are often drawing on Mexican folktales and cultural heritage, on the Catholic upbringing, that seems to be so fascinating for Americans. What do you think are just a few of these stereotypes and tropes, and which are the most exploited according to you?

EAI: One of the key concepts that you mentioned is heritage. How do you define your own heritage? How do you shape your own identity in terms of your upbringing, where are you from, but also where your family comes from? I would suggest that Hispanic Americans are working through their own identity as being aware of their Hispanic heritage—whether it is from Mexico, Central America, or any other Spanish speaking country— and how they see themselves in the national dynamics of the United States. Notions of territory, history, and social dynamics typically render certain groups as others, Hispanics included. The idea of identity seems to be associated with the concept of origins. An acquaintance of mine came to a conference in Mexico and she was very excited to meet her relatives for the first time. She is from California and studies in Florida. She was excited because she felt that she would understand herself and her parents better when she traveled to Mexico to discover this other part of her family's history.

Additionally, folklore and tradition, which help forge a sense of social identity, must not be seen as things that are plainly passed on or inherited. It is also important that we understand how they are interpreted and adapted by younger generations. One prime example is La Llorona. She is the screaming woman, the banshee, a universal trope whose main characteristic is this idea of the lament. Octavio Paz has written about her in his influential book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. I believe she is the most represented ghost or monster in Mexican

cinema, and has appeared in several films from the 1930s to the present day. The legend also exists in Central American countries, like Guatemala. La Llorona is the ghost of a woman rejected by her Spaniard lover. Out of grief, she drowned her children in a river and now her spirit is haunting every nook and corner in Mexico, wailing for her lost children. I have explored La Llorona and her portrayal in Mexican and Hispanic American popular culture before, while trying to understand what she represents in Gothic terms. The ideas of the lament and of the foretelling—in themselves associated with loss—are combined with the anxiety about identity. This is further articulated with the notion of mobility because La Llorona is associated with bodies of water and water that moves, such as rivers. Typically, you would encounter La Llorona close to water. If this water moves, then the ghost can easily travel beyond specific locations and be found in other regions and countries (Ajuria Ibarra, "Ghosting the Nation" 132). Therefore, La Llorona could be associated with migration and carrying a certain haunted cultural heritage to new places. Crossing the Mexico–US border on the Rio Grande, a dangerous body of flowing water, can help boost this idea of cultural ghostly motility and how it is inherited and interpreted by the Hispanic community. Migrants and ghosts must bear the dangers of the river to make it to the other country.

In my analysis of La Llorona, I have noticed that she has crossed over to American mainstream media too. The pilot from the TV series *Supernatural* revolves around La Llorona. In the setting, a river and a bridge feature prominently as the original sites of death and trauma. A woman has killed her children, and then she decides to throw herself off the bridge. The TV series *Grimm* also features an episode about the legend of La Llorona. In this episode, the ghost appears, once again, by the river that crosses Portland, Oregon. A few Mexican horror films about La Llorona also associate La Llorona with bodies of water, such as *Kilometer 31* (2007). Set in contemporary Mexico City, the film notices that many of the rivers that existed in the Valley of Mexico have now become part of the complex urban sewer system. Therefore, La Llorona haunts the city underground, coming out through the drains to haunt and terrify to death.

La Llorona is a gothic figure in the sense that it forces us to reconsider our heritage and identity by means of a haunted *mestizaje* or hybridity. Her legend depicts a history of violence and rejection. The Spaniard man rejects the children because they were born out of wedlock and are not fully Spanish. La Llorona attests to a conflicting view of what *mestizaje* is. We tend to celebrate it as the encounter of two cultures, but again it also speaks about the anxiety about the circumstances that led to that *mestizaje*. If these circumstances are violence and death, which are intrinsically related to the conquest of Mexico, then Mexican identity is perennially haunted by this: the affirmation of a thriving hybrid culture that needs to acknowledge the pain of its formation (Ajuria Ibarra, "Ghosting the Nation" 148). How can this be passed on and reflected again in Hispanic American identity in the United States? We can speak of a celebration of heritage, of being Mexican American or Guatemalan American; still, at the same

time, there is an implicit fear about miscegenation that the Gothic and La Llorona constantly remind us of. It is an origin that is conflicting, and that we never really let go of.

Open Q&A session

Sofía Martinicorena: I just wanted to go back to the idea of nationalism and the Gothic in relation to the borderlands. I was thinking about how the Gothic is used often in dominant US culture as a way of dealing with the colonial guilt that results from a very destructive past of land appropriation. Obviously one of the most evident examples of this is the idea of the Indian as a revenant that is haunting White people to take revenge, and the obsession with Native burial grounds which is a very gothic trope, which you see in lots of films. I was wondering if there are like analogous examples in the southwestern border of the US, where there's obviously also a violent history of fight for the land. Are there gothic narratives or gothic tropes in borderland US fiction that arise from this idea of colonial guilt?

EAI: The first example I can think of is McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, which I have mentioned before. Part of the novel's premise is that the gang the kid joins thinks in terms of the discourse of Manifest Destiny that existed during the exploration and appropriation of the Western United States. In film, the idea of tensions across the Southwestern border with Mexico can also be seen in John Carpenter's *Vampires* (1998). The setting in these narratives is an idealized desert-like landscape, which is closely associated with the border along Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. Mexican film *Belzebuth* (2017) also deals with illegal border crossings in a city that resembles Tijuana, which is on the border with California. The plot focuses on the second coming of the messiah and a cult of satanists who are trying to kill the child. Mass killings occur all over the city, an allegory to the pervasive violence associated with drug cartels in Mexico. The protagonist, a police detective who lost his newborn child during one mass killing at the hospital, ends up helping an excommunicated American priest get the child safely across the border. They use one of the underground drug trafficking tunnels that they have built to get him across to the United States. Halfway through the tunnel, the characters find a room filled with both Catholic and pagan artifacts, where the final confrontation with the Devil takes place. The film discloses a relationship between the demonic and the monstrous with illegal actions that gravely affect cross border relationships, as well as communities on the Mexican side. Ideas of illegality and moral corruption are always happening south of the border, while safety and protection is what characterizes the country north of the border. It's not Southwestern per se, but the film explicitly addresses border tensions related with politics, society and economy. The dynamics of this liminal geographical area are exposed in a story framed by holy revelations and the act of saving a child from vicious adult harm. It may not be explicitly about the Southwest, but there is a hint about similar concerns all along the border between the United States and Mexico.

Mónica Fernández Jiménez: The Enlightenment is central in the origins of the 18th century Gothic, but also in postcolonial narratives. You mentioned Latin America and the Caribbeans, characterized by a different way of dealing with the landscape, of understanding the environment, and this has also been applied to politics by Carpentier himself and José Martí who—discussing theories of development—stressed that these populations want to abide by their own epistemology and not by imposed models, because they are not for "here." So, in terms of turning all this conversation to the Gothic, you've been mentioning some authors that—like all McCarthy—that clearly come from a more Western Anglo tradition, and some other authors that would identify more with Indigenous forms of knowledge, Chicanx tradition etc. I was wondering if there is some critique toward more Europeanized or Western forms of gothic. Guillermo del Toro's films, you said, draw on the Brontës and similar authors. The Gothic in the 18th century was a rejection against the Enlightenment but it's still a product of it. Is there any critique to the European Gothic and its relation to the Enlightenment, in the same way that post-colonial and Indigenous narratives critique European epistemology?

EAI: You are right in pointing out that the Gothic can be understood as a reaction to the Enlightenment. Concepts associated with the Enlightenment, such as reason, law, light, face a dark side, or what Fred Botting defines as a "negative aesthetics" that "informs" the Gothic (1). Perhaps, more recently, we can think these terms laid out with the Mexican project of the modern nation that developed throughout the 20th century. After the Mexican revolution, the country went through a period of rapid modernization and industrial development, particularly between the 1940s and the 1960s. This was paired with an idealization of *mestizaje* as the core of Mexican identity. In *Mestizo Modernity*, David S. Dalton claims that the pairing of the project of the modern Mexican nation is associated knowledge of/and technology. For him "the transformation of Amerindian individuals into mestizos … used technology to modernize the indigenous body" (2). Therefore, the encounter of different cultures aims to modernize the nation, incurring the marginalization and erasure of indigenous identities. This is where the Gothic comes in again. Dalton's pairing of modernity, technology, and mestizaje reminds me of the role of photography in *Rito terminal* (2000), directed by Óscar Urrutia Lazo. I have previously analyzed this Mexican film with a focus on "visually mediated spectralities" (Ajuria Ibarra, "Media, Shadows…" 198), but a focus on technology and identity also discloses tensions about the subject, the body, and the nation that Dalton suggests. The plot focuses on a photographer based in Mexico City who is sent to film the festivities of an indigenous community in the state of Oaxaca. During his stay, the protagonist experiences a series of ghostly encounters and his shadow is eventually stolen. He decides to go back to search for his shadow, and discovers that the community is haunted by the ghost of a young woman who decided to embrace *mestizaje* and the modern world and was murdered for her choice. The film revolves around what photography unravels, but also about the failure of *mestizaje* itself. The film depicts an isolated Indigenous community that is wary of people coming to see them as something exotic and outdated, as something from the past that needs to be recorded and

saved with film and photography. The technology of photography reveals the spirit of the murdered young woman. The town's elders—her mother being one of them— decide what must be kept in the collective memory of the community, and they decide to forget her. Her own mother decides to raise her little girl in their own traditions in an attempt to erase her *mestizaje*. The film acknowledges other voices and discourses that shape Mexican identity, our own origin, and our own past. The intrusion of technology by means of photography and film discloses the tense encounters between tradition and modernity. Even though the community may try to keep their own traditions alive and to shy away from modernity, modern technology sparks the return of the ghost of the murder victim they have decided to forget. This film makes use of certain gothic tropes to reveal the other side of Mexican identity: the project of modernity based on reason, on technology, on moving forward, has points that crack, points that haunt, points that make us question the discourse of the modern Mexican nation.

Laura Álvarez Trigo: I was wondering about Caribbean Gothic in terms of its recent evolution. How we see the origins and how is it being developed these days? If you see there's been certain changes and how I was thinking about contemporary authors, such as Mónica Ojeda which has been sold or publicized as Andean Gothic—an *andino* Gothic—and how that also works in relation to the US market, because you were mentioning before also magical realism and this is something that's what the market expects from Latin American authors. Is there something to that in how this Caribbean Gothic is being maybe developed, or sold, or published these days?

EAI: First, European writers have written about the Caribbean and have portrayed it as a strange land. Then, there are writers from the Caribbean who resort to haunting and the supernatural to express that the past is still an issue in terms of defining identities and nationalities in the Caribbean. For example, Puerto Rico has a rich Hispanic culture inherited from colonialism, but now they are a dependency of the United States. They are not quite a state, so they are still being bound by a remnant of colonialism. In what ways Puerto Rican writers recur to the Gothic to address the political and social—and even economic—inequities that have affected their own island in terms of how they can identify themselves? We can also think about the Cuban, Puerto Rican and Dominican communities that have migrated to the United States. Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* deals second-generation Caribbean teenagers assimilate American pop culture. At the same time, it explores feelings of estrangement when they take young men back to the Caribbean countries their parents grew up in. This is what happens with Oscar. He feels inadequate, he feels out of place and out of bounds because of his body. He does not conform to the idea of what a Latin lover should look like. When he goes to the Dominican Republic on vacation, he cannot fulfil the idea of masculinity that is culturally dominant in this nation. Through the Gothic, the novel deals with the crisis of identity that the protagonist experiences. The narrative features a Dominican curse, and Oscar believes that his family has been cursed and so he is too. Transgenerational

mistakes and wrongdoings befall on Oscar, and he is unable to fit anywhere because he has no stable ground. He does not feel like he belongs in the United States, but, whenever he goes back to the Dominican Republic, he does not belong there either. The insistent haunting curse affects his own perception of himself and his own reality. The idea of belonging and of the past that keeps creeping in when defining who the nation states in the Caribbean are could be one of the elements that I personally see is a current topic for Caribbean Gothic.

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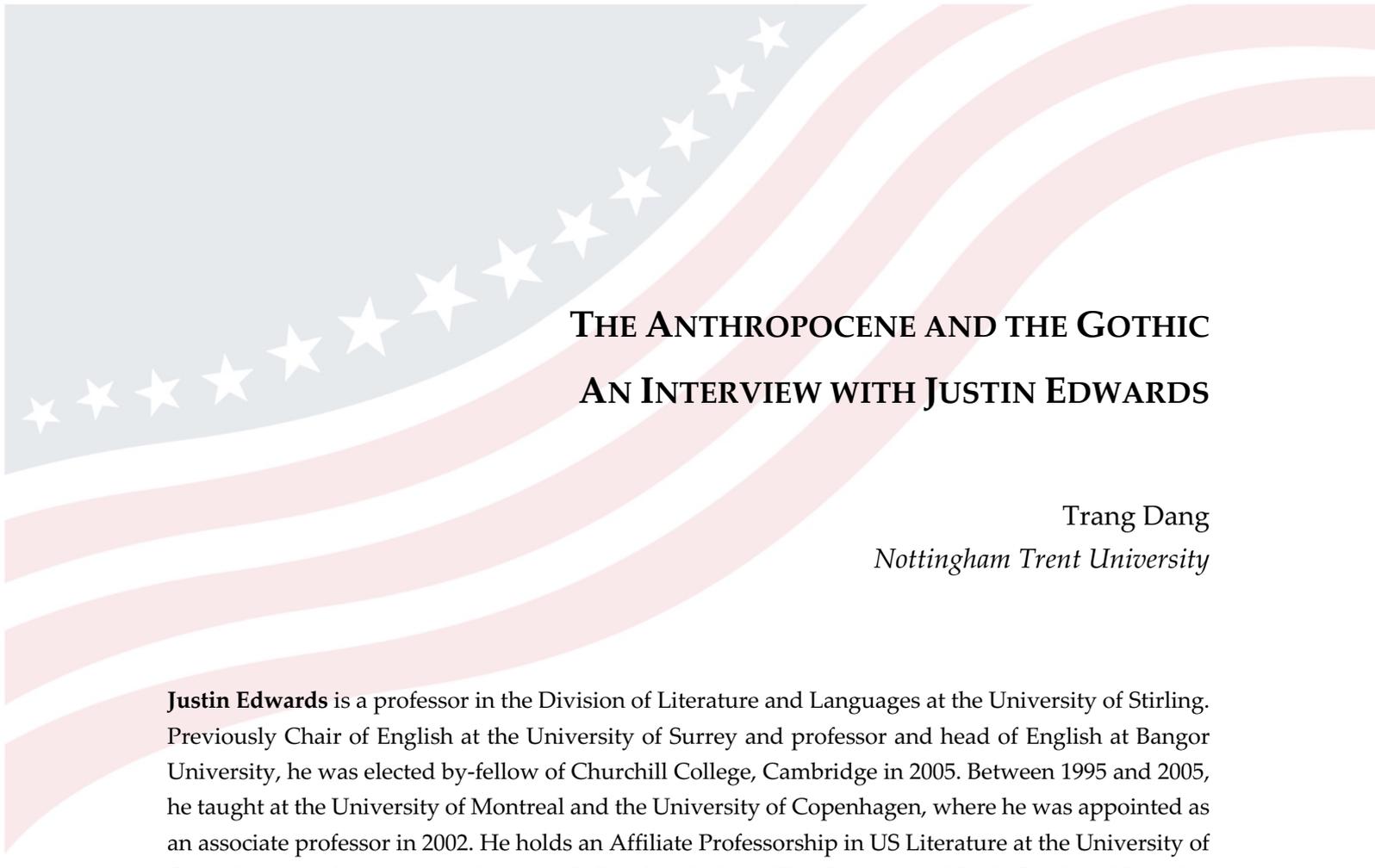
THE ANTHROPOCENE AND THE GOTHIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH JUSTIN EDWARDS

Trang Dang
Nottingham Trent University

Justin Edwards is a professor in the Division of Literature and Languages at the University of Stirling. Previously Chair of English at the University of Surrey and professor and head of English at Bangor University, he was elected by-fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge in 2005. Between 1995 and 2005, he taught at the University of Montreal and the University of Copenhagen, where he was appointed as an associate professor in 2002. He holds an Affiliate Professorship in US Literature at the University of Copenhagen and in 2016-2017 he was a Fulbright scholar at Elon University, North Carolina. He is also a member of the Peer Review College for the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and a Trustee of the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA). Justin's contribution to the study of Gothic literature started with *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic*, which examines the development of US Gothic literature alongside 19th-century discourses of passing and racial ambiguity. In *Gothic Canada: Reading the Spectre of a National Literature*, he continued in the area by examining how collective stories about national identity and belonging tend to be haunted by artifice.

Trang Dang: I'm very honored to have Justin Edwards for our interview focused on the Gothic in the Anthropocene. Given the ongoing criticism of the Anthropocene as being anthropocentric, colonialist, and racist, I'd also like to hear about your position on the term "Anthropocene" itself.

Justin Edwards: First of all, thank you for inviting me. It's a delight and an honor to be able to participate in this project. I noticed that you've got some fantastic colleagues from around the world and one of the great things about things like Zoom and these kinds of conferences is that you can bring people together in a way that is, to a certain extent, carbon neutral and, of course, this does lead into questions of ecology and the Anthropocene and the ways in which we conceptualize what the Anthropocene is and how we have an impact on our planet.

To begin with the first part of your question, the Anthropocene is a word that comes out of geology, and it is a term that refers to geological time originally and a shift in geological time. Within geological circles, it marks a change in the ways in which the human being has mastery or control over ecology, the environment and the planet more generally. This, for geologists, can be found in the actual rock sediment so finding, say, carbon and methane and other things that are actually located in the stratosphere of the rock, then leads them to articulate this new form of time called the Anthropocene. Now, I mean that's how it begins but then, of course, it moves into other aspects of study within the arts and humanities and social sciences and other areas, to describe the ways in which there is a shift in which the human as a subject or as a collective has a profound impact on the environment and ecology, and that might be through extinction, that might be through global warming and the ways in which we are using up natural resources and contributing to the potential destruction of the planet. The Anthropocene, in a nutshell, is the ways in which the human being now has the potential to destroy, to impact, to change the planet, whether it be through climate, through extinction or other things like that. That's a kind of thumbnail basic way of articulating the Anthropocene.

There is, of course, the contentious issue of when the Anthropocene begins. Some would say the Anthropocene begins with the Industrial Revolution in the UK, in Northern Europe. The Industrial Revolution which then leads to the burning of coal. This marks the beginning of a transformation in which the human being is having a profound impact on the planet in a very negative way, through toxic emissions that then lead to things like global warming. So, the Industrial Revolution is one place that scholars say we can date the Anthropocene to this time—the time of the Industrial Revolution. Others locate it in the Nuclear Age, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, saying that is the beginning of the Anthropocene—that's when we really see the ways in which the human being can transform the planet in really profound ways and actually lead to complete destruction of environments, ecosystems, and planets, and it has a potential to destroy ourselves in the process. Whatever the case might be, what we find is a transformation in the planet that accelerates tremendously throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century so that's what some scholars call the Great Acceleration within the Anthropocene that happens in the 20th century and goes into the 21st century. The ways which the human is negatively impacting the planet through fossil fuels, carbon emissions, methane, and so on and so forth, thus has an impact on things like climate and extinction.

TD: The debate around the Anthropocene often centres on how the term is anthropocentric, colonialist and racist because it's saying that humans are a powerful force able to change the planet and everything. Where do you stand in those debates?

JE: That is a huge question and a huge debate and a fascinating one. In many ways, the word Anthropocene obviously includes something which is anthropocentric about it. It includes the human within the very term itself, and as a result, this has led scholars to really critique the

idea of the Anthropocene. The term leads to a kind of flattening out of all of humankind being responsible for this transformation or destruction of the planet. That word "Anthropocene" does not locate the transformation in the Industrial Revolution or in the Nuclear Age of the Cold War, which is very Western-, European- and Northern-American-centric. The Anthropocene as a word doesn't necessarily call attention to those locations or sites as being responsible for this transformation that occurs. It suggests that people in India or people in Southern Africa are just as responsible for this transformation as those in the UK in the Industrial Revolution or Americans who then develop the atomic bomb through the Manhattan project. So, there's a kind of flattening out of responsibility within the word "Anthropocene," rather than saying no, actually, it is certain areas within the globe or certain locations and certain practices that have led to this situation, and that becomes a very important critique of the term.

On the one hand, it is an important critique because, whether it be the Industrial Revolution or the Nuclear Age, wherever we begin talking about the Anthropocene, it's very much a part of the North Atlantic. It's very much part of a wealthy elite region within the world, and becomes important for reflecting on it. However, there's also the fact that, in order to address what's happening with the Anthropocene, we can't just locate it in those places so we need to address it across the globe. How do we address it? Obviously, those North Atlantic regions need to step up and be more responsible in terms of dealing with the transformative effects of the Anthropocene, whether it be extinction or climate change. There are many critiques to the word but I think the main one is the flattening out and saying that all human beings are responsible for this transformation when, really, it is a kind of industrialized Northern European or North American area of the world that starts this process. It then gets picked up elsewhere, of course, but in terms of responsibility, that word "Anthropocene" doesn't necessarily articulate that which is responsible.

TD: I think the Anthropocene doesn't pay much attention to the nuances in terms of the degree of responsibility of human beings towards planet Earth. So, it's problematic but at the same time it's a useful term to talk about how it's human action that causes damage to the planet.

JE: We might make the analogy to the word "postcolonial." It has always been contentious. That's not to say that it's not useful. It is a useful term and it's being replaced now, of course, by decolonization and the decolonial, which is very good. But certainly, during the 1990s and early 90s that word 'postcolonial' was important but always interrogated so we need to do the same with that word "Anthropocene." Others have proposed the Capitalocene; other people have proposed the Plantationocene, as being words that could potentially replace the Anthropocene because they, in and of themselves as words, place an emphasis on the development of capitalism in the Capitalocene, or the development of plantation slavery culture in the 16th century in the Plantationocene. Those words, if they were to be used as replacements for the Anthropocene, then do call attention to the ways in which economic models, like capitalism

or like slavery and the transportation of Africans through the middle passage to plantations in North America and other places in South America and elsewhere in the globe, then become important pivot moments in the transformation of the planet, the transformation in species, the transformation in land, the transformation in relations between people, but also between humans and plants, and humans and animals as well. Those words are very important, and I think that we should not dismiss those words and we should think a lot about the use of that word "Anthropocene" and use it alongside "Capitalocene," which calls attention to capitalism as being that which is responsible for this transformation that has occurred, or "Plantationocene," which then dates back to European expansion and imperialism and slavery. I think these words are all important and can be used and all must be interrogated as well; all must be used in their complexities.

TD: I totally agree. To move towards the relationship between the Gothic and the Anthropocene, in your recent talk on your forthcoming book titled *Gothic in the Anthropocene*, you said: "we live in Gothic times." Could you unpack this a little by talking, perhaps, about how the Gothic informs our understanding of this geological epoch?

JE: In many ways the Gothic has always been about death, destruction, ruins, and in many ways, the current focus on ecology, the current focus on environmental crises, the current focus on environmental collapse, on species extinction, raises narratives that relate back to the Gothic, whether it be the ruin of an ecosystem, or the death of a species, or the destruction of certain parts of the environment, that then lead us into a narrative terrain that we can then relate to that dark side of Gothic, which has to do with death and destruction.

To answer your question, I think the Gothic offers us narrative forms and narrative strategies to be able to articulate the times in which we are living, the times which are crucial in addressing the large-scale mass extinction events, death, ruin of ecosystems, and the destruction of various parts of the world. The Gothic gives us language and narratives in order to be able to articulate these things that we're experiencing now and are going through, and that leads me to say that we live in Gothic times. That also leads back to things like the destruction in the castle of Otranto in the 18th century or *The Fall of the House of Usher*, to the ways in which we might consider the collapse of the castle or the collapse of the house in relation to the collapse of ecosystems or the environment. Thinking about these things in analogous ways that the planet is our home, just like the castle of Otranto might be the home for Manfred, or the house of Usher might be the home of the Ushers, we can conceptualize these narrative forms within the larger context of a home or homely space that we inhabit within the planet. The destruction of that or the crumbling or the ruin of that planet is something that we can think about in terms of a Gothic narration and the language that Gothic has offered us.

TD: Indeed, the Gothic focuses on ruins, destruction, the collapse of systems, and how that brings death and suffering not only to humans but also nonhumans. That reminds me of

something I read elsewhere, which says that there are people who actually find the idea of catastrophes enjoyable rather than horrifying. Could the Gothic then, in some way, run the risks of romanticizing those catastrophes, and as a result, of failing to warn us about the consequences of ecological disasters altogether?

JE: That's a really good and important question. If you take a novel which was then made into the film, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, for instance, what you have is a very popular novel, a very popular film, which is very much based on apocalypse. So, an apocalyptic narrative like that then becomes a form of entertainment. It becomes consumed on Netflix or consumed as a novel or a bestseller, and that can lead to a situation in which the narrative then provides a kind of entertainment or even sensationalist dynamic for the reader that might romanticize. But more of a kind of sensational aspect exists within those kinds of apocalyptic narratives and those visions of global death and destruction and environmental collapse and apocalypse can be quite sensational, and when consumed as entertainment, as you're suggesting, it can be very problematic. It can be enjoyable rather than actually getting us to really reflect on, or think about, what this might mean.

The Gothic has always been like this. This is not new to the Gothic. The Gothic has always been a popular form, going back to Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), for instance, going back to *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) again, going back to classic 18th-century Gothic novels. They are popular and are often quite sensational. Those sensational dynamics can be highly problematic when it comes to pertinent and relevant political issues, because it can cover over the politics or the pressing issues of the day through the entertainment and sensationless dimensions, which are contained within those narratives. Your question is a really important one, as it relates to the Anthropocene, as it relates to environmental collapse and apocalyptic narratives. But it's always been there in the Gothic, and that's always a question that critics have asked. Can the Gothic be both sensational and have a positive, political dimension to it at the same time? Can it be progressive and get people to think about the pressing political issues of the day, and at the same time have a sensational dimension to it? I'm not sure there's a specific answer to that. I think we have to take it text by text. There are Gothic texts that go back to the 18th century or now that do romanticize or sensationalize apocalypse or a mass extinction event or mass destruction. I think that's certainly there and that's always been there in Gothic. But then I think that there are other texts that actually do force us to consider our position within this and do force us to think about the political dynamics of our place within the planet, as it relates to mass extinction events or mass destruction or the Anthropocene more generally. It's difficult, in other words, to make grand sweeping claims. We need to look at the texts themselves and that has a long history within the Gothic.

TD: I think you're right. I don't think all texts romanticize the idea of death or ruins, and there really are texts that ask us to critique the issues of the present like those about climate change or other political and ecological issues.

JE: It's important to know that that's always been there in the Gothic. That sensational aspect has always been present within the gothic novel, going back to the 18th century, and whether you can be sensational and politically progressive at the same time, I'm not sure. But it's an important question.

TD: Moving the conversation towards the American Gothic and drawing on your previous work on this area, I'm interested in how American writers from the 19th century to the present have utilised the gothic trope to tackle issues of race, class, gender, and the relationships between humans and nonhumans. Would you like to comment on this and on how these issues are interrelated?

JE: The American Gothic does differ from European forms of Gothic in several ways. I would say that there is a strand that we could identify of American Gothic that is unique from European forms in the 18th century. There's been lots written on this, going back to Leslie Fiedler, Teresa Goddu, and others who have written about the uniqueness of the American Gothic. There are certain things that they point to in terms of that American Gothic tradition as being unique, and that is the presence of the exploitation of slavery and of slavery as being something that haunts the nation, things like genocide and 'settler culture of the Americas' more generally, and that is contained within American Gothic—the ways in which the colonial expansion leads to genocide of Native peoples and leads to destruction of large groups that then contributes to a Gothic narrative that is specifically American, or part of the Americas. It's not just US, and we find this in Canada, we find this in Brazil, we find this across the Americas in Gothic text. Questions of race, questions of genocide, questions of slavery, are really present within an American Gothic tradition that aren't necessarily present within 18th century European Gothic. There's a long history of criticism related to that, going back to the 1960s with Leslie Fiedler.

That's one aspect of it, the other aspect of it is, of course, the land itself, and that brings us into the realm of ecology and the environment, the ways in which the American Gothic deals with the so-called frontier, the so-called unsettled land, the dark forest of Hawthorne, the dark forest of Charles Brockden Brown and the threats of the land to the white European colonial settler, and that being really important dimension to an American Gothic tradition that is unique from what we might refer to as the European Gothic. Race, slavery, genocide, colonialism and the so-called settling of the land then become really important in developing narratives that we can call the American Gothic. The settling of the land is, of course, tied to slavery. It's tied to genocide, but it's also tied to the human relationship to ecological space. Here again, the plantation becomes very important, and we can refer to that word 'Plantationocene' within the Americas as being very significant. We can talk about a tradition of plantation Gothic in which what you have is a destruction of a particular ecosystem replaced by a plantation for cotton or sugarcane, which is then farmed by slaves. You have a coming together of labor exploitation, exploitation of people, slavery with a transformation of the land

itself, and that transformation of the land is a transformation in which it imposes a kind of monoculture. You wipe out diversity within the ecological system and then you create the plantation for the cotton or for the sugarcane or whatever it might be. In other words, you take out the diversity of the ecological space and you replace it with a monoculture, whether that be cotton or sugar or whatever the case might be. These things are intimately linked. The transportation of slaves, the exploitation of labor through slavery, then becomes linked to the transformation of the land, the ecosystem and the ways in which the human being then impacts that land. That's something specific to the Americas. We don't find the same plantation cultures in Europe, in the UK or elsewhere, geographically speaking, that we do in the Americas. That's one of the ways that the two come together—colonization, exploitation of people through slavery, but then also the imposition of a monoculture within an ecosystem that was once diverse.

That's one way of thinking about it. The other way of thinking about it also is in terms of what constitutes the human, and that was the debates around slavery that go back to the 17th and 18th centuries. What constitutes the human, what constitutes the nonhuman, and of course, the nonhuman argument then becomes a way of justifying colonization, and things like slavery and reducing human beings to the status of the nonhuman, to the animal that then moves from racist discourses into speciesism. I think that relates back to your question. They're very much intertwined and linked.

TD: I think when we think about issues of climate change, we realize that the exploitation of nonhumans is very much similar to that of human labor, as some people would treat other humans in the same way as they treat nonhumans and so they'll exploit and extract the labor of both.

JE: Absolutely, we can't separate these things. The ways in which we exploit human beings, the way we exploit natural resources, the way we exploit the land, those things are intimately connected. We find within a capitalist society, whether it be gender hierarchies or hierarchies in terms of white supremacy and racism, they are intimately connected to the ways in which we treat animals or ecosystems. We can't say we're just going to focus on one. They're so interrelated and so interconnected that they're systemic rather than things that we can tease out and say this is separate from that, this racism is separate from patriarchy, which is then separate from capitalism and exploitation. No, they're all interrelated.

TD: The final question I would like to ask you is about the body in the American Gothic. I think the body as a theme or feature of the Gothic is very important to this particular genre. For example, there are corporate bodies, or the bodies of the exploited, or the bodies of the monstrous other. Could you comment on how the gothic portrayal of the body contributes to our understanding of the human-human and human-nonhuman relationships in the context of the Anthropocene?

JE: Another great question and another very large question but a very important one. We can go back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1817) and look at Dr Frankenstein's Creature. What is monstrous about the Creature that Victor Frankenstein creates is, of course, the body. It's the visual. The monster just wants to be loved. Internally, there is this desire for connection, this desire to link with others, but it is the body, the grotesque body, the body of monstrosity, that creates fear and anxiety within those around the Creature so the body then becomes located in the Gothic. We find this in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), that transformation from the civilized doctor into the brutal and savage Mr. Hyde. The transformation of the body and the body is essential to Gothic narratives, going back to the 18th century. We can track that through to people like Poppy Z. Brite writing today and others, in which the body becomes central to the gothic text. We can, as you're suggesting, move beyond that to the corporate body, beyond that to the ways in which we might talk about biopower, a Foucauldian concept of biopower, and the ways in which institutional bodies, whether they be corporate bodies or public bodies like institutions, whether they be hospitals or whether they be systems of education, schools, universities, the ways in which these bodies have a profound impact on us and the ways in which we might think about how the corporate body might form us, or how the biopower might form us through an education system or through hospitalization or whatever the case might be. Those bodies then become exploited and changed and transformed in various ways.

How does this relate to the Anthropocene? The body is, of course, central to any conception of the Anthropocene. It's the human body that now has an impact on the planet and how we use our body, whether that be to drive a car or choose to get on an airplane or collective bodies to mine minerals or natural resources or whatever the case may be. So, the body is still at the center of the gothic narrative, as it relates to the Anthropocene and to making choices about how we use our bodies and what we do with our bodies. Nowhere is this more prominent than in what we physically consume. Veganism, for instance, is a way in which we can conceptualize that relationship between the physical body of the individual and the Anthropocene. Choosing not to eat animal products, to have a plant-based diet, then becomes central to the ways in which we can think about methane emissions, the ways in which we can think about the treatment of animals, the exploitation of animals, the ways in which we use our bodies to avoid those forms of exploitation and those things that are going to further lead to the destruction of ecosystems. The body is still at the center of any Gothic narrative that might be related to the Anthropocene and to what we consume on a daily basis in our bodies that then becomes central to an ethical response to the Anthropocene. But in order to be able to have that ethical response, we also need the gothic narrative. We need the narrative of if we don't choose to act in this way, if we don't choose to stop eating animal products, if we don't choose to stop driving cars and getting on airplanes, then we are going to end up in ruin, we are going to end up in death and destruction. We need the gothic narrative in order to help us to conceptualize and to see that relationship between our own bodies and our

relation to the wider world, whether it be other animals, whether it be ecosystems, environmental change and ecology.

TD: I think you're right about the question of consumption, of contamination that involves all sorts of human and nonhuman bodies, and the gothic narrative can be a really helpful tool to question and explore these sorts of relationships, especially when it plays with the idea of the uncanny, for example, or fear and anxiety.

JE: Quite often, the gothic narrative is very much about the body consuming. The vampire consuming blood; the zombie consuming brains. We have this monstrous body in the vampire or the zombie that is consuming. I think we need to think about that for ourselves in relation to the Anthropocene, about our daily actions of consumption in relation to that. I think the gothic narrative can help us to see that.

Open Q&A session

Paul Mitchell: I'm really interested in this idea that you mentioned in the forthcoming book about we're living in gothic times and I was wondering, when you said that, if you'd agree that we're actually living in posthuman times and that the Gothic is a very useful tool to elaborate and to explore some of our experience of being posthuman. I was also interested in what you said about the differences between British and European and American Gothic, and wanted to ask if you think that actually there's a kind of coming together in the 21st century, that some of the preoccupations maybe of the American Gothic in the 19th century, as you said, with slavery and exploitation, have become now very much part of the European Gothic, and the other way around that the American Gothic is now beginning to elaborate ecological concerns, which it perhaps didn't do in its earlier manifestations.

JE: To answer the first part of your question, the Gothic has always been about what constitutes the human. Going back to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the transformative human body of the Count that appears to be human, to be Harker, and then suddenly transforms into the bat. What does that mean in terms of the transformation of the human? That word 'posthuman'—you're absolutely right—it's been used to describe things like zombification and it's been used to describe the cyborg. It's been used to describe all kinds of things, and I think that there are a couple of strands to posthuman narratives, some of which can be quite positive. To move into the posthuman could be moving beyond the political hierarchies related to patriarchy or racism or white supremacy. Moving into the posthuman could have a utopic vision of leaving these things behind us, which we all, of course, want to do. The flip side of that is the posthuman as machines or that which is not human controlling us in some ways and that's a much darker side to the posthuman. I think that there's a Gothic strand in that second part of the posthuman and the human losing touch with any kind of power over the technology that the human has created, for instance, and there's definitely a dark Gothic aspect to that. That answers the first part of your question.

The second part of your question is really pertinent. Right now, I'm editing a collection of essays called *Global Gothic*, which follows on Glennis Byron's book on global Gothic. Thinking about Gothic just in terms of national traditions or regional traditions is something that we need to move away from, and a focus on the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene or whatever we want to call it is very much part of that thinking about ecological collapse. It's not something we can do just within a national tradition of Gothic literature, and nor should we. I think that those kinds of categories, of national traditions, are important for literary history and thinking about the ways in which a Gothic tradition might develop in the United States from Charles Brockden Brown and Hawthorne and be distinct. But in a contemporary global world, those kinds of national divisions begin to break down and we see something that we can call a global form of Gothic that there's a mesh in which things are related and connected.

PM: I'll just follow up on what you were saying. I think what you said is really interesting, that the idea of the global Gothic is becoming something that, as you say, academics now are beginning to consider. I get the feeling that Gothic is becoming in a way more affirmative, that in the past, it's been obviously associated with horror and shock, celebrating, as Trang mentioned earlier, some of the more unfortunate things that happen. But actually, I get the feeling that the 21st century Gothic is becoming a lot more politically aware and that it's using some of those elements of shock and horror to make very important and affirmative political messages particularly about the Anthropocene and about ecological issues. Do you agree with that or do you see it in a different way?

JE: I absolutely agree with that. I think that Gothic affords us a narrative form and language to really articulate the horrors of environmental collapse or ecological destruction, and that then can lead to an ethical response. Once we can envision and articulate the narrative of ecological collapse and the death of humanity, it's only then that we can actually begin to really fully understand what that means and then act appropriately, so I do believe that there is an ethics to contemporary forms of global Gothic. Like we're saying earlier, we don't want to make broad generalizations about the Gothic. We have to take each text on its own merits, but I think there is a strand that you're pointing to that is really important for thinking about the ways in which we can draw upon the gothic narratives and the language of the Gothic to really help us to understand the crises that we're going through now and once understanding them, act appropriately in terms of ethical responses.

PM: Something you said right at the beginning really made think. You were talking about the beginning of the Anthropocene as a concept in talking about the Industrial Revolution and the Nuclear Age, and these kinds of very important moments historically, when we really started to impact upon the world and the planet. I was just wondering about the role of medicine, and if you have any thoughts about that, whether it is possible to conceive it as the beginning of the Anthropocene in terms of our ability to fight disease, for example, and the consequences that have in terms of population growth that actually has had a massive impact

on some of the problems that we now experience ecologically. It's not always necessarily related to things that we would consider to be historically negative events like Hiroshima, but there is a much longer projection in terms of the development of the Anthropocene which actually didn't necessarily begin with nefarious ends, that actually it began with the intention to save people's lives and to prevent suffering. Would you say that it's a justifiable sort of viewpoint?

JE: I think so, and it's a very pertinent question in time of COVID. Medicine is something that can be conceptualized in terms of something that's very positive, keeping people alive, and, of course, the Anthropocene is quite often about that relationship between life and death and blurring the boundaries between life and death. Medicine does that—medicine has the potential to keep people alive or indeed to kill people. Going back to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the doctor develops the medicine that then transforms him and his body. The way in which we could conceptualize medicine as having a profound impact on the world around us, not just on the individual's body, but how long the individual lives, things like overpopulation, as you're suggesting, then become really pertinent in terms of these questions about the Gothic and the Anthropocene. Overpopulation is something that we need to address in relation to the Anthropocene, and medicine in many ways is contributing to that. I'm not saying that we should stop practicing medicine in order to call a large number of people. Not at all. That's not what I'm saying but because medicine transforms our relationship between life and death, and the gothic narratives have always been about that complex relationship between life and death and breaking down the barriers between life and death.

Natalia Kopytko: I really enjoyed those points you emphasized. My question is whether the Gothic is naturally or used to be claustrophobic. We've been talking about the recent time and the pandemic and so forth. Do you think that there is a tendency to view the Gothic now as not so much claustrophobic but claustrophilic because we asked to be isolated and to social distance? My other question deals with the urban spaces. You've been talking about the monstrosity of the bodies and so forth. Do you think there is a relationship between the classical and urban setting in the Gothic? When we discuss classical Gothic, the settings are often mansions and castles, which are isolated from the rest of the country, but nowadays if you pay attention to postmodern tags, they tend to be more like urban Gothic in that there are urban spaces—like the city—that are monstrous themselves, and they transform the body, the spiritual world of the characters.

JE: Regarding the first part of your question about the claustrophobic dimensions of the Gothic, we definitely see that—going back to *The Castle of Otranto*, the underground passages, the dungeons, the buried alive, these kinds of Gothic tropes that we find in classical European Gothic texts. But then when we come to American Gothic, it's more the vast spaces that then become fearful. It's no longer the castle or the dungeon. It's the threatening forest. It's the threat of the frontier. It's the huge spaces that are untamed that then become a threat. We

move from a claustrophobic enclosed space to the untamed huge space that then becomes threatening within the early American Gothic narrative. That's certainly one of the distinctions and differences. That tradition of the urban Gothic that really begins in at least Anglophone literature in the 19th century, with texts by Oscar Wilde or Robert Louise Stevenson. I just referred to *Dracula* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as classic urban Gothic texts set in central London, parts of it in Soho, and the ways in which the city then becomes this Gothic space. Stevenson was writing around the time of Jack the Ripper and the ways in which the urban location, the urban space, can create a certain anonymity for people that then leads on into the 20th century and in Gothic narratives about the serial killer. They're usually within urban settings, and the ways in which the serial killer can then blend into the populist, the large or urban population, and that fear of the monster as being invisible, as being no longer Frankenstein's Creature in which the monstrosity is inscribed on the body but within that urban Gothic context. Quite often, at least, in contemporary forms, there's that fear of the monster being your neighbor, of not knowing that this person is the serial killer, of the serial killer walking beside you on the street and having no idea that this person is dangerous or monstrous in any way so there's definitely a transformation there in terms of space.

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THE DARK THREAD:
AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID PUNTER

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David Punter is the author of fifteen academic books, many of which revolve around gothic fiction. *The Literature of Terror: The Gothic Tradition* (vol. 1-2, 1996) is one of the most relevant manuals about the Gothic published so far. He is also the editor of ten academic volumes and has taught at universities in different countries and even continents, the University of Bristol being the last one, where he was the research director for the Faculty of Arts. David Punter has also authored eight volumes of poetry and has published poems and short stories in various anthologies. His work can be found at david-punter.org.

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Mónica Fernández Jiménez: The titles of your two most famous volumes on the Gothic make reference to terror. In the introduction to the first one you clearly state that "Gothic fiction has, above all, to do with terror" (13). How do you associate the particular features with which you describe the Gothic genre to the fact that they always create terror? Can you think of some exception?

David Punter: When I published those books that was forty years ago and I suppose my views have changed or I hope developed a bit since then. I do think the Gothic and the notion of terror are critically interlinked but one has to bear in mind that Gothic was from the very beginning, if one takes the beginning to be the late eighteenth century, to an extent formulaic. If you take an early novel like Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777) I would not imagine that that produced in its audiences a sensation of terror, but it might have produced a kind of *frisson*, of excitement. I think that terror is a term that sometimes needs to be thought of in inverted commas. And, of course, from the beginning there was this distinction which is still with us I think between terror and horror, with terror being seen as more psychological and

horror more to do with what we now call body horror, a kind of gross intersection of physicality. And, of course, that does occur as a dialectic at the beginning of the Gothic with the frequently cited differences between Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, with Lewis as a far more explicit writer about various matters which might cause us to feel fear.

But I would want to now say one or two more things about that, because what I had assumed in the days when I first wrote about the Gothic as a strand of writing from the eighteenth century to the present day was that Gothic should be seen as a function of whole works, whole novels, whole poems. I always had trouble with that because, for example, in *The Literature of Terror* I talk about Dickens, and you might think of Dickens in terms of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840). *The Old Curiosity Shop* does contain moments which I would still think of as Gothic, but it is not a Gothic novel, and I think now we might want to be more sophisticated about how the Gothic interweaves with other genres and modes in particular works. Maybe not many works are actually wholly Gothic and maybe that is okay. Maybe Gothic needs to be thought of as a vein that runs through works rather than the whole deal as it were. I think of early Gothic drama back in the early to mid-nineteenth century, where a Gothic play or mini play might crop up in an evening's entertainment alongside satirical works, comical works, farces, and so forth. This is all part of an evening's entertainment and not many early Gothic writers would have thought of themselves specifically or entirely as Gothic writers. They were writers who wrote, among other ways, in a Gothic vein. If I move on to a different matter related to this, it occurred to me when thinking about your question to think a little bit about Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Now, that is often referred to as a Gothic work but I do not think that that story, that novella, invites one to experience terror quite. One certainly has fear about the unstable relationship between the governess and the children. But I think that what is more interesting in that work, as an example, is about doubt, suspicion, uncertainty. And I think that the Gothic could be seen as a kind of strand in writing that takes away your usual bearings and means that you are looking at things in a different way. And that is because Gothic always, I think, has to do with transgression of one kind or another, and there is no knowing how far that transgression will go. Once you have transgressed against the usual physical and so-called natural rules then you might go anywhere. Outstandingly, of course, that is the case when dealing with the supernatural, which the Gothic has always done, I think, in one way or another, either through belief in the supernatural or through challenging the supernatural or through criticising or indeed mocking the supernatural. Self-mockery then was in the Gothic from the beginning, because once we grant the possibility of ghosts, vampires, zombies… then anything might follow from that.

MFJ: You endorse a very inclusive definition of the Gothic in these volumes. Gothic has always been hard to categorise and there are some horror and science fiction, decadent or supernatural works that have been excluded by critics from the Gothic category even though they also include some transgression. I was thinking of a particular piece of work which you

indeed include in the second volume of *The Literature of Terror* that I personally love. It is Arthur Machen's novella *The Great God Pan* (1894). The critics Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton argue that this novella does not create fear because it is too detailed and it is more about embracing the occult (44-45), which is commonplace in decadent literature. What thoughts do you have on the literature of the occult sometimes written by authors who fearlessly embraced these unknown forces in relation to Gothic transgression and terror?

DP: My original attempts at defining the Gothic in *The Literature of Terror* were indeed very inclusive. Some might say they were too inclusive but I was trying to trace this strand of the Gothic from the late eighteenth century to what was then the present day—that is quite a long time ago now. In another sense they were not inclusive at all because in those early books I was entirely dealing with a tradition based in British and to an extent American literature and now things have changed. We have had a great deal of work done on what we might loosely call global Gothic or Gothics of different cultural backgrounds. And I think that one of the crucial features in these new critical approaches to Gothic is that there is a series of intersections between what we have thought of traditionally as Gothic and what some might say folk motifs within very different, very various cultures. Every culture I know of has some dealings with the supernatural. And every culture I know of is predicated at least to an extent on attempts to deal with fear. Different cultures deal with that in different ways and therefore different cultures produce different kinds of ghosts, but the ghosts are always there. From the fox fairies of Chinese and Japanese writing through to the Wendigo in North America, every culture that one can think of has these dealings which are partly, of course, dealings with the ancestors and dealings with death.

So we now have within our purview a very much wider range of materials that we might think of as Gothic and of course it is even more complex than that because what we might call Indigenous texts of fear have become inflected recently with European and American Gothic, so there is a kind of mutual feeding between what we think of in the West as Gothic and what has originated in other cultures to cope with issues of fear. And that of course has now fed back into, for example, an emerging Anglo-American folk horror tradition. Think of *The Wicker Man* (1973). I am currently reading a graphic novel by Hannah Eaton called *Blackwood* (2012) which is all about folk motifs in the English countryside. It is all to do with managing fear, lots of Gothic motifs, ghosts and so forth, but it is not really based in that. It is based in some historically different kind of past. Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* is a tremendous novel. Wonderful. I agree with you entirely, Mónica. One of my favourite books. It is certainly occult. Is it Gothic? Well, I think you could say it is Gothic if we accept this description, not a definition but a description of the Gothic as transgressive, specifically in relation to the supernatural, because it deals with the supernatural and, to an extent, it accepts the supernatural. But, of course, when we think of novels of the occult then it turns out that almost all of them, in my experience, are actually quite intensely more than that. They do not say that there are dark forces coming to claim us. They say that there is a battle in the world between

dark magic and white magic and that this battle is something that needs to be described in order to restore order, or at least to point out, as Matthew Lewis did of course in *The Monk* (1796), the extreme dangers of challenging the boundaries around that order. Let me just mention a couple of other novels of the occult. Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild* (1923). Crowley of course was supposedly a believer in magic, in dark magic. But again, in the novel it is white magic that triumphs. A much more interesting and more ambiguous novel which is not so well known, I think, is by a wonderful writer called M. John Harrison who has written a long series of science fiction works but also a book called *The Course of the Heart* (1992), which has to do with ritual magic but also with psychological disorder. And the hinge of that book is that what you summon up through magical rituals or through memory cannot be banished. And that, of course, is also the root of recent and not so recent cultural anxieties about the literature and more specifically the film of terror, as in the example of the visual experience of *Child's Play* (1988). Once you have something lodged in your mind then you cannot dismiss it and you may have to, in some sense, act upon it. And that is the cause of lots of moral panics about Gothic and horror texts, not so usually literary now, more filmic. There is the threat of an incitement to violence, maybe a result of repeating images. Another example, my last one of literature of the occult, Peter Ackroyd. His wonderful book *The House of Dr Dee* (1993) is about John Dee, the famous Elizabethan astrologer and magician. What Ackroyd does is perform a historical engagement with ritual magic, which is brilliantly ambiguous about whether that magic is or ever could be actually effective. So all through the literature of the occult, I think, there is this set of doubts about whether or in what sense we are dealing here with magic. You can describe magic as a supernatural power over the natural. The physical is not its own master but supernaturally in some way you can control those forces, that is what magic has been about since the ancient Greeks at least, and in Chinese culture probably for even longer than that. Where there is magic, that goes way back into what we think of as some deep history. But whether that magic is actually effective or being used as a metaphor—and Crowley I suppose is good on this because he does talk about how, for him, even magic is a kind of metaphor for exerting power—is another issue. Maybe the occult is something like that, although the occult of course is also a way of forming relationships, small groups. Think of the Society for Psychical Research at the end of the nineteenth century in the UK and elsewhere. This is a way of banding together to form some kind of power, often among those who are otherwise powerless.

MFJ: I have always been intrigued by the occult because its emergence and its representation within decadent literature follows a different periodisation than the early Gothic fictions of the eighteenth century. In your answer you have mentioned psychic disorder and also the different cultural traditions where the Gothic has made an appearance. In the introduction to volume one of *The Literature of Terror* you seem to express the belief that the nature of fear in the American reappearance of the genre is completely different because of its psychic

dimension if we compare it to eighteenth-century British Gothics. In your words, "this new American Gothic seems to deal in landscapes of the mind" (2). This is also how Rosemary Jackson, who wrote a book about fantastic fiction, defines the gothic genre. She defines it as a recognition that fears are "created by the self or by unconscious forces" (14). But you seem to believe that in the early British Gothic works there was a sort of more external fear compared to the reappearance of the genre in the American context. Can you elaborate a little bit on that in relation to what is unique about the American Gothic?

DP: There are many critics far more expert than I am on the US dimension: Charles Crow, Maisha Wester, Marilyn Michaud and Bernice Murphy, for example, have written very powerful books on US Gothic. To slightly sidestep that for a moment—but I will come back to the United States—I think I would no longer say that there is a distinction between inner and outer fears, but there are different ways in which they might be represented. I was recently reviewing a book on Polish Gothic and the author, Agnieszka Lowczanin, discusses ruins. Of course, ruins are a theme in the Gothic from the eighteenth century through to Iain Banks' *A Song of Stone* (1997), Shirley Jackson … lots of material. Ruins run right through Anglo-American Gothic. But the point made in this book is that although ruins also run through Polish Gothic, they mean something quite different because in Britain ruins represent the legacy of internal strife, largely religious, monasteries being destroyed, abbeys being burned to the ground … all in the course of religious strife within the UK. Whereas in Poland, and in Polish Gothic, those ruins are almost always the effect of a destructive invasion from other nations and empires which have sought over several centuries to destroy Poland, and in fact they succeeded twice in banishing Poland from the map of Europe. So all I mean to point out by that is that any repertoire of Gothic motifs in different polities—the ruin, the castle - even the persecuted maiden depending on gender politics—will be different in different locations. And so, fears in the US will also be differently coded.

Here is a huge generalisation and I am not an expert on this so I expect I am quite wrong. Nevertheless, it seems to me that in a lot of US Gothic the anxieties are about insurrection from within, whereas in European Gothic a lot of those fears are about invasion from without. Now that is a vast generalisation, there are many exceptions, but that is something which I think may have some mileage in it and therefore in the US I think the return of the repressed, whether that be through anxiety about indigenous racism, national fate, or terrors about the after-effects of slavery … these I think are very much to the forefront in US Gothic. They are more on the back burner, I think, in Britain. But in the US these are sometimes very interestingly coded. And I want to make reference here to Stephen King who I believe is a great American novelist. A lot of American critics over the decades, even last century, have wailed and moaned about the question of where is the great American novelist and they have said "oh, he or she has not yet arrived." I think he has. I think he did. I think it is Stephen King. But you cannot confront Stephen King or face Stephen King partly because King is boxed into a genre, Gothic or horror, whatever you call it, and partly because what he does with that is based not

in these returns of the repressed. He very rarely writes about the fate of indigenous peoples. He does write about small-town USA and he writes about it in terrifying ways and the novel of his I think is the best is called *Needful Things* (1991). Now in *Needful Things* the devil arrives in small-town USA, does not matter where it is, and sets up a shop, and in that shop he can give you anything you want. The people in the town, who appear fairly peaceful but actually have these huge antagonisms one to another, come asking for various things they think will help in these disputes. And the devil helps, of course, the devil is a helpful kind of chap. But, in the end, it turns out that all that people actually want, all they need, their needful thing, is a gun. So the devil provides guns and there you go, there you have one powerful version of the history of contemporary USA, I suppose. Black lives may matter, but do they matter as much as the right to bear arms? I know I am always puzzled by the assertions of the National Rifle Association in the USA who say repeatedly, "guns aren't the problem." Well, I do not think they are right but if they are right, what is the alternative? If guns are not the problem, then something deep in the US psyche must be the problem. There is no third way, it has got to be one thing or the other, the motive or the means. So you are talking about a deep traumatic root of disturbance in the US which is what US Gothic keeps on trying to gnaw at. Although maybe recently the threat of invasion is back. I think about Max Brooks' wonderful book *World War Z* (2006) and how the US remains no longer immune to a kind of invasion. And, of course, now with this current pandemic we see again that the US is not immune to invasion. Another kind of return I think is represented in Kameron Hurley's wonderful set of books *The Bel Dame Apocrypha* (2010-2012), which are about the violence on women and about the return of the ravaged deserts so that what the US has done in Afghanistan and in Iraq and so forth comes back home. And to go back to Stephen King again, in his book *Cell* (2006) he refers memorably to the possibility of Americans being refugees in their own land, doing an endless "Refugee Walk" (183), which of course echoes Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

MFJ: The Stephen King novel is a great example. I am going to move on to something a bit different and it also has to do with something that you have been mentioning which is changing your mind about things that you wrote in the past. Unlike many scholars with a background in the literature of the previous centuries, although your background is extensive and you never historicise the Gothic in absolute terms, you also have an interest in the critical framework of deconstruction. This is particularly visible in your 2007 book *Metaphor*, especially in the seventh chapter "Metaphor, Difference, Untranslatability," although I can see a deconstructive form of writing throughout all of your texts. I have enjoyed reading this text very much. This book was published after the ones on the Gothic that I have been mentioning so far. Has your latest interest in deconstruction added something new to your perception of the Gothic?

DP: Yes, thank you again for that question. I am interested in deconstruction. On the positive side I find that Derrida's writings and Kristeva's writings provide a kind of *jouissance*, a kind

of enjoyment in the twists and turns of language. I think deconstruction can almost be defined as an alertness to the ways in which words never say exactly what they mean, or they never mean exactly what they say. I think that it is extremely important not to get boxed in by the notion that words have a conventional acceptable history and that they can be defined entirely in the ways in which they are defined by dictionaries, because words are always small explosions. Almost any word that you can use has other meanings hidden or partly visible within it. And that is only thinking about them in terms of one language and its etymology. Of course, when you spread that out across a range of languages, matters become even more complex. I also think that deconstruction is in a sense a development of a political position and specifically a Marxist position, though very few deconstructive thinkers would agree with me. What Marx said about ideology before the term ideology got debased was that ideology is a way of purveying the world upside down so that you are taught to ignore the real causes of things—in this case the real economic causes—and to focus on the superstructure as though that is what causes things, which it does not. This is a complicated situation. I do not want to go into any more detail about that but I think that deconstruction follows on from that, even while not wanting to, in trying to expose this kind of upside-down view of the world that we are continually exposed to. That is on the positive side. On the negative side I think the real problem is with the ways in which deconstruction has been interpreted as the possibility of a slide into relativism. And I worry increasingly about whether that connects with or has been made to connect with the current discourse of fake news because when deconstruction says "there is nothing outside text" (158), then it is in danger of saying "therefore, there is no such thing as pain," and pain for me is the touchstone. You could say there is no such thing as death because different cultures view death differently. I can understand that, some cultures do not acknowledge death. That is grand, good for them. I wish we did not but there we are. And some religions do not acknowledge death, and that is good too, that is absolutely fine. But pain for me is the touchstone, you cannot not acknowledge pain. It is real, it is physical, and I do not think deconstruction has a rhetoric for coping with that, or with the many painful experiences that most people in the world go through.

Another thought I have had recently about deconstruction is that it is a kind of experimental criticism and I like that. It is good, we all need to experiment, but it does seem to me that it coincides rather oddly with a decline in what we used to think of as experimental fiction, except of course for flash fiction, which I think of as fiction for those with a short attention span. I am not very fond of flash fiction. To go back to deconstruction, I think we are at a kind of cusp, or maybe beyond it, in relation to high theory. I am not sure anybody cares much about high theory anymore, I think there are more pressing concerns, mainly about the realignment of the canon so that we no longer have a kind of male supremacist view of writing, a white supremacist view of writing. These things have moved on amazingly in the last twenty years and that is obviously all to the good. I have got a brief footnote to that which I suppose is partly about the current pandemic. I am interested in the way in which deconstruction

speaks about different kinds of speed of writing and reception. Thinking about that took me back recently to Paul Virilio, a major cultural critic who about forty years ago wrote a book called *Speed and Politics* (1977). What he was saying was that the real privilege in political life has to be geared to speed so that if you can travel faster, you can conference faster, you can influence faster, you can be part of the world as it moves. If you are stuck in one location you cannot influence how things go on. It is a fairly obvious point but he goes into great detail about different speeds. In a different book of his he says that "the invention of the ship was also the invention of the shipwreck" (89). I think that is the most wonderful, crisp statement about how every advance produces or can produce its own disaster and I take it that is the situation with the pandemic. I presume it has been spread by global air travel, I presume also in the way of inversion people now, or governments now, choose to try to blame poorer communities, communities who do not have access to power. They choose to say that they spread the pandemic. Actually, it is spread by the super-rich and their air travel. If you look at the figures for how many people travel by air, 3% of the people in the world do 90% of the world's air travel. My point about the pandemic, if I just continue that for a moment, is that what we have at the moment is a speeding up. International conferences are a speeding up of the interchange of ideas, and the current problem with physical presence and interaction might speed things up even more. But there is also a slowing down. Will air travel ever really function again? Interestingly, a great deal of Gothic has traditionally been about claustrophobia. We think of Poe above all. We think about all those castles of Radcliffe and Lewis and so forth. And we think about imprisoned heroines, and cells, and prisons, and dungeons, and all the associated paraphernalia of incarceration. A rare exception actually is the remarkable writer Algernon Blackwood who writes almost entirely about agoraphobia, but he is different. But I am interested in looking forward into whether that is going to change because I do not now know whether our greatest fear is of isolation, that is, claustrophobia, or fear of public spaces and what might be transmitted through them as in a pandemic situation. And I am interested to know how Gothic will emerge and cope with it. I am sure it is doing so already but there is a long way to go, I think.

MFJ: I am really fond of deconstruction but I do fear as well the tendency to relativise everything and that it might lead to something dangerous. I think it has a lot of possibilities. I do have just a small last question about your own creative writing. You have written eight volumes of poetry, the last but one is titled *Those Other Fields* (2020). This is about events that happened in 2020 so I would like to ask you about the process of writing during such a difficult time. I think, personally, that the gothic mode survives because it allows us to deal with the unspeakable, so I am therefore curious about how it feels on the other side, where you have to deal with writing about these unspeakably difficult times.

DP: *Those Other Fields* is my last book but one, I published one since then called *Stranger* (2020). *Those Other Fields* was straightforwardly political but it was mainly focused on refugees, which

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of course has now become not the major issue of our times, which I think is a problem because the whole issue of refugees is how we code our fear of the Other. *Stranger* has more ghosts. But the poems I am writing now seem to be more about the local, the immediate small incidents that happen outside my study window. So maybe that reflects the way in which we have all been driven back on ourselves during the pandemic and the questions are, I think, about how we will behave when we are freed from lockdown, how we are beginning to behave as lockdown loosens up. Will we rampage or will we emerge blinking into the sunlight? Just one very small point. I do not know about other parts of the world, but in the UK we have had the continuous repetition of this terrible mantra "it is what it is." That is supposed to make you feel at ease with things and not mind too much about lockdown and so forth. Well, Hegel often implied, in his dismissal of common sense, that actually things are not exactly what they are, and the Urban Dictionary online that you may know is especially good on "it is what it is." It says that "it is what it is" is a code for saying it will always be what it is. So it is a way of telling us not to even think about change, not to imagine a future. And the Gothic is all about imagination, about possibilities, maybe especially when they are transgressive, so I think we need to resist that terrifying thought "it is what it is."

Open Q&A session

Anna Marta Marini: I see that you have recently worked on Mexican Gothic. I found some remarks that you made on the border very interesting, about how the border can be a place where Gothic happens in a way. Could you briefly say a few words on why the Mexican Gothic interests you and how you find the border connected with terror and horrific realities and narratives.

DP: I have written a couple of things on Mexican Gothic but I know I am no expert. I think the Mexican Gothic is a kind of classic, maybe the classic site of intersection between what I was mentioning earlier about folk traditions and cultural appropriation, because Mexico can obviously be seen in very large-scale terms as a continuous struggle between the indigenous and the imperialised. That has been so for a very long time and it was accentuated again during the Trump years - one hopes it might be a little more relaxed now. So, on the one hand, you have the Mexican traditions of the Day of the Dead, the death cults and so forth. On the other, you have the continuous threat of invasion or takeover from the bully in the North. That I think produces a very interesting form of Gothic which is of course full of fear and anxiety but also is curiously jaunty. I am thinking here of Laura Esquivel. *Water like Chocolate* (1995) is an interesting book of course in itself because of something I was saying earlier about Gothic being a kind of hybrid form, never quite as pure as we would like to think. And that, of course, is a hybrid book. It is a cookbook and it is a book about a family, and it is a book about real terror, isn't it? Or at least fear. But it has a jaunty kind of tone to it, it seems to me, as though in Mexican Gothic, to quote Heidegger, the terrible has already happened (164). Something terrible has happened in the past and whatever happens now cannot be worse than

that and we will manage somehow to survive it. That is the kind of tone I get from Mexican writing which I get from very few other countries. I do think that Gothic can sometimes be not just a site of transgression, also a site of resistance. And I think there is some resistance evident in Mexican Gothic, some resistance of being entirely taken over, even when most of the films being watched in Mexico are US films. Although that is the case, I still think that their reception is not the same as it would be in the US, so there is still some Mexican *différance.* On the other hand, I think one must be careful not to romanticise that Mexican resistance because Mexico has numerous indigenous difficulties and problems which will not be solved by simply reading its literature. But I do find that site of cultural resistance and reaffirmation of the Mexican past very intriguing, and especially because it is done through a lot of motifs which in themselves are quite terrible. Octavio Paz, as we all know, saw Mexico as imbued with a kind of a culture of death.

AMM: I think I do agree with you because I find Mexican fiction of this kind to have a connection with the past, but it is like a ghostly past. It is like they are haunted and if, in a way, as you say, that can be a place of resistance, it can also be a place of not moving on. It has these two different sides and I think you can feel that in the fiction. The border, in a metaphorical and material sense, is an absolute place for that. I would like to find, though, a lot more Mexican fiction on the border, but I think it is still too present. They write about haunting from the past if it is the colonial past or the pre-colonial past, or even the revolutionary times as is the case of Laura Esquivel's book, but I think it is still too early for a real Gothic of the border.

DP: Gothic of that border takes you back to Cormac McCarthy, doesn't it? And the trilogy.

AMM: I find, for example, the movie *The Sleep Dealer* (2008)—which is science fiction but not quite—to have a kind of a Gothic edge, because there are migrants that are attached to machines and they work from Mexico in the US attached to virtual reality machines. So I think maybe this border fiction is still trying to find somehow a way.

DP: I think that is partly what separates some Gothic fiction in the British tradition from lots of other Gothics, because I think it is fair to say that in the British tradition we do not have those anxieties about borders because we persuade ourselves that we do not have any. So we are ignorant of borders as we are ignorant of invasion. Or pretend we are. Or have been for a long time. Of course, everywhere is invaded. There is a wonderful poem in the eighteenth century by Defoe called "The True Born Englishman" (1701) which just lists all the various peoples that the so-called true-born Englishman in the early eighteenth century is actually made up of. We are a hybrid race and so on and so forth. But we do not care to acknowledge that, I think.

Laura Álvarez Trigo: Paul Virilio's idea of technology and speed in relation to power is often discussed in relation to Marshall McLuhan. I come from the field of communication and media studies and I am very fond of McLuhan as a theoretical framework. I was thinking of this

very commonly quoted idea in his work that "the medium is the message," which is the title of one of his books, and I wanted to ask you if you had any comments that you could share with us in terms of the gothic modes and the gothic strands that you were mentioning at the beginning, especially how they are expressed through different mediums, if there is a specific way in which the gothic modes and strands vary according to medium and which one, if any, is a better medium for that to be expressed.

DP: I do not know that one could say that one is better than another. I suppose you might say that some media are more culturally effective than others and I suppose that mixed media, visual and verbal, are always bound to be more effective in some way. It seems to me now that if effectivity is the main criterion, rather than quality or subtlety or density of thought, then, obviously, a meme is going to have more power than any other kind of form. I am thinking just as one example of a meme called Slenderman. Slenderman got everywhere but what was the purpose? What was the point? Or is the point that there is no point? Is the point in simply showing that you can get anywhere with a meme, regardless of what that meme might mean? Or was the point to instill and foster a kind of fear parallel to but not effective in the way of a serial killer or stalker. Was that the point?

LAT: I think it might be a bit both in the sense that it worked because it came from a creepypasta, if I am not mistaken, and in the sense that these ideas are spread on the internet and just the capacity to get to a wider and wider audience. That is what is dependent on the medium, that it is more effective by virtue of the numbers.

DP: That virtually is a kind of pure example of the medium is the message. The message is nothing more than the medium in which it is conveyed. The message is the speed at which you can convey. But the image does not mean anything beyond that. Slenderman is a slender image. Maybe that was the point. An image without depth. An image that is purely of the surface. Virilio might like that idea, I think.

Natalia Kopytko: I would like to ask you whether modern Gothic authors are interested in using mythological patterns in their works.

DP: Some are some are not but also, again, it depends on what you think of as modern Gothic authors. The authors that come to my mind most immediately as using mythological patterns or making up new mythological patterns are, firstly, Russell Hoban, who I do not think one would call a Gothic author in every way, but his novel *Riddley Walker* (1980) is certainly involved with issues of fear and terror and uses a huge mix of myths to sustain that. Also Neil Gaiman who, again, I am not sure one would think of as a Gothic author, is clearly involved all the time with remaking myths and making them into more fearsome versions. If you go back a little way then I suppose a more acceptedly gothic writer would be Angela Carter who is often, I think, taken within the gothic canon, at least again partly but not wholly, and is obviously interested in myth, in fairy tale, in folklore, and gains some of her most terrifying

effects from that. Angela Carter is a very good example, I think, of how difficult it is to speak these days of a wholly Gothic author and it is interesting this has gone in two different ways. If you look in the bookshops, then you do not find shelves all devoted to the Gothic, you do find shelves devoted to horror and in the bigger bookshops you find shells devoted to what is now called "dark romance." But what is mostly on those shelves are books written specifically to figure in the charts and the sales pertaining to those labels, whereas a writer like Carter would figure, I think, in the general fiction shelves. If you try to classify her you would use such a number of labels, and the first, of course, will be "feminist," or "women's fiction" depending on what kind of labelling one is using. Then you might think of Gothic. You would never think of horror, not in relation to Carter. You might think of satire. You might think of cultural criticism. There are all manner of ways in which you could seek to classify Carter's works, her fiction as well as her essays, but none would be wholly satisfactory. It comes back to the whole way in which literary criticism tries to deal with questions of genre, which now has become more complicated because of course there are many, many writers, maybe the majority of writers, who write to fulfil a specific genre demand. There is nothing wrong with that, but it does mean that we now have this odd divide between genre fiction, so-called, and general fiction, which is not in a genre. Is it superior? Is it literarily superior to genre fiction? Is it simply unclassifiable? Is it better or worse for that? It is a very strange situation, I think. And, of course, it affects Gothic because Gothic has never, I think, really emerged as a genre in quite that sense. It is an academically reputable genre. Some would say it is the academically reputable version of horror. That is possible, but it does not sell in the bookshops in itself as Gothic. It might sell through horror, it might sell through certain kinds of graphic novel, it might sell through dark romance, always mediated through some other more popular, in inverted commas, form, because Gothic has this curious position of being and having been immensely popular without ever being popular. It has had a kind of ring of something slightly above popular genres.

Paul Mitchell: One of your quotes that I always use when I teach the Gothic and cinema is where you call the uncanny "a savage negation of history" ("Shape and Shadow", 260), which I think is a wonderful phrase to think about the uncanny and the way in which it makes us think about how we look at the world so that we re-see this world in which we think we live and that we think we know. I just wanted to pick up on something you talked a few moments ago, about borders. And I do not know if you are familiar with the British TV series *Humans* (2015). It is a really interesting piece because it is actually about kind of sentient robots, it is about AI and this kind of thing. But, in reality, it is kind of allegorical because it is about the migrant crisis and it is about Britain becoming swamped by these kinds of beings that come from without. Do you think that in the twenty-first century one of the hallmarks of the Gothic is that it has become more political, that it has become a force of subversion and resistance to big government? *Humans,* for example, is very much about the government that we have had

in the UK for many years, about living under austerity and these kinds of politics. That very much in the US has become a way to reflect on what has happened in the past few years with the Obama administration and then the administration of Trump. So whether it is becoming a lot more kind of politically focused than perhaps it was historically.

DP: Well, that is a really interesting question. I think my short answer is I would hope so. I think that one way of going at that would be to think about the history of the zombie and how that has always been infused to an extent with the political. Think back to the early film *White Zombie* (1932), by Victor Halperin, which obviously was making some extremely important points about slavery and exploitation, at the same time doing it in a way which was itself almost a kind of exploitation film. This is a brilliant kind of melding of popular form and political content. Then, if you think through with the zombie, I suppose the zombie becomes a kind of multivalent code for all manner of oppression. And I think that those relations between the notion of the zombie, slavery, and mindlessness have become more focused in recent years. Again, I could allude to works I have already mentioned. Stephen King's *Cell* which is about zombification through cell phones. A very potent thought that is. And again, *World War Z,* where the zombies prove capable of invading even the US. One of the wonderful things about *World War Z* is how different nations react in different ways, which gives good scope for Max Brooks to talk about different national priorities and to give his own views on how those national priorities might themselves be exploitative and open to critique. I will not mention examples right now but there are plenty of them in that book. I have said I hope you are right and I also think you are right. I have read quite a bit of lockdown poetry recently, some of it published poetry, some of it just written by colleagues I am in poetry groups with, and that motif of the coming of the mindless is very much there. But I think we have to be very careful because when you are speaking of zombies, then you can be speaking of that which is done to people, zombification by governments, or by capitalism, or by slave control. But by speaking of zombies, you may also be depriving sources of possible resistance, or, indeed, dare one say, revolution, of true agency. So I think the political force of that can go in two directions.

PM: I think it is interesting you mentioning the zombie as well given the context that we are in with the pandemic, and to see how that now plays out in terms of whether there is a space of zombie movies and zombie graphic novels which reflect that notion of people being contaminated in some way.

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